

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The aims of a comprehensive approach

The so-called “Comprehensive Approach” aims to bring together UK government departments and other stakeholders in international crisis management to:

- i. promote a shared understanding of the situation and common aims and objectives which will govern HMG efforts in conflict situations, particularly when military action is foreseen;
- ii. develop structures and processes to help align planning and implementation in conflict situations;
- iii. establish relationships and cultural understanding, through common training, exercising, analysis and planning.

Why is a comprehensive approach needed?

“Comprehensive approach”, “effects-based approach”, “comprehensive planning” are all terms originally used by the US or UK military. “Integrated planning” is one of several equivalents from civilian (UN) jargon. In NATO, it is called “Concerted Planning and Action (CPA)”; in the EU, “civilian-military coordination”. All of these expressions describe or arise from the growing recognition of a need to combine together various approaches, whether civilian or military, whether governmental or not, to improve the effectiveness of HMG activity through the conduct of more coherent assessment, planning and implementation of conflict management or peace support operations.

Despite the end of the Cold War and any significant conflict in Europe, there are still times when military force is required to deliver the UK’s foreign policy objectives. But victory over an enemy is in itself no longer sufficient as a desired “end state” at which HMG aims when it uses military force abroad. The term “success” is now supplanting the term “victory” in conflict-related operations, even those in which military force is deployed and encompasses the much wider requirement to ensure that the object of our engagement is left in a viable condition – politically, economically, socially and militarily.

Progress so far

The UK Government is relatively well advanced, compared to partner nations or multi-national organisations, in joining up its “conflict architecture”: the Conflict Prevention Pools and the Stabilisation Unit are demonstrations of this. The main coordinating role is played by the Cabinet Office, and the Defence and Overseas Policy (Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction) Committee retains governmental oversight.

It has so far been the military at the forefront of pushing the “Comprehensive Approach” doctrine in the UK, although the need to develop joint diplomatic, security and development approaches is recognised by other departments and, this approach is now starting to enjoy increasing support around Whitehall, and even outside government. The philosophy has been developed in stages: first came ‘joint’ planning (the 3 military services joining up), now we are grappling with ‘inter-agency’ planning (government and public actors, including multi-nationals, become engaged); a further step would be ‘comprehensive’ or ‘integrated’ planning (when non-governmental or private sector stakeholders might also get involved).

What is the approach meant to do?

A “comprehensive approach” is designed to make HMG interventions in complex environments (particularly when involving military deployment such as in the Balkans, Afghanistan or Iraq) more effective, so that they

can lead to timely progress in political, economic, legal, developmental and other activities, which together can be known as “state-building”. The military themselves are keen to be seen as only one strand of an overall operation, planned in advance, to achieve over-arching policy objectives, where security is a vital precursor but not the end-state in itself.

One of the greatest challenges to joined-up planning within government is in achieving the cultural compromises required. The very different time-frames involved, the potential friction between a focus on development and a focus on security management, and the need to balance resources for the different streams of activity (whether military, diplomatic or economic) are all challenges to a comprehensive approach. Nonetheless, creating a genuine culture of “joined-up-ness” within and outside government is absolutely fundamental to underpinning new methodologies for civilian-military planning and implementation of crisis management operations.