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Between Association and Dissociation: The Legitimacy Politics of CIMIC Experimentation

Prof. Dr. Markus Bresinsky[1]; M.A Jule Marie Brischar[2]*
[1] Applied Natural and Cultural Sciences, Technical University of Applied Sciences (OTH) Regensburg
[2] Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Friedrich-Schiller University Jena

*Correspondence: j.brischar@gmail.com

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Abstract

NATO's Concept Development and Experimentation (CD&E) works well for discrete technologies but is ill-suited to civil–military cooperation (CIMIC), where the 'capability' at stake is an inter-organisational relationship. Drawing on regime-complex theory and organisational sociology, this paper argues that willingness to engage in joint CIMIC capability development hinges on legitimacy rather than technical utility. A legitimacy-scale metaphor captures the trade-off: functional gains from collaboration load one side; identity risks, such as threats to neutrality, autonomy, or safety, load the other. Three ideal-type cases test the framework. In stabilisation missions, humanitarian neutrality is vital, the scale tips toward identity risk, and co-creation remains siloed. In sudden-onset disasters, shared life-saving objectives reduce identity costs, functional incentives dominate, and integrated trials flourish. Territorial- and collective-defence scenarios occupy the middle ground: acute threat perception opens selective, often low-profile windows for cooperation, yet unresolved legal and reputational questions still temper overt collaboration.

The analysis yields five practical lessons. First, legitimacy must be treated as a primary design variable. Second, the optimal depth of cooperation is context specific. Third, legitimacy-sensitive 'safe-to-fail' spaces – wargames, living labs, tabletop exercises – lower entry barriers. Fourth, structured reflection on legitimacy exposes red lines early and refines future joint efforts. Fifth, incremental processes can build trust and gradually relax legitimacy constraints. Recognising legitimacy as both constraint and resource allows practitioners to design CIMIC co-creation – and eventual experimentation – that is technically sound, politically acceptable, and ethically sustainable.

Keywords: *CIMIC; NATO; Legitimacy; Co-creation; Experimentation; Association; Dissociation.*

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1 Introduction

Concept Development and Experimentation (CD&E) has become NATO's principal method for translating novel ideas into deployable capabilities. The doctrine presents experimentation as a technically bounded, low-risk process: hypotheses are formulated, variables controlled, and lessons captured before concepts mature into policy or procurement (NATO, 2021). This template performs well when the capability in question is a tangible technology – a radio, an unmanned vehicle, or a software patch. Civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), however, poses a different challenge. Its capability is not hardware but a relationship among military, governmental, commercial, or humanitarian actors, each of which answers to distinct constituencies and derives legitimacy from different norms, standards, and procedures.

Because CIMIC experimentation remains to be defined, the present study employs a broader concept from organisational theory – co-creation – to refer to joint civil-military capability development, transformation, and innovation. Such activity already occurs in operational settings: actors improvise, organisations learn, structures evolve, and new capacities are tested in real time across multiple contexts. Yet invitations to participate in joint capability development are often judged less for their functional promise than for the signals they send about identity, neutrality, and authority. In some cases, they are embraced; in others they encounter resistance, prompting organisations to innovate inside their own silos.

This paper argues that legitimacy, rather than technology, sets the outer limits of co-creation. Drawing on regime-complex theory and organisational sociology, we demonstrate how actors choose between legitimation by association and legitimation by dissociation. The paper posits as straightforward cost-benefit logic: organisations will engage in joint transformation when expected functional gains and potential legitimacy spillovers outweigh reputational risks, and they will distance themselves when the balance is reversed. Because both gains and risks vary with operational context, co-creation is more readily facilitated in some environments than in others.

Three ideal-type cases illustrate this claim. Stabilisation missions such as Afghanistan reveal high legitimacy threats for humanitarian agencies and thus foster dissociation; innovation and transformation tend to occur in parallel channels and remain fragmentary. Sudden-onset natural disasters demonstrate an opposite dynamic: legitimacy threats are modest, functional incentives dominate, and joint capability development can become routine. Territorial and collective defence remains significantly under-researched to date. Nevertheless, it appears to occupy an ambiguous position, characterised by selective, discreet, and sometimes hesitant collaboration focused on technical interfaces rather than public co-creation.

