Grounding a Comprehensive Approach to Crises: Comparison of UN, NATO And EU Understandings

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ABSTRACT

One of the more pervasive concepts in discussions of international responses to crises and conflicts has become 'a comprehensive approach'. A comprehensive approach is a process that aims to produce coherence and coordination between and across the security, development, governance and diplomatic dimensions of responses to crises. This paper analyses how three key international organizations intervening into crises—the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU, Union)—understand a comprehensive approach. This article provides conceptual clarity in how the term is used and offers a comparative analysis along various dimensions of a comprehensive approach. The ambition of this article is to provide a translation device for the three organizations and for scholars working on crisis management by the UN, NATO and EU, and in security studies and development/peacebuilding more broadly.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

One of the more pervasive concepts in discussions of international responses to crises and conflicts has become 'a comprehensive approach'. In different settings the concept is known also as a holistic approach, an integrated approach and a whole-of-government approach. A comprehensive approach is a process that aims to produce coherence and coordination between and across the security, development, governance and diplomatic dimensions of responses to crises. It has become a mantra guiding international actors, and most states and international organizations engaged in crisis management have actively adopted the discourse of comprehensiveness. In everyday discourse the term has become a blanket, catchall concept for the types of activities international actors plan to engage in or see as desirable when dealing with crises and conflicts. However, the specific understandings of a comprehensive approach differ between various actors.

This contribution analyses how three key international organizations intervening into crises—the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU)—understand a comprehensive approach. It locates similarities and differences in their conceptualisations and provides insights into why they differ. How a comprehensive approach is conceptualised is determined by institutional practices of these organizations, reflecting the identity of each of them. In turn, their understandings of the concept determine how these actors organize themselves, how they function and how they relate to others. In practical terms this means that when a NATO, an EU and a UN official engage in a discussion on a comprehensive approach, they do not speak the same language.

In the first three parts of this contribution I briefly sketch how the concept is understood by each of the three organizations. The concluding part provides a comparison of their understandings of the concept. Such comparison is pertinent not only because of the significance of their contributions in crisis situations, but also because the three organizations start from a different vantage point of the security–development nexus; the UN has always been preoccupied with both aspects of the nexus, NATO and the EU on the

other hand are primarily engaged in one of its dimensions, that is security in the case of NATO and development for the EU.

2.0.   THE UN AND A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Throughout the 1990s UN's usage of the term comprehensive approach came to be closely associated with attempts to address crises and conflicts. However, it was only at the turn of the century that the concept became more clearly linked to UN peacekeeping activities. This development indicated that security—which is the core responsibility of the UN Security Council—would be the primary objective of comprehensive approach. In this spirit, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan argued that there is a need for "a reordering of normal developmental, humanitarian and other activities, so that their first objective [was] to contribute to the paramount goal of preventing the outbreak or recurrence of conflict" (United Nations 2001).

Discussions culminating in a 2001 open debate in the UN Security Council on "Peace-building: towards a comprehensive approach" showed two levels on which the organization wanted to address questions of coordination and coherence in peace operations: (1) an inter-institutional level and (2) an intra-institutional level. However, an intra-institutional level quickly became the focus of UN's attention. Over the last decade, the UN has used the language of 'integrated missions' and 'integrated approach' to refer to cooperation within the organization. The UN initially proceeded with structural/institutional integration through the establishment of UN Integrated Missions. The underlying logic of this policy is that, although individual mission components remain functionally separate, their operation in the field takes place within integrated teams (International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations 2010).

In 2008 following a general dissatisfaction that the purpose of integration was getting lost in the squabbles over structural arrangements at the field level, the current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced several policy developments in conflict responses. Most importantly the conversation switched from structures to processes through the introduction of the UN Integrated Approach. Such approach applies to countries in which the UN has both a Country Team (consisting of UN agencies, funds and programmes operating in that country) and a multi-dimensional peacekeeping operation or political mission/office (United Nations 2008). UN's intra-institutional comprehensive approach is thus only applicable in the context of peacekeeping operations.

3.0.   NATO AND A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Unlike with the UN where the understanding of a comprehensive approach developed through a more strategic debate, NATO's understanding evolved from practice. Experience from Afghanistan showed that NATO did not have a single vision of a comprehensive approach. Instead, member states responsible for various sections developed their own national understandings and implementation of a comprehensive approach (cf. Farrell and Rynning 2010). The core challenge for NATO is that as an organization it does not have the civilian capabilities that a comprehensive approach requires. The alliance is thus left with two options, either to develop these capabilities or conceptualise a comprehensive approach as an inter-institutional approach that relies on cooperation with outside actors. Already in 2005 at the Copenhagen Summit it was decided that NATO should not develop its own civilian capabilities (Jakobsen 2008:11). The concept is thus used in an inter-institutional way.

