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Introduction

In June 2008, the U.S. Army War College, the Canadian Forces Land Force Doctrine and Training System, Queen’s University’s Centre for International Relations and the Defence Management Studies at Queen’s School of Policy Studies presented the Third Annual Kingston Conference on International Security at the Four Points by Sheraton in Kingston, Ontario. One objective of the annual conference is to foster “dialogue and exchange on security issues” among governments, militaries, civil-society organizations and scholars. This year, panellists and participants were brought together to discuss “wars without borders” - conflicts which transcend the borders of the nation state and in some cases, the boundaries of a particular region. The conference program focused on the question of how wars are defined in the post-Cold War world, and encouraged participants to reflect on the patterns of conflict and various approaches to stability campaigns.

“Wars without borders” are also referred to as “new wars,” “hybrid wars,” “fourth generation wars” or “wars amongst the people.” Although there is some variation in terminology, there is some consensus among practitioners and academics on the principal characteristics of these conflicts and the conditions under which they occur. First, these wars extend beyond the geopolitical confines of the nation state. Within states, aggressors tend to be unconstrained by local and national authorities. The nation state is only one player among many, and wars are often not sanctioned by political authority. Conflicts also play out at the regional and international levels where no single body or system of law governs in a systematic, consistent or effective way.

One way to address the complex and multidimensional subject of “wars without borders” is from a geographic perspective. The conference was organized into four panels. Three of the panels focused on particular regions: Afghanistan and Iraq (Western Asia), Latin America and the Caribbean (the western hemisphere) and Africa. A final discussion provided panellists and participants the opportunity to reflect on changing conditions of these conflicts and on lessons learned to improve current and future operations.
Panel I: Understanding New Wars: Afghanistan and Iraq

The first part of the program focused on current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both are considered ‘hybrid’ or ‘new’ wars as they are wars amongst the people, and are complicated by religious and ethnic rivalries. Local and international networks figure prominently in the conflict, and violence instigated by aggressors is targeted and indiscriminate.

In the case of, Afghanistan, the panellists spoke of Canada’s experience and the various challenges it faces. Among these challenges, there is an identified lack of coordination among contributing countries and organizations operating in the country. This may be attributed to the fact that participant countries demonstrate varying degrees and areas of expertise, which makes it difficult to establish a coherent, integrated approach to defence, diplomacy and development.

In an effort to improve coordination among Canadian bodies, the Canadian Forces (CF), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) are working to establish a “whole-of-government approach” to defence and development in the country. For the CF this has meant the establishment of new force development activities to foster integration of the defence team, and the expansion of the forces with new equipment.

Overall, however, there is an identified need for improved cooperation among contributing countries and organizations in Afghanistan. There is a lack of coherence in strategies among actors and organizations in the region, partly because participant countries demonstrate varying degrees and areas of expertise. Specific areas for improvement include messaging and information sharing, and the coordination of provincial reconstruction activities.

One panellist pointed out that there are aspects of the Iraq war which make it an atypical example of a ‘hybrid’ or ‘new’ war. First, unlike other ‘hybrid’ or ‘new’ wars, the Iraq war was triggered by state-on-state invasion and occupation. Second, there are a large number of American troops in Iraq, which is uncommon for such conflicts. A primary concern in Iraq is the lack of legitimacy accorded to governing structures by local populations. American strategists are still seeking an appropriate balance between providing hands-on support and allowing civilian and military institutions to develop independently of foreign intervention.
Panel II: The Africa Experience

As one panellist pointed out, ‘wars without borders’ have been the ‘historical norm’ in Africa. Conflicts on the continent have rarely been contained within boundaries of nation states. This panel was designed to address the question of how these conflicts have evolved over time, and more specifically, how developments within the region and on a global scale have transformed wars in Africa.

Although wars have typically occurred beyond particular boundaries within this region, borders have real and significant meanings in Africa. Borders are important symbols of state sovereignty, so governments are particularly concerned with border protection. However, these controls often remain ineffective because many borders are remnants of colonialism and remain contested among African peoples. In their efforts to protect sovereignty, government leaders have tended to support and use insurgents and rebel movements as proxy instruments of war. As these aggressive movements gain strength and momentum in their association with international networks, states and societies have become increasingly vulnerable to crime and corruption.

In terms of lessons learned, panellists pointed out that capacity building efforts in Africa must be designed to strengthen institutions within the limits of existing resources. Secondly, development activities ought to improve states’ performance while keeping an eye to respect for human rights, as well as to the values and operating principles of democracy. The success of these activities depends on the degree to which solutions are identified and supported by African peoples. Finally, any long-term foreign assistance ought to assign equal priority to security reforms, democratic development and economic growth.
Panel III: The Western Hemisphere: Latin America and the Caribbean

This panel included discussions of countries’ experiences in dealing with security threats in the region, as well as ways to improve existing approaches to “wars without borders” in South America. The cases under consideration included the Brazilian experience in Haiti and the current security situations in Colombia and Mexico.