Translating these ideal-type insights into practice, the study proposes practical measures – legitimacy scans, low-visibility pilots, and structured reflection phases – that can help planners align co-creation formats with contextual constraints. By placing relational legitimacy at the centre of analysis, the paper complements functionalist accounts of CD&E and sharpens understanding of where, why, and how joint CIMIC capability development can succeed, thereby providing a foundation for the emerging concept of CIMIC experimentation

2 CIMIC Co-Creation as (Il-)Legitimate Practice

NATO's CD&E methodology is presented in Allied Command Transformation publications as the Alliance's principal engine of transformation (NATO 2021). Through a sequenced cycle of discovery, hypothesis testing, and demonstration, CD&E is intended to translate creative ideas into viable capability solutions (ibid.). Each event is framed as a controlled, low-risk environment in which new concepts mature incrementally, uncertainty is reduced, and unpromising lines of development are abandoned early. Rigorous evaluation, coherent control of execution, and unbiased analysis are stipulated prerequisites for success (ibid.). Under this doctrine, experimentation is conceived largely as a technical and functional undertaking: sensors, communication links, or decision-support tools are exposed to operational stress, their performance is measured against predefined metrics, and the resulting evidence informs later defence-planning decisions (de Nijs, 2010).

This template has proved its worth for narrowly defined capability gaps – autonomous ground vehicles, plug-and-play satellite kits, or next-generation mission networks (Barz et al., 2021; Boulet, 2007; Lopes et al., 2023; Mansfield et al., 2019; Warren & Sutton, 2008). Civil-military cooperation, as codified in AJP-3.4, is different. It is not a hardware problem but an institutional relationship linking military headquarters with civilian, governmental, and non-governmental actors, each of which draws legitimacy from markedly different sources. When these actors are invited to join transformation or innovation processes, they assess not only functional promise but also how participation might influence perceptions of neutrality, independence, or professional identity among constituencies vital to their authority. Joint CIMIC capability is therefore highly relational – and, by extension, highly contested.

Existing scholarship implicitly recognises this gap. Reviews of NATO experimentation concentrate on technical enablers, whereas CIMIC studies focus on coordination mechanisms, coherence, and organisational culture (Ankersen, 2007; De Coning, 2007; de Coning, 2016; Rietjens, 2008; Rietjens & Lucius, 2016). To date, no study has examined how CD&E principles translate when the capability under test is civil-military cooperation itself. This omission matters, because the assumption that CD&E can simply be extended to the civil-military sphere overlooks a basic reality: association among organisations is never a neutral, purely functional act. It is a public signal laden with potential gains and losses of legitimacy.

Consequently, willingness to join joint transformation varies sharply by context. Humanitarian agencies governed by neutrality norms often decline military-led processes in stabilisation missions, yet the same agencies collaborate readily during disaster-response where neutrality is less contested. Territorial or hybrid-defence settings generate a third pattern: actors recognise shared threats and occasionally cooperate but remain cautious about publicly integrating their innovation efforts. Where a threat is apolitical – extreme weather, for instance – association is more likely; where core values and identity, and safety are perceived as directly at risk, dissociation predominates. These observations suggest that CD&E's standard logic of stakeholder identification and spiral validation does not automatically travel into the civil-military sphere. Successful co-creation first requires an appraisal of who will see the initiative as legitimate and why.

This paper therefore argues that joint CIMIC capability development demands more than technical sequencing. It requires continuous assessment of stakeholder expectations and legitimacy concerns at every stage, from concept framing through post-trial messaging. To substantiate that claim, the study applies a relational legitimacy framework that depicts organisations as weighing protection of their own identity against the prospective gains of collaboration. Where issue salience is high, identity threats are low, and expected benefits substantial, joint transformation and innovation should be attractive; where the opposite conditions prevail, dissociation is the rational response.

The next section elaborates this framework of institutional complexity and relational legitimacy, laying the theoretical foundations for the subsequent analysis of three contrasting contexts. In doing so, the discussion moves beyond a purely functional reading of CD&E and shows why legitimacy is the critical variable that conditions civil-military co-creation.

