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Fatally flawed

The rise and demise of the “three-block war” concept in Canada

The concept of the “three-block war” was introduced and briefly used as a military metaphor by the United States Marine Corps leadership at the end of the last century. It was resurrected by the Canadian forces in 2004-05 and touted as the *modus operandi* for current and future Canadian field operations. The core idea is that military forces would conduct humanitarian, peacekeeping/stabilization, and combat operations simultaneously on three separate city blocks or more widely. How did Canada arrive at this concept and what has been the Canadian experience with its application? Why do some analysts consider it a vision for the future while others consider it fatally flawed?

FROM KRULAK TO HILLIER

The term “three-block war” was first coined by General Charles C. Krulak when he served as commandant of the US marine corps from 1995 to 1999.

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Based on the challenges the marines faced in “failed states” such as Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, he offered the concept as a metaphor to describe the demands of the modern battlefield. In a 1997 speech before Washington’s national press club and in a 1999 issue of *Marine Corps Gazette*, Krulak imagined the future battlefield to be urban and asymmetrical, an environment with few distinctions between combatant and noncombatant and in which sophisticated weaponry is readily available to all sides.¹ A rapidly changing environment was a defining factor in his description. Such situations would require the marines to engage in a range of activities, all more or less at the same time and within the same limited space:

In one moment in time, our service members will be feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing humanitarian assistance. In the next moment, they will be holding two warring tribes apart—conducting peacekeeping operations—and, finally, they will be fighting a highly lethal mid-intensity battle—all on the same day...all within three city blocks. It will be what we call ‘the Three Block War.’²

Krulak’s metaphor was not widely used in the marine corps after his departure in 1999; neither did it gain currency in other American service branches or in NATO.³ The three-block war, however, was touted several years later by the Canadian army as a key transformational concept. This was largely because of Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, then chief of land staff, who had served as deputy commanding general of III Armored Corps of the US army while at Fort Hood in 1998-2000. In a 2005 interview, he said that the three-block war concept will “significantly alter how we structure, how we prepare, how we command, how we train, how we operate and how we sus-

¹ Charles Krulak, “The three block war: Fighting in urban areas,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 64, no. 5 (15 December 1997): 139-41; and Charles Krulak, “The strategic corporal: Leadership in the three block war,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 83, no. 1 (January 1999): 18-23.

² Krulak, “The three block war.”

³ Max Boot, “Beyond the three-block war,” *Armed Forces Journal*, March 2006. The concept is still taught in the Marine Corps University. On the other hand, the three-block war is not even included in the voluminous “NATO glossary of terms and definitions,” produced by the NATO standardization agency, document symbol AAP-6(2007).

tain ourselves.”⁴ It became one of the main theoretical constructs behind his transformation policy. “Army transformation,” the program for restructuring the land forces, and the public affairs section of the Canadian forces put the three-block war front and centre. A widely distributed army transformation poster quotes the army chief:

Preparing for the three-block war will be the foundation of all our training. Leaders at all levels must ensure that our soldiers are set up for success in all aspects of the three-block war.⁵

Similarly, the army transformation website described the concept as “the key” for future warriors, asserting that the army “must be prepared to fight and win the three-block war.”⁶ The Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre in Wainwright, Alberta, opened in 2006, greeted visitors with the sign: “Forging Masters of the Three Block War.”

When Hillier was promoted to chief of defence staff and Canada’s top military officer, he continued to champion the three-block war concept. The defence section of Canada’s 2005 international policy statement, developed with strong input from Hillier, highlights the idea: “the ability of our military to carry out three-block war operations will be critical to the success of Canada’s efforts” to restore order in “failed and failing states,” identified in the document as the forces’ principal future role.⁷ The overview notes that the three-block war is “the image that captures today’s operational environment for the Canadian Forces.”⁸ The concept was thus expanded from the army to the Canadian forces as a whole. In short, through army transformation and the 2005 international policy statement, a late-1990s marine corps metaphor became part of the thinking of Canada’s military leadership. Surprisingly, despite its adoption by the Canadian forces, there is almost no scholarly literature providing critical thinking and analysis of the three-block war con-

4 Chris Maclean, “Experience is shaping army transformation: Interview with Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier,” *Frontline* (January-February 2005), www.frontline-canada.com.

5 “Army transformation: Three-block war,” army transformation poster 7, 2005.

6 “Army transformation,” Department of National Defence, www.army.forces.gc.ca.

7 “Canada’s international policy statement: Defence,” www.mdn.ca.

