



CIVIL-MILITARY COOPERATION DURING MASS CASUALTY EVENTS

Współpraca cywilno-wojskowa w trakcie
zdarzeń masowych



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Abstract

The paper discusses the importance of civil-military cooperation during mass events between 2013 and 2024. We analysed the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, and the Boston Marathon bombing, highlighting various forms of armed force involvement in supporting civil institutions. We found that the effectiveness of civil-military cooperation depends on a clear division of responsibilities, mutual trust, training, and coordinated procedures. The paper further underscores the need to formalize this cooperation as an inherent component of the national security system.

Streszczenie

Praca omawia znaczenie współpracy cywilno-wojskowej podczas zdarzeń masowych w latach 2013–2024. Analizuje przypadki, takie jak pandemia COVID-19, igrzyska olimpijskie w Paryżu (2024) oraz zamach podczas Maratonu Bostońskiego (2013), ukazując różnorodne formy zaangażowania sił zbrojnych we wsparcie instytucji cywilnych. Wskazuje, że efektywność współpracy cywilno-wojskowej zależy od jasnego podziału kompetencji, wzajemnego zaufania, szkoleń oraz wspólnych procedur. Praca podkreśla również potrzebę formalizacji tej współpracy jako stałego elementu systemu bezpieczeństwa narodowego.

Keywords: mass events; crisis management; terrorist attack; COVID-19 pandemic; civil-military cooperation

Słowa kluczowe: zdarzenia masowe; zarządzanie kryzysowe; zamach terrorystyczny; pandemia COVID-19; współpraca cywilno-wojskowa

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Introduction

Civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) has become an integral part of successful crisis management in the current geopolitical context. Given the growing frequency and scale of mass incidents, including pandemics, natural and anthropogenic disasters (including chemical, industrial, ecological, and construction emergencies, terrorism, armed conflicts, biological or chemical threats, and cyberattacks), close coordination between civilian sector and the armed forces is essential.

The boundaries between military and civilian operational domains are becoming increasingly blurred. The armed

forces no longer exist merely for defence purposes intended to protect state sovereignty and territorial integrity, but they are also expected to support public administration and relief efforts during emergencies.

The role of CIMIC has considerably expanded over the past decade, particularly where security-related activities like handling disasters, terrorism, and search-and-rescue missions are concerned. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant deficiencies in civilian systems while simultaneously underscoring the value of military resources and capabilities, including logistics, organizational capacity, rapid mobilization, and the ability to operate under crisis conditions. Similarly, organisation

of large-scale international events such as the Olympic Games, as well as addressing natural disasters, including fires and floods, have demonstrated that effective crisis management without military involvement is often challenging and, sometimes, impossible. Our paper attempts to analyse civil-military cooperation in the context of selected mass events held in the past decade, with particular focus on practical and legal aspects, as well as developmental barriers and opportunities in this domain. We also assessed cross-national differences in approaches to CIMIC and lessons learned from past experiences.

Legal framework for CIMIC

Civil-military cooperation is governed by certain legal regulations that defining the extent to which military activity can be conducted during crises within particular countries. Depending on the national context, this framework may be statutory, constitutional, or executive (acts, regulations, or bylaws). A state of natural disaster or emergency, or decisions made by executive authorities in relation to an emergency, serve as a legal basis for engaging military forces in operations supporting civilian administration in most European countries, including Poland [1].

Poland

In Poland, the legal framework for civil-military cooperation is defined, among others, by:

- **The Act of 21 November 1967 on universal obligation to defend the Republic of Poland**, which allows for directing the armed forces to actions other than defence tasks, including support in crisis situations (Articles 3 and 11);
- **The Act of 26 April 2007 on Crisis Management**, which establishes a crisis management system in Poland and designates the armed forces as one of the institutions responding to crisis;
- **Act of 18 April 2002 on the state of natural disaster**, regulating circumstances under which the armed forces may be deployed to provide assistance during natural disasters and threats to the life and health of the population;
- **Regulations of the Minister of National Defence and internal regulations of the Polish Armed Forces**, including the *Operational Doctrine of the Polish Armed Forces* [2, 3].

Furthermore, specialized units and cells responsible for CIMIC have been established within Polish Armed Forces, most notably the Territorial Defense Forces Component Command, which plays a key role in aid operations, particularly at the local level.

