

Military Intervention and the Humanitarian “Force Multiplier”



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Recent military interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq have sparked controversy by using humanitarian aid to further military goals. In 1999, NATO forces set up refugee camps for fleeing Kosovars, even as NATO fighter pilots attacked Yugoslavia. US planes dropped both cluster bombs and food packets in Afghanistan in 2001. As the US military finalized plans for invading Iraq, the US Agency for International Development recruited nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to work in the war zone. Despite the heated rhetoric concerning militarized charity, military and humanitarian actors offer little examination of its effects. My analysis of recent military and NGO interaction reveals three types of interaction, which I term humanitarian soldiers, aid workers as government agents, and the humanitarian placebo. I find that in the absence of adequate security, “humanitarian soldiers” cannot create stability or meet local humanitarian needs. Additionally, aid organizations face the reality of non-neutrality, and may be considered as *de facto* government agents, if they operate in close proximity to Western intervention forces. **KEYWORDS:** humanitarian, nongovernmental organizations, intervention, Iraq, Afghanistan.

Following the military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, US Secretary of State Colin Powell commended representatives of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for their role as a “force multiplier” for the US government.¹ In Powell’s view, humanitarian organizations expanded the reach of the US government and helped achieve the political goals of the intervention. Most NGOs responded to the force multiplier claim with outrage and denials. Yet examination of the Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq interventions reveals a complicated relationship between military and humanitarian actors.² In fact, humanitarian activity appears to further the aims of politicians and soldiers in many situations.

Recent military interventions have sparked controversy by using humanitarian aid to advance military goals. In Macedonia, NATO forces set up refugee camps for fleeing Kosovars, even as NATO fighter pilots attacked Yugoslavia. Following the 9/11 attacks, US planes dropped both cluster bombs and food packets in Afghanistan. As the United States military finalized plans for invading Iraq in early 2003, the US Agency for International Development recruited NGOs to provide aid to war-affected civilians. In all three conflicts,

political and military leaders adopted humanitarian action as a valuable strategic tool.

The prevailing discussion of military involvement in humanitarian activity usually fails to differentiate among the various types of interactions that occur. My analysis distinguishes two main ways that humanitarian action can function as a force multiplier during a military intervention. In the first type of interaction, the military engages in humanitarian activity as part of a strategic plan. In the second type, the reverse occurs—humanitarian organizations fulfill military or political goals for sponsoring governments. The third form of interaction—what I term the humanitarian placebo effect—results when governments deploy humanitarian organizations in lieu of political or military engagement. All three types of interaction can politicize humanitarian assistance, regardless of intentions. The remainder of this article analyzes those interactions, as well as the underlying assumptions about humanitarian aid held by aid workers, soldiers, and politicians.

Two main insights emerge from the analysis of military and humanitarian interaction in recent interventions. The first is that humanitarian action undertaken in an insecure environment can actually intensify violence and endanger civilians. The identity of the aid givers—military or humanitarian—is less important than the need for security as a prerequisite to providing aid. This may be unpalatable to military planners who hope that reconstruction activity can create a secure environment. It cannot. The strategic use of humanitarian assistance cannot fill a security vacuum, and may well exacerbate insecurity. In an active conflict, combatants will view humanitarian assistance as a political, and even military, resource.

Second, this analysis confirms that neutrality is impossible during many military interventions. Neutrality is an ideal, not a reality. When aid workers operate in close proximity to Western military forces, all sides will inevitably view the aid workers as political actors. For their own safety, and that of the aid recipients, humanitarian organizations are now forced to consider the potential political ramifications of humanitarian action, even if they would prefer to avoid politics altogether.

Humanitarianism and Warfare Reexamined

The growing friction between military and humanitarian organizations stems, in part, from the increased overlap between military and humanitarian spheres. Military organizations attempt aid work and provide logistical support in humanitarian emergencies more than in the past, often incurring the disapproval of NGOs. Kevin Henry, director of advocacy for CARE, deplores the increasing trend since the 1990s to “use and co-opt humanitarian assistance as an integral part of warfighting.”³ Military planners no