8 “Canada’s international policy statement: Overview,” Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, www.international.gc.ca.

cept.⁹ Given its alleged importance in recent years, an appraisal of the concept's strengths and weaknesses is needed. The concept has clearly evident pros and cons.

RECOGNIZING POTENTIAL REALITIES

The three-block war helps to convey, in part, the multidimensional nature of modern military missions. Soldiers must always be combat-capable, and at times tactical combat duties must be added to other mandates. Also, as a metaphor, the three-block war seems to be a realistic description of some of the confused tactical situations confronting the forces, notably in southern Afghanistan. An emphasis on the multidimensional nature of modern missions should, in principle, help expand the Canadian forces' skills and expertise, including more diverse training and education in the humanitarian, reconstruction, and peace support fields. As Hillier noted in 2005, "[w]e have not put sufficient intellectual energy, and resources, and work toward the other two [non-combat] blocks specifically, and then all three blocks together."¹⁰ In other words, preparing for a three-block war should mean that the forces will be better equipped to face the more complex challenges of today's deployments. Hillier did not address the question of when or even whether the blocks can be "put together" successfully.

SIMPLICITY: WHEN PROS BECOME CONS

The concept can help simplify deeply complicated situations. The boiled-down, catchy expression "three-block war" makes the idea of multiple tasks easy to communicate, imparting a sense of purpose and confidence in situations lacking clear rules and defined goals. However, the simple and short articulation is also problematic: simplicity can readily be overly simplistic. While it describes some of the potential tactical situations in modern, multidimensional missions, the concept's one-size-fits-all approach risks losing sight of the special nature of many missions. By ignoring that some operations are primarily humanitarian, or peace support, or outright offensive combat, the concept does not allow specificity of mission mandate, which is critical

9 In September 2006, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre and the Humber International Development Institute co-hosted a conference entitled "Three block wars and humanitarianism," however the merits of the approach were not the focus of the discussion. See Sarah Jane Meharg and Ryan T. Marks, "Three block wars and humanitarianism," final report, Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, Ottawa, 12-14 September 2006.

10 Army transformation poster.

for mission clarity, both for Canadian forces personnel and local populations.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some missions may be far more complex, having significantly more than three elements or lines of operation. Marine corps Lieutenant General James N. Mattis and Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman have called for a “block” to cover the psychological and informational aspects of modern missions.¹¹ Colonel John Agoglia of the US army’s Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute suggested that US operations in Iraq are not characterized by a three-block approach, but that US forces are in a fourth block of “governance, reconstruction and economic development.”¹² There is a natural tendency towards “block inflation” as various thinkers and situations find the need for additional lines of operation to cover new tasks.

The three-block war’s simplicity is most problematic when the concept makes the jump from a tactical description of the reality on the ground to a strategic vision, as it did when it was introduced in Canada. Indeed, according to Agoglia, the concept is ill-suited to serve as an overarching military strategy, which it was never meant to be.¹³ It was a metaphor for one type of urban warfare that is not readily expanded to other spaces, such as the maritime and aerospace environments. Such a leap would require substantial reflection, redefinition, and testing.

In complex operations, the end goal must be not simply to “win a war,” but to establish a sustainable peace, especially with the “focus on the complex and dangerous task of restoring order to failed and failing states.”¹⁴ In other words, by emphasizing the means (warfighting), the three-block war concept risks losing sight of the goals (peacemaking and reconciliation).

A FRAGILE FOUNDATION

The concept lacks a solid intellectual foundation. Briefly discussed in the US until Krulak retired as marine commandant in 1999, the three-block war was not incorporated or converted into US doctrine. In Canada, there is

11 Frank G. Hoffman and James N. Mattis. “Future warfare: The rise of hybrid wars,” Naval Institute proceedings 132, no. 11 (November 2005).

12 John Agoglia, “Learning to fight the four-block war: How commanders learn ‘non-military jobs’,” in *Beyond the Three Block War*, David Rudd, Deborah Bayley, and Ewa K. Petruczynik, eds. (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2006).

13 Comments by John Agoglia to one of the authors at the conference, “Beyond the three block war,” Canadian Forces College, Toronto, 15 January 2006.

14 International policy statement: defence, 26.

similarly no doctrine, keystone document, or even case study that tests the concept objectively in different operations. Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the concept's recent effectiveness either as a description of the situation on the ground or as a strategic objective. In lieu of detailed studies, there exists only a vague smattering of supportive language from some military personnel and the occasional politician, the latter referencing Canada's Afghan deployment.¹⁵ In fact, the current concept rests on only a handful of speeches and interviews, a few lines in the 2005 international policy statement, and some basic information materials in the army's transformation program. This shortage of deeper thinking leaves plenty of room for ambiguity.