NATO and the European Union

The following international frameworks are also of relevance:

- **NATO documents**, including Allied Joint Publication 3.4.9 (AJP-3.4.9) "Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)", which outline the principles for planning and implementing civil-military cooperation in Allied operations [1];
- **The Treaty of Lisbon (2007)**, which introduced the "solidarity clause" (TFEU Article 222), obliging EU

Member States to collaborate in the event of disasters and terrorist attacks, including the use of military resources [4].

Limitations and controversies

Finding a proper balance between civilian supremacy over the armed forces and their effective performance remains one of the major legal challenges. Excessively rigid regulations may impede the timely response in an emergency, whereas overly broad regulations can give rise to misuse of power and, in extreme cases, overstepping the boundaries of competences. Some states, like Germany, have strict constitutional limitations on the domestic use of armed forces, while other, such as France or Poland, allow for a more flexible participation of the military in crisis operations.

Examples of civil-military cooperation

COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted armed forces to undertake unprecedented public health protection efforts. The Polish Armed Forces supported the state's logistical and organizational activities, including:

- Coordination of hospital logistics and delivery of personal protective equipment, respirators, beds, full hospital room equipment, etc.;
- Supporting civilian facilities through screening and testing done by military paramedics and Military Centers of Preventive Medicine (WOMP);
- Establishing and running swab testing sites and field hospitals (for instance at the National Stadium);
- Providing support to organise and operate the vaccination stations, especially in smaller communities;
- Involvement in transportation services to enable the elderly and disabled individuals access to the vaccination stations;
- Delivering masks, disinfectants and medical equipment to residents and public institutions;
- Organising convoys and providing support for the Material Reserves Agency;
- Cooperation with Border Guard and Police in carrying out border and sanitary epidemiological control activities;
- Monitoring of individuals under quarantine conditions conducted by Military Police officers;
- Conducting educational campaigns and providing telephone aid for isolated individuals and those experiencing crisis situations (the so-called WOT Support Telephone) by the Territorial Defence Forces.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom launched Operation Rescript in March 2020, representing the largest peacetime military operation in the country's history, which gave rise to the COVID Support Force (CSF), comprising up to 23,000 soldiers and reservists. The CSF provided support to the National Health Service (NHS) and local authorities across many dimensions of the pandemic response.

Some of the CSF activities included:

- constructing temporary NHS Nightingale hospitals;
- distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), with over 1.18 billion items delivered to NHS facilities;

- aiding the transport of patients and medical personnel;
- participation in the vaccination programme, including planning and logistics.

Operation Rescript was carried out according to the Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) procedure, which enables the armed forces to support civilian authorities in crisis situations [5–7]. These actions demonstrated the flexibility and adaptability of military structures when facing non-traditional threats.

Paris 2024 Olympic Games – International Mobilization of Security Forces

Preparing for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, France undertook extensive measures to ensure the safety of both participants and spectators. Approximately 15,000 soldiers, 45,000 police officers, and 20,000 private security personnel were deployed daily to support security operations. Additionally, support from 46 countries was requested, seeking military and police assistance for specialized operations.

These activities included, among others:

- night patrols using night vision and drones;
- patrols with sniffer dogs;
- securing the port of Ivry by combat divers;
- deployment of troops near the Olympic venues at a scale similar to Operation Sentinelle.

Operation Sentinelle was launched in France in January 2015 following the attacks against the Charlie Hebdo editorial office. Its objective was to prevent terrorist attacks and protect civilian population from these attacks through a permanent military presence across the country. As part of the operation, several thousand to over ten thousand soldiers are deployed to support police forces in patrolling public spaces, critical infrastructure, and symbolic objects.

Operation Sentinelle is an example of civil-military cooperation where:

- the armed forces support civil services (police, prefectures, civil protection);
- rapid deployment of armed patrols is possible;
- soldiers fulfil preventive and deterrent functions, protecting key locations.

This extensive mobilization of security forces was aimed at counteracting potential terrorist threats and ensuring an unimpeded conduct of sporting events [8, 9].

2013 Boston Marathon Bombing – Limited Military Involvement

Following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the primary rescue and investigative efforts were run by civilian agencies, including local police and emergency medical services. Military involvement was limited and included:

- approximately 1,000 members of the Massachusetts National Guard who had already been deployed to secure the event;
- three Navy explosive ordnance disposal teams, who provided support in neutralizing potential explosives.

The response to the attack showed that effective crisis management can be achieved primarily with the use of civilian services, with minimal military support [5, 6].

Benefits of civil-military cooperation

Enhancement of crisis response capabilities

The armed forces have access to unique logistical and organizational resources, including transportation, communication, medical facilities, and personnel trained to operate under extreme conditions. Their involvement significantly enhances the capacity to respond to mass events such as natural disasters, pandemics, and terrorist attacks [10–12].

