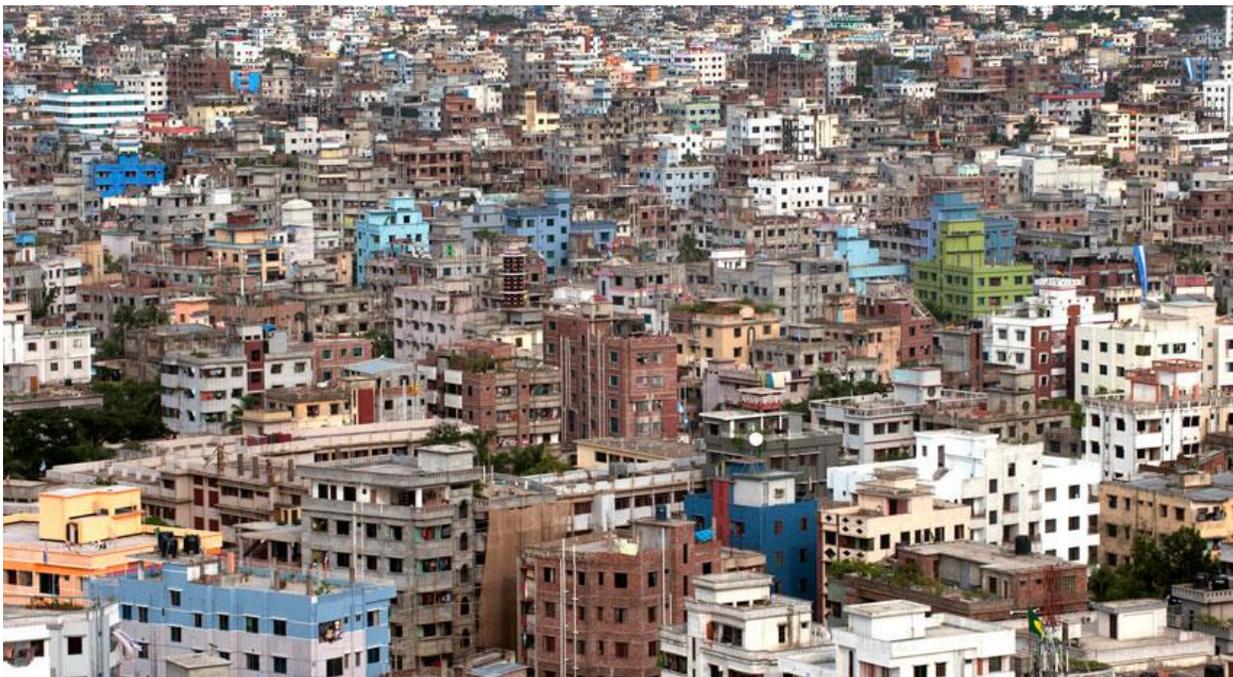


Out of the mountains into the cities: is CIMIC ready for future urban operations?

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Every generation regards only a few events as able to change the world or to shape the future, as for example the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or 9/11. Some of these events might have left their traces in our collective memories, and many people can still remember what they exactly did at this special day. Nevertheless, most people would not claim this fact about a single day in the April of 2008. Yet, an important event took place at this day which can be seen as a beacon of the rapid change of the human environment: this day marked the first time in human history the number of people living in an urban environment outnumbered their counterparts in the rural settings.

This event is a landmark of an ongoing development that will change the human society as well as the face of future military operations. Indeed, the rapid growth of cities, which become more and more crowded, complex and connected areas, represents many challenges for the future. Some of these city complexes, like Tokyo or Seoul, belong to fully developed countries and can take profit from good governance and the use of modern technology, so that urbanization represents a real opportunity for the population living there, offering them better living conditions, jobs, exchange, good infrastructures, etc. Nevertheless, the majority of the growing cities in the world is located in developing and fragile states and have to face problems like political instability, poverty, unemployment, and crime. NATO cannot ignore this important trend and must ask itself what would happen if Task Forces, including CIMIC assets, had to operate in such a difficult area. Is NATO ready to face this new environment after having fought in the Afghan mountains for years?