3 Legitimacy Concerns in Institutionally Complex Environments

3.1 Institutional Complexity

International crisis management now unfolds in a landscape crowded with formal and informal organisations. The latest *Yearbook of International Organisations* lists more than 66,000 intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies active across some 300 issue areas (Union of International Associations, 2024). Scholars describe this proliferation as an *organisational turn* in world governance (Biermann & Koops, 2017): policy boundaries that once appeared neat now blur, compelling actors to coexist within shared domains. In such an environment no single entity can resolve a crisis alone; outcomes emerge from shifting webs of cooperation and competition.

Institutional complexity arises because organisations are embedded in multiple, and at times contradictory, logics of action. Where mandates overlap, actors must choose whether to pool efforts, defend turf, or attempt both at once. Inter-organisational relations therefore display a persistent co-

operation–competition dialectic (Aris & Snetkov, 2018; Knoke & Chen, 2008). Cooperation promises synergy when interests align and coordination is feasible (Keohane, 1984). Competition surfaces when resources, audiences, or normative capital are scarce, or when organisations seek a distinctive profile to secure funding and legitimacy (Biermann & Koops, 2017).

Regime-complex research offers an institutional lens on these dynamics. A regime complex is "an array of partially overlapping and non-hierarchical institutions that govern a particular issue-area" (Raustiala & Victor, 2004, p. 279). Overlaps can foster both productive division of labour and frictional duplication. Critics argue that fragmentation invites forum-shopping, normative incoherence, and wasteful duplication (Drezner, 2013; Gehring & Faude, 2014; Pratt, 2018). Proponents counter that overlap can encourage specialisation and adaptive problem-solving, generating emergent yet ordered patterns of authority (Holzscheiter et al., 2016).

Institutional complexity thus refers to governance arenas where multiple actors overlap geographically and functionally, forming networks of cooperative and competitive ties. The interactions among these actors create emergent dynamics: feedback loops, reputational cascades, informal hierarchies that cannot be traced to any single participant.

Whether organisational overlap and institutional complexity undermines or enhances governance depends on how organisations manage and perceive legitimacy. With audiences ranging from donors to local populations, actors cannot treat association as neutral. If a prospective partner threatens an NGO's neutrality claim or a military actor's operational credibility, dissociation may outweigh the functional gains of co-operation (Saleh, 2023). Conversely, a shared emergency or external threat can lower legitimacy costs, making association strategically attractive. These abstract dynamics manifest sharply in civil–military cooperation. NATO doctrine recognises that contemporary conflicts demand "multi-dimensional, comprehensive, whole-of-government and integrated civil-military approaches" (de Coning, 2016, p. 12). Yet achieving such integration is difficult precisely because CIMIC occurs in a regime complex rife with overlapping mandates and divergent normative logics. Each new coordination mechanism, liaison cell or joint planning drill constitutes an experiment in boundary management. In short, institutional complexity provides the structural backdrop against which organisations decide whether to co-operate or compete with one another.

Institutional complexity therefore poses the structural backdrop against which organisations decide whether to cooperate or compete. The next subsection examines how IOs navigate this terrain through relational legitimation strategies

3.2 Relational Legitimation

The authority of an IO seldom rests on material resources or coercion. Rather, it depends on the IO being recognised as a rightful actor by those whose cooperation it seeks. Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as a "generalised perception or assumption" that an entity's actions are appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms and beliefs. In this sociological reading, legitimacy constitutes an IO's most valuable currency, because it sustains acceptance even when decisions fail to satisfy immediate interests (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Legitimacy converts directly into agency. Organisations judged legitimate obtain resources, attract expertise and elicit compliance from member states (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Gronau & Schmidtke, 2016). They may also secure delegated powers that allow autonomous rule-making or operational discretion. Conversely, weakly legitimised bodies struggle to implement mandates and risk marginalisation in an increasingly crowded governance landscape (Sommerer et al., 2022).

Humanitarian agencies illustrate the point starkly: their core objective in armed conflict is to maintain access to affected populations, an aim that depends on being perceived as neutral, impartial and independent (De Coning, 2007). Without that legitimacy, convoys are blocked, and programmes collapse. NATO, though equipped with formidable coercive means, is not immune to similar dynamics. Episodes of contestation, from debates over burden sharing under the Trump administration to questions about Europe's strategic autonomy, demonstrate that allies invoke legitimacy frames when they challenge or defend the Alliance's role. Analysts note that NATO now projects itself as more than a threat-based pact: it emphasises values, institutionalised consultation and mutual interdependence to preserve its standing (Schuette, 2023).