UNDEFINED BLOCKS

In the absence of an accepted definition of the three-block war, the type, scale, and priority of the blocks are all unclear. In Krulak's articulation, each city block was linked to an activity: humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and mid-intensity warfighting for blocks one through three respectively.¹⁶ In 2005, Hillier modified the activities: he put "fighting" in block one, "helping secure, stabilize and nation build" in block two and, most ambitiously, "helping people through disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping" in block three.¹⁷ Later, Hillier substituted "warfighting" with "war," suggesting the combat element is sustained.

Army transformation further emphasized the combat element, keeping Hillier's block order but changing the activities: block one becomes "a *high-intensity* fight against the armies of failing states"; block two deals with "stabilization or peace support operations including counter-insurgency" (though counterinsurgency is very different from peace support); and, in block three, soldiers "deliver humanitarian aid or assist others doing it."¹⁸ By contrast, an army transformation website restores Krulak's order and gives yet another spin on the block's contents. This articulation places humanitarian aid and support in block one, "stabilization and peace support operations" in block two, and a "high-intensity fight" (not Krulak's occasional mid-intensity battle) in block three. Finally, the 2005 international policy statement echoes Hillier's description, placing "combat against well-armed

15 See, for example, Bill Graham, "Speaking notes," Rotary Club of Toronto luncheon, 21 January 2005, www.forces.gc.ca.

16 Krulak, "Three block war" and "Strategic corporal."

17 Hillier quoted in Maclean, "Experience is shaping army transformation."

18 Army transformation website (emphasis added).

militia” in block one and “stabilization operations” in block two, but it adds “reconstruction” to humanitarian aid in block three.¹⁹ The policy statement goes even further, including naval and air force actions in adjoining areas, expanding Krulak’s city blocks to an entire theatre and in vast oceans and airspace.

Taken together, these definitions paint an ambiguous picture. Are the blocks equal or is fighting the priority, as suggested by the term “war”? And even placing order, priority, and scale issues aside, important details about each of the blocks remain uncertain. For example, do modern operations constitute “high-intensity fighting” in comparison with the high-intensity wars of the past (e.g., the world wars)?²⁰ How do these situations differ from warfighting, in general? It is also uncertain whether the concept is essentially about urban warfare, as Krulak and Hillier’s early articulations suggest, or whether, as the international policy statement suggests, it describes lines of operation stretching across vast land spaces, to the sky and across oceans.

The fit of the three-block war into Canada’s declared doctrine—the focus on diplomacy, development, defence, and commerce and, more recently, the “whole-of-government” approach—is also left unresolved. The concepts cannot be easily mapped onto each other: the three-block war is about the roles that military personnel undertake, not other government departments. This last issue is all the more pertinent given that two of the three institutional leads in the “3D+C” approach—the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency—have not adopted the term three-block war or integrated the concept into their existing policies.²¹

19 International policy statement: defence, 8.

20 The Canadian forces operations manual states that a “high-level operation” means “the entire range of modern weaponry may be used, including weapons of mass destruction...such operations will demand the mobilization of a nation’s entire military potential.” “Canadian forces operations,” Department of National Defence, B-CG-B-GG-005-004/AF-000, 18 December 2000.

21 The concept did not appear, for example, in either the diplomacy or development sections of the international policy statement. Furthermore, in the diplomacy section, the term “failed and failing state” is replaced by the more diplomatic “failed and fragile states.” See “International policy statement: Diplomacy,” www.international.gc.ca; and “Development,” Canadian International Development Agency, www.acdi-cida.gc.ca.

A RETURN TO WARFIGHTING

The concept's ambiguities aside, the three-block war places a heavy emphasis on war in contrast to the other two blocks. Beyond the front-and-centre use of the word "war" in name, the concept has been widely interpreted as a means of advancing a combat-focused agenda. Perhaps this reflected the strong desire within the forces to strengthen its combat role and capabilities after years of perceived neglect, a period Hillier disparagingly called "the decade of darkness" (until the post-9/11 period). The defence section of the international policy statement notes that to carry out a three-block war, the Canadian forces "will remain, above all, combat-capable in order to deter aggression, defend themselves and civilian populations against conventional and asymmetric attacks, and fight and defeat opposing forces."²² This statement suggests that, in terms of the Canadian forces as a whole, while the peace/stability block may be the end goal, the warfighting block has priority. The warfighting approach fosters an "enemy-centred" mentality, which can all too easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It favours the short-term expediency of winning battles over the ultimate goal of building a sustainable peace. The great danger is that unnecessary warfighting will be pursued in situations that mainly call for a peace support approach, where the principles of impartiality, consent, and defence (versus offence) are more appropriate. When soldiers default to combat in the three-block war, they may miss opportunities to use other means to achieve greater ends.