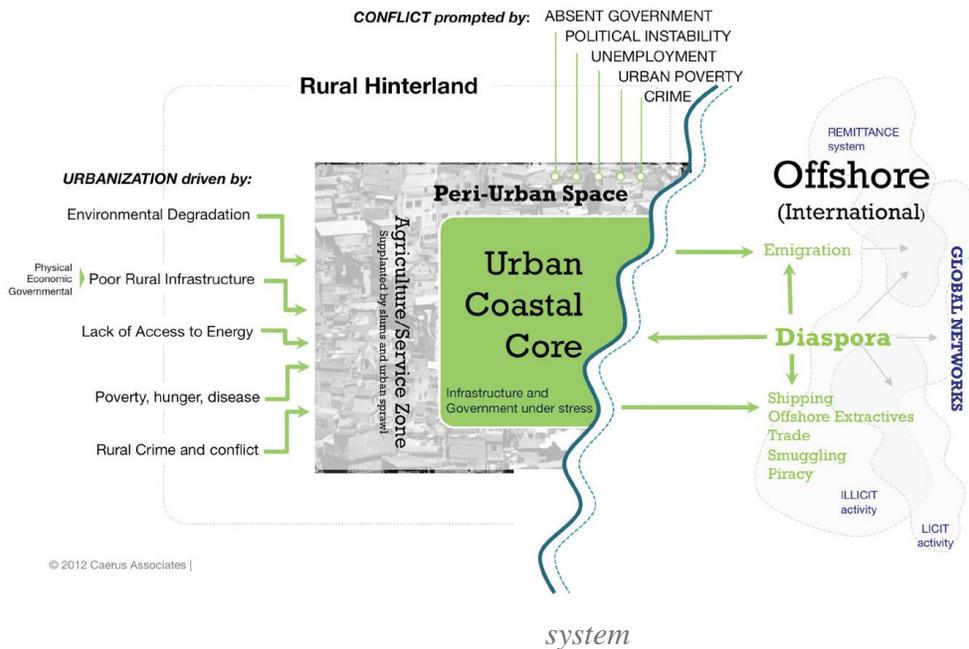


Picture: Are we ready to fight in this environment? Source: United Nations

In the last decades, the human population saw a constant and exponentially growth, from 3 billion in 1960 to over 7 billion people in 2012. This development is closely linked to the trend of urbanization: while in 1950 the world counted only two megacities (cities counting more than 10 million inhabitants), there are currently 25 of such a settlement on the earth. Furthermore, nearly every major city in the world is located close to a coastline or a coastal delta, and 80 percent of the people of the planet live within 60 miles from the coast.

Besides those phenomena of *urbanization* and *littoralization*, the whole world and especially the cities are becoming more and more connected. The world has seen the democratization of technology and of connectedness in the last decades. Physical and geographical borders have become less significant. The internet, networks, and traffics have become part of everyone’s daily grind. Conflicts have now reached this virtual dimension too, which played for example an important role during the Arabellion in the early 2010’s. Social networks, drones and “videogame-like” operations have become part of current warfare. The role of that virtual dimension will improve in the coming years, all the more than cities are in the heart of this connectedness.

These three phenomena, namely *urbanization*, *littoralization* and *connectivity*, lead to the appearance of complex megacities all around the world. The way these cities are structured can be visualized depicting a city as a system.



This model visualizes the complex system of interaction and interdependence which is characteristic for every megacity: The city itself is the core of a larger system which is surrounded by a peri-urban space. This zone plays an important role in supplying the city with agricultural products, while the growing city swallows the free space step by step. The rural hinterland is the zone that is defined by low population density and often suffers from problems like environmental degradation, poor infrastructure or poverty. While the city itself may face problems like crime, unemployment or political instability, it nevertheless attracts many people from the hinterlands to move in the city and contributes to its growth. On the other hand, a modern megacity is not only

connected with its surrounding countryside, but also with far off locations and groups. Especially a coastal city will have the sea trade which will flow from and to the city as well as an international diaspora of emigrants who connects the city with the global network.

Understanding these complex structures will be a key element for military operations in an urban environment. Those future crowded, complex and connected cities have to be considered as entire units of analysis, as they represent complex systems of systems ruled by their own laws. The identity of a city defines itself more through its flows and processes than through its physical infrastructure. Therefore, it is important to focus on the elements which balance a city. The fragile balance of a city can be destroyed by several and diverse threats: natural disasters like floods, cyber-attacks, terrorism, technical disasters as the explosion of a nuclear power plant (Fukushima 2011), the lack of an equal distribution of resources (water, for example) which can lead to riots, etc. Facing those problems by understanding the way a city is balanced and helping re-establishing it will be one of the challenges NATO might have to confront in the future.