Because legitimacy is costly to acquire and easy to lose, it is managed strategically. IOs cultivate supportive audiences through transparency initiatives, partnerships, branding and narrative control (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015). They also weigh the legitimacy risks of collaboration: association with a controversial actor may undermine normative credibility even if it promises functional gains (Biermann & Koops, 2017). Dissociation, by contrast, can safeguard reputation at the price of foregone synergies. These trade-offs become acute in civil-military co-creation, where participation itself might signal alignment. Whether an organisation enters or exits such ventures therefore depends on how the move is expected to be read by its audiences. Legitimacy is thus not a stable attribute but a relational and context-dependent judgement that shapes organisational survival in complex institutional environments.

As already established, IOs cannot rely on formal authority alone, they need their main audiences (member states, donors, and affected communities) to see their work as appropriate, effective and worthwhile. To build that acceptance, they use what Gronau, Schmidtke and Catsellà-Sarriera call legitimation strategies: deliberate efforts to win and keep broad, long-term support (2016). Performance claims ('we deliver results'), fair procedures (transparency, inclusion), value appeals (humanity, democracy) and member mandates ('our states asked us to act') are tools commonly cited to achieve

said support (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018; Gronau, 2015; Suchman, 1995; von Billerbeck, 2020; Zaum, 2013). When these efforts succeed, organisations gain room to act and a buffer of trust that outlasts any single decision.

Relational legitimation builds directly on the institutional complexity picture set out above. When several organisations operate in the same issue-area, audiences rarely judge each body on its own. They look sideways, comparing mandates, performance, and alliances. As Black (2008) notes, the standing of one organisation can rise or fall with the behaviour of another. Saleh (2023) likens this environment to a crowded market in which every actor must signal its value while surrounded by rivals and potential partners. IOs react to this by adopting relational legitimation strategies: they strategically position themselves vis-à-vis one another to secure resources, attention, and authority. Teaming up with a well-regarded partner can boost credibility; aligning with a controversial actor can do the opposite. When the likely legitimacy gain outweighs the risk, organisations lean into close collaboration; when the risk looks high, they hedge with looser coordination or even open rivalry. Actors thus constantly adjust how close or how separate they stand, seeking to protect or improve their reputation.

Existing scholarship identifies two broad and sometimes competing approaches. Legitimation by association (LegA) draws on cooperative logics in inter-organisational relations (Biermann & Koops, 2017) and on the integration end of regime-complex dynamics (Holzscheiter et al., 2016). Heupel (2023) argues that organisations seek public links (joint statements, shared programmes) with other organisations which their core audiences already trust. Haug (2024) also shows how such links are amplified rhetorically and presented as evidence of shared purpose. The aim is to signal that the organisation is part of a wider web of legitimate actors, thereby enhancing its own legitimacy.

Legitimation by dissociation (LegD) illustrates the opposite dynamic. Saleh (2023) stresses that in a crowded field, standing out can be just as valuable as fitting in. When overlap threatens an organisation's profile, or when a partner carries reputational baggage, differentiation may be the safer option to be perceived a legitimate actor. Organisations may consequently establish parallel structures, emphasise unique mandates, or criticise rivals to underline comparative advantage.

Both strategies are reflected in guidance for civil-military interactions. United-Nations CMCoord doctrine, for example, explicitly offers a spectrum from cooperation, joint planning, and action to coexistence (OCHA, 2017). Humanitarian agencies may adopt a pragmatic cooperative stance in a natural disaster response yet switch to principled non-involvement in an insurgency where neutrality is paramount (Frerks et al., 2006). De Coning expresses the same logic in a civil–military scale that runs from united and integrated at one end to coexist and compete at the other (2016). These relational choices are assumed to matter directly for joint CIMIC capability development. Agreeing to join transformation and innovation processes signals association; declining or developing a separate concept or capability signals dissociation. The framework developed here therefore predicts that an actor's willingness to

experiment, the format it accepts, and the preferred framing around it will vary with its reading of legitimacy pay-offs in each context.