South America faces a number of security threats including organized crime, human trafficking, food and energy security, poverty and natural hazards. Countries that comprise the region demonstrate varying levels of development, democratization and institutionalization, and therefore different degrees of vulnerability to these threats. Presentations and discussions on particular case studies highlighted this diversity, and the opportunities for greater cooperation among states in fostering greater security and stability in the region.

While operating in Haiti, the Brazilian military developed new strategies for dealing with war amongst the people. This experience demonstrated the importance of conducting military and civilian operations simultaneously. Both types of activities were conducted by the same group of soldiers, which ensured continuity and consistency in operations. Brazilian leaders identified the need to shift its training systems’ focus on general war to a focus on peace operations and inter-agency operations, and presented this as an option for other militaries.

In the Colombian case, government and military leaders are pursuing a total strategy that coordinates exterior or foreign policy, interior or domestic activities, and military action. The objective of this approach is to create long-term policies and to sustain long-term activities. However, it is recognized that the key to success of these policies and actions lies in building the confidence and gaining the support of the local population.

The greatest security threat in Mexico is organized crime, stemming from drug trafficking activities. The problem is expected to persist with the continued demand for illegal narcotics and the influx of small arms into the country. It is expected that Mexico’s current strategy, or lack thereof, will remain ineffective because it is driven by military planning. Rather, what is needed is a multifaceted strategy that strengthens the state and the rule of law in the country. Further programs that create employment may alleviate conditions of poverty and provide economic opportunities for individuals at risk of drug addiction and criminal activity.
The United States has shown some interest in supporting Mexico in its fight against organized crime. However, these initiatives are seen as intrusive and threatening to Mexican sovereignty. A persistent lack of trust and confidence between the two countries has prevented any meaningful response to security threats in Mexico and surrounding areas.

Generally, there are a number of impediments to peace in South America. First, the states of South America demonstrate different organizational cultures and varying issues of jurisdiction, which complicate coordination among governments, militaries and civilian bodies in the region. There is also a general failure to share information and intelligence among governments, militaries and organizations. At the sub-regional level, sovereignty remains a primary concern for governments and states are sceptical of multilateral initiatives for fear of compromising sovereignty. The result is a lack of coordination and many missed opportunities for shared strategies to address security threats. Finally, the historic failure of governments and international bodies to deliver on promises has left large parts of populations marginalized and sceptical of development activities.

There is consensus, however, that transnational solutions and a multidimensional approach is needed to combat current and future security threats in South America. The Organization for American States (OAS) offers one platform for discussion and action in the region. Established in 1948, the OAS is one of the oldest regional entities in the world. It is government driven and consensus based, which ensures inclusivity. In 2001, it adopted the inter-American charter. The proactive application of this charter may assist in building confidence and trust among countries, and provide an umbrella structure under which to improve inclusion, equality and prosperity in South America.
Panel IV: Adjusting to New Conflicts

The purpose of this final panel was to consider how governments, militaries and civilian organizations can adjust and improve approaches to ‘new conflicts’. Two themes were stressed during this discussion: the salience of cultural knowledge and the need to bridge the gap between military and development organizations.

Regions are not homogenous entities. Rather, they are comprised of various belief systems and cultures, and different historical experiences. Cultural awareness and fostering the personal capacity for cultural intelligence among soldiers and civilians are essential to the success of operations in other societies. Cultural knowledge was key to the success of American support in extending the government of Colombia’s presence in rural areas, but also in extending participation in development activities to local civilians, especially youth.

Developing and conflict-ridden countries are increasingly asking for assistance in non-traditional sectors such as poverty mitigation, health care provisions, educational systems and crime prevention. These types of cross-sectional issues require a cross-agency, whole of government approach involving military, government and civilian organizations. However, there is a lack of coordination among bodies from the same contributing nation, as well as across governments and organizations representing different contributing nations. At both levels there is a deficit in mutual recognition and awareness of the mandates and activities of other agencies and governments.

A second challenge arises from the different organizational cultures of militaries and development organizations. When these bodies are operating in the same region, these variances become more obvious. Militaries and development organizations use different concepts, terminology and paradigms in devising strategy and in their operations. Miscommunication and misunderstanding between armed forces and development agencies further frustrate coordination efforts in conflict-ridden areas. The lack of recognition and understanding across bodies operating in any single region results in redundancies in service delivery and the inefficient allocation and use of resources.
Concluding Thoughts

This conference addressed the topic of “wars without borders” in terms of geographical areas: west Asia, the Western Hemisphere, and Africa.

As the panellists and participants highlighted, there is a great deal of diversity in the historical experiences, culture, geography and patterns of communication across regions and countries. What is needed, however, is a greater understanding of how these variables play out on the ground, and within particular societies. An ethnographic approach to understanding these “hybrid” or “new” wars at the local levels is a fruitful area for further academic study.

The lessons discussed at this conference were primarily those learned at the tactical and operational levels, particularly the need for improved communication and greater coordination among participating bodies. A number of strategic questions remain for countries participating in wars that transcend borders. For contributing nations, one of the principal issues is how to prioritize among the various countries and regions that require defence and development assistance. Government leaders, military strategists and academics must be attentive to the changing environment and order of international relationships, and cautious in implementing operations under such complex, dynamic and uncertain conditions.