Example: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the armed forces across many countries assumed responsibility for transport, organized vaccination sites, and supported field hospitals, the scale of which exceeded the capabilities of the civilian system.

Increasing social trust

In crisis situations, the presence of the armed forces can positively impact citizens' sense of security, particularly when operations are coordinated and transparent. Military personnel are often perceived as neutral and effective, which helps legitimize state actions.

Example: In Poland, the activities of the Territorial Defence Forces during the pandemic (e.g. assisting elderly citizens and supporting hospital operations) were met with wide public recognition.

Synergy of experience and structures

The military and civilian administration operate under different principles and procedures. The integration of their experiences allows for developing more effective crisis management and scenario planning frameworks.

Increasing interoperability and combat readiness

CIMIC exercises and real-world operations are also beneficial from a military perspective; they allow for hands-on improvement of operational capabilities in a civilian setting, which is also important in foreign deployments, including stabilization, as well as humanitarian and peacekeeping missions.

Barriers and challenges in civil-military cooperation

Cultural and structural differences

Civilian and military administrations differ in their organizational cultures: civilians operate according to the logic of consensus and public administration, while the military relies on hierarchy, discipline, and rapid decision-making. These differences can give rise to misunderstandings, reduced efficiency, and competence conflicts [11].

Example: In some EU countries (e.g. Germany), constitutional constraints and cultural differences hinder the

effective integration of the armed forces into crisis management [10, 11].

Legislative deficiencies and inconsistent regulations

The lack of a coherent legal framework (e.g. clear delimitation of competencies, procedures for activating armed forces, command responsibility) may cause delays or prevent smooth cooperation.

Example: The need for prior parliamentary approval for military involvement significantly increases the response times in some NATO countries (e.g. Germany, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Great Britain, the United States, France).

Many NATO countries have developed carefully designed mechanisms to ensure parliamentary oversight of military involvement in civilian operations during crisis situations. The scope of this oversight varies from country to country, ranging from mandatory parliamentary consent to the requirement to notify parliament after the decision has already been made. The common goal of these mechanisms is to ensure democratic oversight of military actions in crisis and emergency situations [13].

Fear of militarization of civilian space

Democratic societies show a natural distrust of excessive military presence in public life. There may be a risk that a prolonged military presence will be interpreted as a violation of civilian autonomy or even a pretext for authoritarianism [11].

Logistical and communication challenges

The lack of interoperable communication systems, differences in documentation, and unsynchronized information management protocols are frequently reported barriers during joint civil-military operations.

Suggestions for improvement:

- establishment of permanent civil-military coordination centres at the national and regional levels;
- regular exercises involving civil services and armed forces;
- integration of databases and IT systems;
- introduction of a civilian cooperation component into military education and, conversely, incorporation of CIMIC and disaster medicine training into public administration curricula [10, 11].

Theoretical analysis of civil-military cooperation

The concept and theoretical assumptions of CIMIC

Civil-military cooperation is defined by NATO as “a military joint function that integrates the understanding of the civil factors of the operating environment and that enables, facilitates and conducts civil-military interaction to support the accomplishment of missions and military strategic objectives in peacetime, crisis and conflict” [1].

From a theoretical perspective, CIMIC lies at the intersection of three research areas:

- security and defence studies;
- theory of public management and administration;
- sociology of organizations and intersectoral management.

This cooperation requires an integrated approach among military, civilian, local, and international structures. Reconciling the often conflicting logics of these systems poses particular challenge.

Conflict of roles and organizational culture

In her article, “NATO Civil-Military Cooperation: Expectations and Role Conflict,” Agata Mazurkiewicz identifies a key problem stemming from the dual role of soldiers engaged in CIMIC. On the one hand, they remain part of the armed forces; on the other hand, they perform quasi-diplomatic, administrative, and civilian assistance functions [14].

The role conflict manifests, among others, in:

- the need to reconcile the orders of superiors with the expectations of local authorities and the civilian population;
- limited decision-making autonomy of CIMIC soldiers in unstable settings;
- ambiguity of status – being both “soldiers” and “civilian helpers”, which creates ethical and practical tensions.

Mazurkiewicz notes that contemporary operations require soldiers to possess soft skills (empathy, intercultural communication), which were not traditionally part of the military professional identity [14].