Although a number of strategic clarifications happened through Riga, Bucharest and Lisbon summit declarations and in practice, NATO's use of the concept remains elusive. There are three interconnected reasons for this. First, NATO engagements often occur in highly securitized arenas where civilian actors do not have good access. The organization and its member states thus assigned a number of developmental and governance tasks to their militaries, making it less clear how comprehensive approach is an inter-institutional concept. Second, the concept is still intimately associated with NATO's activities in

Afghanistan, where NATO does not have an equal civilian partner and is thus highly prioritizing security activities over other aspects of a comprehensive approach. Third, the different applications of a comprehensive approach by member states are leading to different understandings of its content. The concept is thus entangled with similar, but different concepts, for example counter-insurgency operations. In other words, NATO on paper recognizes a proper security–development nexus in crisis management, yet in practice absorbs other policies and actors under its security umbrella.

4.0.   THE EU AND A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Similarly as with NATO, the push for EU to conceptualise its comprehensive approach came from early experiences in crisis management in the post-Cold War era. However, these engagements tended to be more post-conflict than conflict oriented, with a heavy focus on developmental and governance aspects. The EU was responding to a very specific problem: in early 2000s it found itself in a number of arenas with multiple concurrent missions running under different institutional frameworks. This created questions of how to better coordinate these instruments and how to improve their performance in the field and in turn also the EU visibility.

European Security Strategy from 2003 became the first ideational underpinning of EU engagements with crisis situations (European Union 2003b). The document is focused on comprehensive security for the EU, not comprehensive approach to external crises, yet there are several references addressing connections between security, development and governance. The text focuses on EU internal coordination and coordination with EU member states, however there is also a section dedicated to working with partners. Simultaneously with the broader European Security Strategy, the EU developed a concept for Civil Military Co-ordination (CMCO) that focuses on coordination of actors in the context of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (European Union 2003a).

Further developments affecting the EU's understanding of a comprehensive approach followed the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). The preamble itself stresses as one of the key motivations for its adoption improving coherence of EU action. In addition, the treaty streamlined some of the institutional mechanisms at the headquarters level. The double-hatted High Representative brings closer the work of the Commission and the Council, as does the newly established European External Action Service (EEAS). This brings the previously institutionally separate activities of the European Commission in the field of development and the more security and diplomacy oriented activities of the Council of the EU in closer proximity.

Finally, in December 2013 the EU published a Joint Communication on 'The EU's Comprehensive Approach to external conflict and crises'(European Union 2013). This is the first official EU position paper on the concept and was prepared jointly by the High Representative and the European Commission. In contrast to the UN and NATO usage of the concept, this document clearly mentions all phases of the cycle of conflict and is not particularly focused on Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. While motivations of the EU are framed in self-interest and security, much of the reasoning is connected to development, prevention and long-term commitments. Notably, the EU's elaboration of a comprehensive approach is very intra-institutionally oriented, providing only a couple of sentences on the need for inter-institutional coordination (cf. Tercovich and Koops 2013).

5.0.   COMPARISON

This concluding comparison will look at how comprehensive approach is understood by the three organizations both at an internal level and how in inter-institutional arrangements. At an internal level, it is worth looking at who are the actors pushing for the development of the concept and how specific the context within which the concept is used is. Both these dimensions convey the level of shared understanding of a comprehensive approach within the organization.

Looking at the actors developing the concept, there are clear differences between the three organizations. Although the push for the development of a comprehensive approach within the UN came from UN Security Council discussions, that is, from member states, UN integrated approach is a product of thinking within the Secretariat. This is different in NATO, where the concept was developed through inter-governmental summits and implemented through individual member states' deployments. Within the EU, the responsibility for concept development is shared between the inter-governmental bodies and common institutions. However, in practice, common institutions assumed the key role in its evolution. Looking at the context where the concept is used, it is clear that its application is more specific within the UN and NATO. Both link their concepts to deployed operations. Conversely, while the EU does refer to comprehensive approach in the context of its CSDP missions, its applicability is not dependent on their deployment. Following this, the level of shared understanding of the concept is the highest within the UN. The UN has a clear central actor developing its concept and the concept is applied to very specific contexts (peace operations). On the other hand, NATO does not have a clear driver of the concept, and EU does not have a specific context to which comprehensive approach is applied. This can and does lead to confusion over what instruments fit in.

Comparing the inter-institutional arrangements, the organizations differ here, too. Only NATO defines comprehensive approach primarily as an inter-institutional concept. This is connected to the fact that NATO does not have a whole range of capabilities that a comprehensive approach requires. This also precludes structural integration for NATO, as it would have to integrate with some other actor, something that is not probable. Both UN and EU have some elements of structural integration, although the UN is moving away from it and the EU does not want to structurally integrate military CSDP missions. At the same time, these organizations see their role within inter-institutional arrangements differently. The UN sees itself as holding primacy in inter-institutional coordination of approaches to crises. There is some nuance between the EU and NATO though. EU's documents broadly refer to cooperation with other actors and stress the primacy of the UN. NATO, in its documents, does not as clearly defer to the UN. In addition, its usage in Afghanistan and the dominant role of the United States complicate inter-institutional coordination also with the UN.

In conclusion, it is important to note that a deeper intra-institutional integration, that is, aligning of organizational instruments to fit together better within an organization, can result in that organization having more difficulties in coordinating with others. This is particularly the case when another organization would be taking the lead in international response to a particular crisis. While coherence remains a holy grail in crisis responses, intra-institutional coherence does not necessarily result in international coherence.

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