The interaction between these two strategies can be visualised as a balance scale. On one pan sit the expected functional gains of collaboration – access to resources, pooled expertise, wider political reach. On the other pan rests the threat to organisational identity – risks to neutrality, brand dilution, or loss of autonomy. When the functional side is heavier, the legitimacy scale tips toward association; when identity risks dominate, dissociation becomes the rational choice. Because the relevant weights are set not by an abstract formula but by audience perceptions in each context, the same initiative may appear perfectly balanced to one actor and dangerously lopsided to another. Practitioners must therefore gauge where each prospective partner believes the fulcrum lies before launching a joint capability-development effort.

The next section elaborates this framework of institutional complexity and relational legitimacy, laying the theoretical foundations for the subsequent analysis of three contrasting contexts. In doing so, the discussion moves beyond the functionalist reading of CD&E and shows why legitimacy is the critical variable that conditions civil–military experimentation.

3.3 Context-Dependence

Organisations rarely adopt association or dissociation as fixed positions; instead, they balance projected gains against possible costs. When the functional benefits of collaboration – additional resources, specialised expertise, or broader political support – outweigh the anticipated risks, association is attractive. Where the same partnership threatens core identity, credibility, or autonomy, dissociation becomes the rational choice. Two considerations shape this cost-benefit calculus.

The first is functional. Contemporary crises often require capacities that no single actor commands, and member states as well as donors routinely press for greater coordination to reduce duplication and maximise collective effect (Biermann & Koops, 2017). In these circumstances, association can deliver imporant results: pooled logistics, common analysis, or the legitimacy spill-over that comes from appearing in a unified effort.

The second consideration is normative. Every organisation seeks to safeguard the distinctive mandate that justifies its existence. Close alignment can blur that mandate, import another actor's reputational liabilities, or imply that one's own contribution is dispensable. Dissociation, by contrast, draws a boundary. By stressing unique competences and maintaining separate structures, an organisation protects its brand and shields itself from negative spill-over.

Here, the scale metaphor becomes useful again: One side holds functional gains, the other identity risks. Context places weights on each side. Sudden-onset disasters, for instance, impose urgent operational

demands and feature relatively low neutrality concerns; the functional side becomes heavier, tipping the legitimacy scale toward association. In a protracted stabilisation context, the same organisation fears accusations of partiality; identity risks grow, the scale tilts toward dissociation. Structural features such as threat level, media scrutiny, donor priorities and the recent history of inter-organisational relations can further shift the balance in either direction. Opting for one strategy over the other is therefore a context-dependent exercise in relational legitimacy management.

The framework is applied in the following pages to civil–military co-creation. Three ideal-type cases – stabilisation missions, disaster responses and territorial or collective-defence scenarios – illustrate how legitimacy dynamics condition willingness to transform and innovate jointly. Each case outlines the key contextual factors, links them to established CIMIC findings, and then employs the association-dissociation lens to explain why joint capability development is likely to advance or stall. By tracing how legitimacy gains and risks shift across settings, the analysis shows that co-creation is both enabled and constrained by the strategies organisations adopt to maintain legitimacy. These findings, in turn, inform broader lessons on how future CIMIC capability-development initiatives – and, ultimately, CIMIC experiments – can be structured to respect, and where possible leverage, the legitimacy scale.

4 CIMIC Co-Creation across Contexts

4.1 Stabilisation Missions in Highly Volatile Contexts: Dissociation

This first case examines missions such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur, where high levels of violence and intense politicisation make legitimacy concerns central and, in turn, curtail opportunities for joint capability development. The environment combines urgent humanitarian need with ongoing combat. NATO doctrine identifies CIMIC's core functions in such settings as liaison, assistance to the population and support to the force (Franke, 2006). Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan illustrated this approach: they rebuilt schools, drilled wells and offered basic medical services while simultaneously conducting security patrols. Humanitarian agencies – including the ICRC, Médecins Sans Frontières and many international NGOs – operated in the same provinces under mandates of neutrality and independence.

PRTs have been extensively debated and criticised as embodying an earlier 'winning hearts and minds' model of CIMIC from which most practitioners now distance themselves. They remain relevant here because, nevertheless, that model continues to shape public expectations of civil-military interaction in stabilisation contexts. We further acknowledge that not every actor fits neatly into a 'hard-core-military' or 'solely principled humanitarian' category. The theatre, in reality, hosts a spectrum of hybrid organisations. For analytical clarity, however, the discussion foregrounds the most contrasting positions.

