Non-Lethal Weapons: Striking Experiences in a Non-Cooperative Environment

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ABSTRACT

In missions to stabilize conflicts around the world, the military forces increasingly find themselves operating amongst the people. The emerging need in military interventions to prevent casualties translated into a range of value driven military technological developments, such as non-lethal weapons (NLW). NLWs can be characterized by a certain technological and operational design ‘window’ of permissible physiological effect, defined at each end by values: one value is a controlled physiological impact to enforce compliance by targeted individuals, the other value is the prevention of inflicting serious harm of fatality. This paper points out that societal and political implications of these values in the military domain are governed by a different scheme than is the case in the civil domain. The practical cases concerning non-lethal weapons examined illustrate how values incorporated in military and police concepts are exposed to counteraction and annihilation when deployed in real world operational missions.

Keywords: Military Ethics, Military in Civilian Environment, Military Interventions, Non-Lethal Weapons, Stabilizing Contact, Values

INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a new era in the international security arena. In the decades before, the East-West confrontation, with its epicenter in Central Europe, had dominated military thinking and planning, and the military balance was predominantly built on the large scale destruction potential of each other’s military structures and arsenals.

The emergence of enabling technologies during the 1980s, in particular in the area of information, communication and computing, has introduced military precision strike capabilities, implemented as smart munitions and missiles, and capable of autonomously finding and striking targets at long range, thus providing for a dramatic increase both in effectiveness and in efficiency in warfare. In the military debate, these innovations are often referred to...
as the Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA): the emerging technologies provided for more precision and discrimination in military firepower causing less collateral damage, and fewer own causalities (see, e.g., Freedman, 1998; Latham, 1999).

The whole world has witnessed the so-called stand-off armed precision strikes with cruise missiles and unmanned armed aerial vehicles against Iraqi targets during the First Gulf War in 1990. The operations in Iraq not only demonstrated the effectiveness of these long range attacks, but at the same time these new military-technological capabilities intrinsically entailed the value of drastically reducing the number of military casualties on the side of the intervention forces. Thus, the design and fielding of a new family of smart long range weapons had, alongside the significant increase in military effectiveness, served a key value: the protection of the life of troops deployed in expeditionary military missions.

Former General Sir Rupert Smith introduced a new paradigm that contemporary military forces are now facing: ‘the war amongst the people’ (Smith, 2006, p. 270), or asymmetric warfare. In this complex environment, with blurring distinction lines between combatants and non-combatants, the casualty aversion norm for own military personnel was soon extended to include the protection of the lives of the civilian population in conflict areas as well. Some scholars predicted and claimed that from now on warfare would be conducted ‘humane’ and, ultimately, ‘bloodless’ (Coker, 2001; Toffler & Toffler, 1994). A new value was born, sharply contrasting against the armed forces’ core business of killing and destroying: the safeguarding of citizens during armed operations. So, respect for human life has become a key issue, especially in wars of choice rather than necessity.

The emerging need in military interventions to prevent innocent casualties amongst the local population translated into a range of value driven military technological developments, such as non-lethal weapons (NLW). Whereas proponents of the concept exclaimed high expectations of this new category of military capabilities, empirical analysis of NLW deployments in recent operations, reveals that the operational effect incorporating the intended value is flawed and, in some cases, even reversed. Other than is often the case in the cooperative and socially benign civil domain, where interests and values are subject of constructive dialogue, in the military conflict domain different actors have, almost by definition, sharply different and competing interests. These actors are non-cooperative and even hostile towards the other side’s operational objectives, and focus on de-optimizing the opponent’s capabilities, including those incorporating self-imposed value-based military effect characteristics. Insurgents, for instance, attempt to create conditions in such a way that the value based purpose of preventing innocent civilian casualties is denied by bringing innocent civilians close to or inside the legitimate military target. Similarly, opponents to security forces that apply NLWs against them, may use countermeasures to neutralize the NLW effect, which in turn may bring security forces to use the NLWs beyond its safety margins, thus risking civilian casualties. Hence, in the military domain, the functional intent of the incorporated values of NLWs is undermined by non-cooperativeness and counteraction. The implication of such denial is the loss of credibility of weapon user presenting themselves as protector of the innocent population. The pre-emptive mechanisms reflect the essence of military conflict, which is an armed clash of interests.

This article will point out that societal and political implications in the military domain of NLWs are governed by a different scheme than is the case in the civil domain. The practical cases examined here illustrate how values incorporated in military and police concepts are exposed to counteraction and annihilation when deployed in real world operational missions.
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