In the last few decades, many NATO members were engaged in stability operations which mostly took place in rural areas, marked by difficult terrain, small settlements and a lower state of connectedness. Future operations might take place in a totally different kind of environment, with a huge and confusing maze of crowded streets, and the constant presence of civilian actors (local population, but also local government officials, governmental organizations, international organizations and NGOs). In this context, CIMIC will be a key capability of NATO to deal with complex situations by establishing contact with civilian key actors, collecting information and advising the military commanders. What happened during the Battle of Mogadishu shows for example how important the consideration of the civilian factor can be in a conflict taking place in an urban area.

In October 1993, the US Army sent soldiers to Mogadishu (capital of Somalia) to seize two senior leaders of the Somali National Alliance. The air assault was supposed to last no longer than one hour. However, the soldiers saw themselves confronted to the complexity of the systems which ruled that city, including economy, population, and complex balances of power. The situation escalated, and the soldiers were rapidly overtaken by the events. The author of the book “Black Hawk Down” uses the expression “*it seemed like the whole city was shooting at them*” to express the confusion of the soldiers and the complexity of the situation. The battle resulted in many casualties among the US soldiers and the Somalian militias and civilian population. Furthermore, the city itself became a victim of those fights inasmuch as its system had been disrupted. Indeed, the soldiers ignored the power of a furious population and only considered the military goal, they attacked the city in its heart and the city responded violently.

This example shows how important the comprehension of the way a city works can be for a military mission. This is where CIMIC should play an important role. CIMICs first role is to establish a liaison between the civilian and the military actors. CIMIC has to communicate with local key actors and, analyze the system of a city in order to understand its complexity. Only then, CIMIC is able to advice properly the military commanders and to point elements which can have been missed by them. This process may avoid such disasters as during the Battle of Mogadishu. What can NATO do today to prepare its Forces to face such situations? There is probably no universal response, and no possibility to establish predictions, inasmuch as the specificity of each city and of each situation leads to specific solutions. Nevertheless, some general trends are

common to all these emerging megacities, so that adapting to these challenges and precluding the threats they encompass is not impossible.

First, as we said, crowded cities represent complex areas where the civil factor is highly important. Therefore, one of the core functions of CIMIC, namely *civil-military liaison*, will play a key role in future conflicts. CIMIC will need qualified experts to get to know the civilian key actors of a city, to get in touch with them, and to maintain the established contact. Logically, the number of those experts should increase as the number of civilian actors will strongly grow too: in Afghanistan, the hierarchic structures of villages turned out to be quite simple, and the identification of their key actors, namely the village eldest, did mostly not pose a problem. The structures of future cities will be much more difficult to understand, so that CIMIC will need a greater number of qualified experts to face this challenge. Secondly, future cities represent a new kind of area military commanders will have to understand. Explaining how a city works, which are its structures, its history, its geography, its problems and its resources will also be one of the tasks CIMIC will have to accomplish to *support the force*. At this point we can evoke the American Human Terrain System, which was a program developed in 2005 which consisted in sending social scientists to the front line so as to give military commanders information about the local population and the area where the forces were deployed. Admittedly, this program turned out to be very controversial. Many anthropologists considered it as incompatible with their disciplinary values, inasmuch as ethnographic investigations were determined by military missions, and the information was not always gained in a non-coercive way. Nonetheless, drawing lessons from this experience could be a step forward to find solutions for the future. Last but not least, humanitarian emergencies are also likely to happen in such areas: in case of a natural or of a technical disaster, a huge number of people would be involved. CIMIC must be able to deal with such a situation. CIMIC might also have to face mass movements, or bad hygienic conditions which could lead to diseases. Another threat CIMIC could face in the frame of the *support to the civil actors and their environment* is the management of resources like water and food. All those aspects should be considered while adapting the TTPs, the CIMIC training and the structure of the CIMIC staff and its skills in the future.

To put it in a word, the current trends of urbanization, littoralization and connectedness will result in the appearance of complex urban areas NATO and especially CIMIC will have to understand. To do so, NATO founded the Urbanization Project 2035 in 2014. The CCOE also takes part in this project by researching capability solutions from the CIMIC perspective. While the human factor will become more and more important in those crowded areas, CIMIC will have to adept those evolutions without losing sight of its three core functions. Making the connection between the civilian and the military world, supporting the military commanders but also the local population will still remain at the core of CIMIC activities. Yet, the area CIMIC will operate in, and its complexity will drastically change in the coming years: will CIMIC be ready to face that challenge?