This most-different case set-up intentionally brackets the grey areas to highlight the dissociative dynamic predicted by the legitimacy scale.

The core tension in this scenario centres on organisational identity. Humanitarian organisations rely on being seen as impartial, neutral and independent. This perception secures access to civilians and reduces the risk of attack (ICRC, 2015). Military units, by contrast, wield coercive force and pursue political objectives; their perceived association with humanitarians therefore threatens to blur the humanitarian identity. NGOs in Afghanistan objected that PRT relief duplicated civilian work and blurred the distinction between aid worker and combatant, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence against staff (Franke, 2006).

The functional benefits of collaboration for transformation and innovation appear to be clear: Military contingents bring strategic airlift, convoy security, engineering assets and a robust command-and-control system. From a purely operational standpoint, joint needs assessments, shared logistics hubs or co-branded communications campaigns could accelerate service delivery. Yet humanitarian actors judge that association with a combat force undermines their legitimacy and, by extension, their effectiveness. For them, the cost-benefit balance therefore tilts towards dissociation. Guttieri (2004) notes that the inherently political nature of military action exacerbates this calculation, while Gourlay (2000) shows that as local consent declines, humanitarian actors increase distance.

The legitimacy scale therefore tips toward dissociation. The ICRC promoted the idea of *humanitarian space*, arguing that military assistance should be a last resort to preserve neutrality (Franke, 2006). Humanitarian field offices limited interaction to de-confliction meetings and information exchange, avoiding co-location and joint branding. De Coning (2007) observes that the gap between humanitarian and military components is much wider in peace-enforcement environments than in lower-threat peace-building settings. Even where functional cooperation occurred, for example, military escorts for high-risk road convoys, it was framed as exception rather than norm.

These dynamics shape co-creation prospects. CIMIC branches may test new civilian-environment analysis tools internally, while NGOs pilot separate coordination platforms. Mixed needs-assessment teams or integrated logistics units confront steep legitimacy hurdles. Any initiative must respect humanitarian red lines: civilian leadership, separate visual identity and strict information-sharing limits. Without such safeguards, participation would publicly signal alignment and undermine principles essential to humanitarian access and organisations' safety. Accordingly, innovation tends to proceed in parallel silos, reinforcing fragmentation and leaving joint capability development rather untapped in high-salience legitimacy environments.

4.2 Natural Disaster Relief: Association

In disaster relief operations, legitimacy concerns are muted compared to peace-enforcement settings. The incentives for civil-military co-creation are stronger and association is more likely. Severe weather events, earthquakes, and large-scale health emergencies typically destroy transport links and communications infrastructure, produce significant casualties and attract intense media coverage (Tatham & Rietjens, 2016). Nearly all recent major disasters, from Haiti in 2010 to Mozambique in 2019, have involved both humanitarian organisations and foreign military units. Armed forces deploy because their strategic airlift, engineering assets and command-and-control systems fill recognised capability gaps that humanitarian agencies alone cannot meet (ibid.).

The principal actors in these contexts include local authorities, UN humanitarian agencies, international NGOs and military contingents from donor states or coalitions. Their objectives converge on life-saving assistance and rapid restoration of basic services. Military contributions encompass search and rescue, medical evacuation, route clearance, public-order support and large-scale logistics (Goniewicz et al., 2019; Kalkman & Bollen, 2024). These tasks complement civilian capacities rather than duplicate them. Functional gains are therefore obvious: faster delivery of relief goods, wider reach into isolated areas.

Identity-related risks remain but are comparatively limited. Humanitarian organisations can justify cooperation because foreign troops are not active belligerents, and host governments usually invite them. Studies note that disaster relief is less politically contentious than other domestic military missions (Arcala Hall & Cular, 2010). Concerns centre on potential militarisation or securitisation of response, as well as on procurement practices that prioritise speed over local institution-building (Mandel, 2002). Nevertheless, the expected output legitimacy, measured in reduced mortality and quicker recovery, tends to outweigh such costs.