CIMIC as a stabilization tool

In his extensive work on CIMIC, Dariusz Kozerański investigates, among other topics, the activities of the Polish Military Contingent in Iraq (2003–2008). He argues that the success of stabilization operations depends not solely on military superiority, but also on:

- the ability to build trust with the local community;
- understanding the cultural and religious context;
- implementing infrastructure and educational projects in cooperation with local authorities.

Kozerański stresses that in the case of Iraq, the CIMIC concept is seen as a “soft power” tool intended to minimize social opposition and generate civilian approval for the military presence [15].

It was a key challenge to maintain consistency of messaging between CIMIC soldiers and operational command to ensure that actions are seen as supportive rather than a tool of domination [15].

CIMIC models: classical versus integrated approach

Cottey and Forster identify two principal models of civil-military cooperation:

- **The classical model** – separation of military and civilian structures, cooperation restricted to what is necessary for mission accomplishment;
- **The integrated model** – full coordination of tasks, e.g. joint planning, implementation of operations and evaluation of outcomes.

NATO and the EU are striving for an integrated model, as evidenced, among others, by operations in the Balkans and EU missions (e.g. European Union Force (EUFOR), European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM)) [16].

CIMIC as a concept of “humanitarian intervention”?

Some researchers (e.g. Duffield [17], Barnett [18]) criticize CIMIC as a tool for military expansion of Western influence in unstable states. In their opinion, CIMIC activities may, despite their intentions, serve as a “civilian wrapper” for occupation, ultimately undermining local sovereignty.

This theory brings the focus on the asymmetry of power between the armed forces and local populations, as well as to the risk of humanitarian aid being instrumentalized for geopolitical reasons [17, 18].

Summary of the theoretical analysis

CIMIC is not merely a technical instrument, but a complex social process in which the interests, values, and operational logics of various aspects of cooperation between civilian and military communities intersect. It requires continuous adaptation of military structures to the dynamic civilian environment and reflection on the military role in modern democracies.

Conclusions

The past decade has shown that civil-military cooperation is becoming increasingly relevant in dealing with large crises, both natural and man-made. Cases of the coronavirus epidemic, massive global events such as the Olympics, and acts of terrorism highlight the need for a dynamic, integrated, and flexible state response, of which the participation of armed forces is an integral part.

CIMIC as a component of contemporary crisis management

Contemporary crises are complex and multidimensional, often exceeding the capabilities of a single institution or sector. In this context, CIMIC emerges not only as a support tool, but also as an indispensable element of the state’s crisis response structure [19]. The effectiveness of such cooperation depends on pre-defined procedures, competencies, and mutual trust between civilian and military partners [19].

As pointed out by NATO experts (AJP-3.4.9), the implementation of CIMIC should be based on the principles of reciprocity, coordination and synergy of actions rather than on hierarchical subordination of one of the parties [1].

The importance of flexibility and interoperability

Flexibility of structures and the ability to cross traditional institutional boundaries are key to the success of CIMIC operations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries were forced to improvise – the United Kingdom, for instance, stood up NHS support structures within a matter of weeks [7]. This experience shows that effective response requires:

- prior preparation of armed forces for non-kinetic operations (logistics, transport, evacuation, engineering);
- cross-sectoral training and CIMIC scenario exercises, e.g. “DEFENDER-Europe” [7].

Building trust and soft skills

Civil-military cooperation is not based solely on equipment, command structures and military capability – soft skills such as communication, negotiation, understanding the cultural and social context are crucial [14].

Especially in foreign environments (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan), where local communities may be distrustful of the armed forces, the ability to build dialogue and relationships proves more important than combat capabilities [14].

The need to develop a common doctrine and legal framework

Cultural, institutional, and operational differences between civilians and the military lead to friction and misunderstandings. It is necessary to create a common doctrine for civil-military cooperation that:

- will account for the characteristics of 21st century threats (epidemics, migrations, terrorism);
- precisely defines competencies, responsibilities and coordination mechanisms;
- will ensure compatibility between local, national and international levels (e.g. NATO, EU, UN).

Reports from the European Centre of Excellence for Civilian Crisis Management (CoE) show that there is still a lack of harmonised CIMIC procedures in the EU, which limits the effectiveness of joint operations [20].

Strategic conclusions and the future of CIMIC

- A modern army must be able to operate in the social, informational and humanitarian dimensions rather than only kinetic ones.
- CIMIC should become an integral part of internal security policy rather than merely a tool for expeditionary missions abroad.
- Civilian training for soldiers and military training for civilian crisis management structures should be the norm rather than an exception.
- It is necessary to implement early response systems and cross-sectoral planning, including digitalization and common information platforms.

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