MIXED AND CONFUSED MANDATES IN A FATALLY FLAWED CONCEPT

Given the concept's stress on war, central problems remain: if an operation is primarily of the peace support or humanitarian kind, should it really be labelled a three-block war? On the other end of the spectrum, where combat is offensive and an enemy has been identified, can the blocks mix? Furthermore, what are the repercussions of labelling an operation a three-block war as opposed to a peacekeeping or humanitarian mission? Specifically, what kind of welcome will the Canadian forces receive from the host country and population if the declared purpose is to "fight a three-block war" in a "failed and failing state"? While the psychological support of local populations may not be the only factor, it is an important component to mission success. As experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, when a mission centres

22 International policy statement: defence, 27.

on combat/warfighting, will the other two blocks become ineffective?²³ It is unclear whether it is even possible to carry out peacekeeping and play a humanitarian role while at the same time fighting a war against a determined enemy who can readily threaten or sabotage such efforts. Humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping form the soft underbelly of the three-block war.

The enormous difficulties carrying out reconstruction efforts in southern Afghanistan highlight the difficulties of the three-block war approach. When Hillier urged and convinced the Martin government to take on the provincial reconstruction team in Kandahar, he emphasized, in accordance with the three-block war concept, that the team needed to be reinforced by a strong combat deployment. But he did not foresee that the conventional force component would demand so many resources and cost so many lives.²⁴ The Canadian presence in the highly dangerous Kandahar province quickly became dominated by the troop deployment: there was only one civilian for every hundred soldiers. Military costs were 10 times larger than the civilian program.²⁵ When Canadian soldiers found themselves distributing aid immediately after combat, they were, at times, feeding those whom they had just fought. It was near impossible to tell a Taliban “terrorist” from a civilian “supporter.” Most troubling for the population of Canada, which had not seen its soldiers in such combat since the Korean War, was the high rate of fatality in this “reconstruction” mission. In 2006 and 2007, the annual Canadian fatality rate was 1.5 percent of troops deployed, more than double the rate of US and UK forces in Afghanistan. Ninety percent of Canadian fatalities were from hostile acts.²⁶ Civilian reconstruction programs cannot proceed satisfactorily in such environments. Civilians are easier targets.

23 Adnan R. Khan, “Canada’s Kandahar balancing act,” *Maclean’s*, 19 April 2006.

24 Hillier, quoted in Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *Unexpected War* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 243.

25 Even at the end of 2007, there were only a dozen DFAIT and CIDA officials and a dozen Canadian police officers deployed in Kandahar, compared to 2500 from the Canadian forces. See Lee Berthiaume, “Death of the three-Ds in Afghan mission,” 12 December 2007, *Embassy*, www.embassymag.ca. In rough numbers, Canada provides \$100 million per year in aid to Afghanistan, while the military costs are over \$1 billion per year.

26 Canada lost 66 soldiers in Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007, 90 percent of them from hostile acts. During that period, the average number of Canadian forces troops deployed was 2200. The UK and US annual fatality rates in Afghanistan were significantly

A large part of the problem is that the three-block war gives rise to the very real danger of mandate confusion. Where service members try to be warfighters, peacekeepers, and humanitarian workers on the same day in the same space, the distinction between operation types quickly blurs to the detriment of all. The civilian population and local fighters will find it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish military movements (e.g., convoys) for humanitarian purposes from movements for offensive operations.²⁷ Other players have voiced similar concerns. Humanitarian workers, for example, have often complained of the lack of “humanitarian space” to do their job free from military influence and overt cooperation, which is necessary to maintain the much-needed perception of impartiality and/or neutrality.²⁸ The three-block war approach compounds this problem. When lines of responsibility and mission types are blurred, a determined adversary will target humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, attacking the weakest elements of the multidimensional mission. Moreover, the concept makes any changes in the environment more difficult to discern. For instance, a change in the environment might call for a shift in the type of operation or an entirely new concept of operation.