Empirical practice confirms a drift toward association. NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and national frameworks such as Canada's Operation LENTUS institutionalise routine collaboration and joint drills (Landry et al., n.d.). Logistic chains are an especially productive domain for co-creation because civilian and military professionals already share planning concepts and supply-chain methodologies (Tatham & Rietjens, 2016). Scenario-based exercises offer venues for trialling interoperable tracking systems, mixed assessment teams or drone-enabled damage surveys. Where militaries participate in pre-crisis planning and training, response times shorten and community resilience improves (Kalkman & Bollen, 2024).

In terms of the legitimacy scale metaphor, the functional side is heavy while the identity-risk side is relatively light. The balance therefore tips toward association. Output legitimacy dominates: success is judged chiefly by the relief delivered, not by strict neutrality cues. As climate change intensifies extreme events, demand for rapid, large-scale response will rise, further normalising civil-military collaboration (Kalkman & Bollen, 2024) and, by extension, joint capability development. Compared with stabilisation

missions, legitimacy barriers are lower and functional incentives higher, making disaster settings fertile ground for civil-military co-creation.

4.3 Territorial and Collective Defence: The In-Between

Territorial and alliance-defence scenarios remain understudied, yet they appear to occupy an intermediate position on the legitimacy scale. Concerns about identity and legal status persist, but acute threat perception and high issue salience create selective windows for civil-military association and, by extension, co-creation. The implication is that joint transformation and innovation should proceed incrementally, with regular legitimacy checks, a technology-first focus and a deliberately low public profile.

Territorial defence has returned to the foreground of NATO planning, prompting doctrinal adjustments to civil-military cooperation (Harig, 2024). Much of today's pressure derives from the grey zone between peace and armed attack: hybrid tactics, such as cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, and critical-infrastructure sabotage target civil society, private industry and local authorities while remaining below the threshold that would trigger Article V (Rinelli & Duyvesteyn, 2018).

In this pre-Article V space, armed forces rely on specialised civilian capabilities, particularly in cyber and space, where private companies often outpace military technology (Harig, 2024). Key stakeholders include, among others, emergency-management agencies, energy firms, telecom and satellite operators and cyber-security companies. Cooperation with the military can enhance national resilience through early warning, network redundancy, or rapid repair. But it also raises legitimacy questions. Civil actors face the risk of being drawn into hostilities, blurring legal and normative boundaries. If civilian engineers provide direct operational support, could they be regarded as combatants under international humanitarian law (ibid.)? Commercial logic further complicates trust: firms must weigh national loyalty against shareholder interests and global client bases (Bohatyrets, & Zoriy, 2016).

The resulting dynamic is ambiguous. Hybrid threats make a prominent CIMIC role implicit in NATO's vision because both place civilians at the centre (Rinelli & Duyvesteyn, 2018). Functional need is acute: Germany's own planning for example shows that CIMIC capabilities for territorial defence are still being mapped, let alone exercised. Yet associations remain selective and often quiet. Technical data-sharing agreements might proceed behind closed doors to limit legal exposure and adversary attention. Highly visible ventures – co-branded strategic-communication campaigns, for example – encounter steeper legitimacy barriers and therefore remain ad hoc or compartmentalised.

5 Implications for CIMIC Co-Creation

The three cases demonstrate that prospects for civil-military co-creation are governed less by functional need than by the legitimacy dynamics unique to each context. Where perceived neutrality is paramount, as in stabilisation missions, association is costly and capability development proceeds in silos. In disaster relief, legitimacy threats are modest and functional incentives dominate, so joint transformation and innovation are readily accepted. Territorial-defence scenarios lie in between: collaboration occurs, but selectively and often discreetly, to avoid amplifying unresolved legal or reputational questions. Set against the legitimacy scale metaphor, stabilisation loads the *identity-risk* side, disaster response loads the *functional-gain* side, and territorial defence leaves the balance somewhere in beteween. Five practical lessons follow.

1. Clarify mission and vision before partnering.

Legitimacy is a design variable. Co-creation in a CIMIC context is never a neutral technical act; it signals relationships to local communities, donors, media and adversaries. If those signals clash with an actor's identity – or its basic security – participation will be withheld no matter how great the functional promise. Organisations should therefore articulate incentives, fears and core mandates at the outset and ensure partners understand them. The same principle applies to the design of future CIMIC experiments.

2. Select the right interface for different contexts.

Coherence, De Coning argues, means finding "the optimal level of cooperation among agents in a given context" (2016, 22). Context sets the outer limits of integration. In some settings a fully joint innovation process is feasible; in others a loosely coupled technical trial with minimal branding – or even parallel, non-integrated pilots – will be the safer choice.

3. Create safe-to-fail-spaces.

Legitimacy-sensitive framing lowers the entry barrier. Low-visibility pilots, living-lab arrangements and tabletop scenarios reduce perceived risk and entice actors who would avoid a high-profile event. Clear rules on data ownership, branding and public messaging protect organisational identities; fictionalised but realistic scenarios let partners test ideas without committing to real-world alignment.

4. Institutionalise legitimacy reflections.

Training and exercises should include structured discussion of legitimacy concerns before, during and after joint transformation and innovation processes. Explicit reflection clarifies red lines and points to design tweaks that can widen participation in future efforts. A shared lesson-learned platform that captures these reflections turns concerns into visible knowledge.

5. Leverage incremental trust-building.

Properly designed pilots can themselves reduce legitimacy concerns. Incremental successes demonstrate mutual benefit, normalise collaboration and, over time, potentially lighten the very identity risks that once tipped the scale toward dissociation. Trust gained in one theatre can transfer to another – provided designers monitor how reputational effects spill across contexts.

Finally, context is not the whole story. As de Coning notes, relationships (associative and dissociative dynamics) are impacted by a wide array of factors, such as organisations' roles, mandates and perceived credibility (de Coning, 2016). Nor are real-world operations neatly bounded, current crises and conflicts in fact gain complexity as we speak. Peacekeeping missions might face disaster-response phases, disaster zones can morph into hybrid-warfare arenas. Spill-overs between contexts mean that legitimacy gained (or lost) in one setting can travel to another.

Taken together, these guidelines sketch a pragmatic path forward. Joint CIMIC capability development should begin with a legitimacy scan, match design choices to contextual constraints, employ low-risk pilots to build confidence, and embed systematic reflection so that legitimacy becomes an explicit, shared consideration rather than an unspoken barrier. Such an approach widens the space for iterative, evidence-based learning – the goal at the heart of NATO's experimentation culture.

6 Conclusion

The evidence across the three cases confirms that civil-military co-creation rises or falls less on the technical utility of a proposal than on the legitimacy signals that participation sends to key audiences. In peace-enforcement operations, where humanitarian neutrality is non-negotiable, the identity cost of association outweighs prospective synergies; dissociation prevails and capability development fragments. Disaster-relief settings invert that balance: shared life-saving objectives and the absence of active belligerents reduce identity risk, making association the default and creating fertile ground for integrated transformation and innovation. Territorial- and collective-defence scenarios show that acute threat perception can open selective windows for cooperation, yet unresolved legal and reputational questions keep overt collaboration muted and highly compartmentalised.

Five practical lessons follow. First, legitimacy must be treated as a primary design variable. Clarifying each actor's mandate, concerns and goals at the outset prevents misalignment later. Second, cooperation depth is context-specific; forcing full integration where neutrality norms dominate is likely to be counter-productive. Third, legitimacy-sensitive 'safe-to-fail' spaces (wargames, living labs and tabletop exercises) lower entry barriers and allow confidence to build incrementally. Fourth, embedding structured legitimacy reflection in training and exercises exposes red lines early and refines subsequent trials. Finally, well-designed pilots can themselves generate trust, gradually lightening the legitimacy constraints that first limited cooperation.

At the same time, practitioners should resist rigid typologies. Real operations morph: a peace-support mission may transition into disaster response, and disaster zones can be targeted in hybrid warfare. Legitimacy gains or losses in one arena migrate to another. Co-creation planners must therefore track how narratives travel across theatres and adjust accordingly. Two limitations warrant future work. The present cases rely on secondary sources and ideal-type abstraction; ethnographic or interview-based studies could test the framework against fine-grained practice. Moreover, the analysis is anchored in NATO-led operations; applying it to other regional or national settings might reveal different legitimacy logics. Despite these caveats, the core insight stands: CIMIC co-creation is a social act embedded in a contested field of legitimacy. Acknowledging legitimacy as both constraint and enabler allows for the design of capability-development initiatives that are not only technically sound but also politically and ethically sustainable.

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