NATO’s longstanding peace support operations doctrine provides a useful contrast to the three-block war.²⁹ Peace support operations are of six clear types: conflict prevention, peacemaking (mainly negotiation), peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and peace enforcement. More importantly, peace enforcement is to be used as a last resort in an impartial fashion to support a peace agreement, much as police officers would intervene impartially to enforce compliance with the domestic rule of law, though international law enforcement obviously requires more force.³⁰ Because the

lower: 0.68 and 0.43 percent, compared with Canada’s 1.5 percent. The Canadian forces were concentrated in the Kandahar region, one of the most dangerous regions of the country. By mid-August 2008, 90 soldiers and one diplomat had died in Afghanistan. The number of aid workers killed—of all nationalities, but including at least three Canadians—escalated in 2008 to 23 (up to mid-August) from 17 the entire year before. See “Aid workers killed in Afghan attack,” *Globe and Mail*, 13 August 2008, www.theglobeandmail.com.

27 Reuben E. Brigety II, “From three to one: Rethinking the ‘three block war’ and humanitarian operations in combat,” www.usafa.af.mil.

28 *Ibid.*

29 “Peace support operations,” NATO allied joint publication AJP-3.4.1, July 2001.

30 *Ibid.*, paragraphs 202 and 217.

mindsets are completely different in war and peace, US doctrine separates “war” from “operations other than war” for good reason. The three-block war deliberately blurs this distinction.

The UN’s peace operation in the Congo is a successful example of the alternative to the three-block war approach in a complex conflict. The United Nations mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) makes sustainable peace its clear objective. While mid-intensity combat does occur, there is no declared enemy. Instead, an impartial attitude is taken toward breaches of the peace. Moreover, those breaches are met with a nuanced, sophisticated response. For example, during combat, MI-35 helicopter gunships have engaged renegade brigades, but the UN always allows a graceful surrender in lieu of ongoing battle. Moreover, the option of *brassage* (merging of rebel units with the national army) is always open to insurgents, though immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court cannot be given. The MONUC approach is widely seen as succeeding, albeit slowly, in handling one of the most complex and difficult conflicts in Africa.³¹ The UN has likewise achieved success in the nasty conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone, involving nation-building in the presence of ruthless rebels and initially lawless regions. Similarly, through peace processes the UN has helped end vicious conflicts and insurgencies in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Namibia, Mozambique, Cambodia, Timor Leste, and other trouble spots.

ALTERNATIVES

The three-block war concept was never picked up by the Canadian navy and air force. It was eventually dropped, in 2007, as a concept for the army. It is not even mentioned in the army’s latest force employment concept, “Land operations 2021.”³² Newer concepts are coming to the fore, including adaptive dispersed operations, full-spectrum operations, and joint, interagency, multinational, and public-enabled forces. Compared to the three-block war, these are much broader concepts, covering not just three activities but as

31 Christopher S. Chivvis, “Preserving hope in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Survival* 49 no. 2 (2007): 21–41.

32 “Land operations 2021: Adaptive dispersed operations—the force employment concept for Canada’s army of tomorrow,” directorate of land concepts and design, Kingston, 2007. The text does not even mention the three-block war concept. The commander of the army also stated in 2007 that the army would no longer use the concept.

many (or as few) as are needed for a mission. They call for the integration and coordination of diplomatic, defence, multinational, and commercial resources, along with those of many other agencies.³³ The last, in particular, avoids many of the problems of the three-block war concept while still emphasizing a multidimensional approach, as does NATO's peace support doctrine and the UN's evolving peace operations doctrine. Still, there is an ongoing need to develop new thinking to describe the complex inter-relationship between the use of force and other activities in the field.

Given the difficulties in implementing the three-block war concept at the operational and strategic levels, its demise is not to be mourned. While the metaphor may suggest some of the potential situations faced by modern forces, it falls far short as a strategic guide. The emphasis it places on warfighting over a wide array of other activities is fatally flawed. Personnel cannot and should not be expected to serve as humanitarian workers, peacekeepers, and warfighters, all at the same time and within a few blocks. The concept's lack of a firm intellectual foundation is also challenging, but not so much as the contradiction at its heart: warfighting cannot mix with peace support and other missions. The three-block war exacerbates this problem by making it look tidy, simple, and easy while giving no clear sense of an exit strategy. Instead of embracing three-block war operations, militaries should try to avoid them. The concept deserves to be discarded to make way for new concepts and the further development of doctrines that have long proven their worth in scores of cases over decades, such as the peacekeeping and stabilization operation concepts in complex environments, for which Canada has a strong reputation and much valuable experience upon which to build.

³³ For more on joint, interagency, multinational, and public-enabled forces, see Peter Gizewski and Michael Rostek, "Toward a JIMP-capable land force," *Canadian Army Journal* 10, no. 1 (spring 2007): 55-72.