



## Interest-Based Conflict Resolution *and the* Deployed Soldier

by Maj Brad Coates

From a Canadian Forces (CF) perspective, the theme of the 2008 Annual Symposium on Conflict Resolution, “Identity-based Conflict, Human Security, and Peace Building,” is both timely and important.<sup>1</sup> Armed forces, in general, and the CF, in particular, are long standing actors in the fields of human security and peace building. And while the role played by the CF in these areas has not always been widely recognized, recent events in Afghanistan have provided a measure of increased visibility. Notwithstanding this enhanced public awareness, there likely remain some readers who continue to perceive armed forces as purely blunt instruments of state power. For such individuals, the title of this paper – “Interest-Based Conflict Resolution and The Deployed Soldier,” – may seem something of an oxymoron.<sup>2</sup> From such a vantage point, the notion of soldiers employing something other than a power-based approach to conflict resolution would, indeed, seem odd. Although

not my primary intent, the following may also be a useful introduction to some of the diverse activities undertaken by modern militaries.

This paper discusses a recent CF initiative to introduce interest-based conflict resolution into pre-deployment training.<sup>3</sup> While this training has been conducted with several units, the current discussion is limited to its application within the civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) environment.<sup>4</sup> To provide necessary context, conflict management in the CF and the current mission in Afghanistan are briefly discussed. Thereafter, the nature of CIMIC work and some of its associated challenges are explored. Finally, the relationship between conflict resolution skills and CIMIC operations is considered. From my perspective, as an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) practitioner and as a CF officer, the inclusion of conflict management in pre-deployment training is an exciting and important development. It speaks strongly to

the growing recognition of conflict management as a core leadership competency and to the acceptance of interest-based approaches to dispute resolution.

At the outset, a few caveats should be noted. First, although I am a military officer I have not served in Afghanistan and, consequently, am not an expert on the military or political situation in that country. The general contextual comments made in this regard are drawn from open source literature and from discussions with soldiers who have served in Afghanistan. My expertise and comments are largely limited to interpersonal conflict management and communication. Second, while the term “deployed” is sometimes used in a general sense to denote soldiers operating away from their home base, in the following paragraphs it is employed in a more restricted sense to refer to soldiers deployed in support of operations in Afghanistan.

The CF has long recognized that the management of interpersonal conflict is an inherent aspect of leadership and a key contributor to operational success.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, CF members have historically had recourse to several dispute resolution mechanisms, including access to the organizational hierarchy and an internal grievance system. In 2001, the CF conflict management system was augmented by the establishment of an ADR program.<sup>6</sup> The CF ADR program provides two broad types of service - training and interventions. With regard to the former, communication and conflict management training is provided through a range of leadership and professional development vehicles, while with respect to the latter, a variety of intervention services are provided, including conflict coaching, mediation and facilitation.

While cognizant of the need to provide reactive dispute resolution mechanisms, the primary focus of the CF ADR program is to enable individuals to address interpersonal conflict early and informally by fostering development of the necessary skills, confidence and orientation. When third party intervention is required,

a non-directive interest-based methodology is employed. This approach attempts to break the adjudicative and adversarial paradigm of traditional conflict resolution approaches by shifting the onus for solution development from interveners to participants and from one-sided to joint outcomes. Interest-based theory posits that the positions taken by disputants in conflict are often the consequence of more fundamental underlying factors.<sup>7</sup> These factors (interests, needs, concerns, etc.), represent the reason why certain positions or claims are adopted in conflict situations. Interest-based theory contends that identifying and exploring these core causal factors can have a profound effect on conflict, helping to create understanding, strengthening relationships and opening up avenues to integrative and collaborative problem solving.

With this context in hand, we now turn to Afghanistan. As of January 2008, Canada has approximately 2,500 soldiers participating in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led International Security Assistance Force mission.<sup>8</sup> The majority of CF activities are centred in Southeast Afghanistan in Kandahar province. Kandahar province is a sparsely populated region characterized by one large urban centre, Kandahar City, and numerous small villages. From a socio-economic perspective Pashtu is the dominant language, Islam the dominant religion and the economy is largely agrarian.

While 2,500 troops is a significant contingent, when considering the overall operation in Afghanistan the CF contribution represents only a part of a much larger multi-national, multi-agency endeavour involving several dozen nations, numerous international organizations and non-governmental organizations – a truly massive and complex undertaking. In certain ways the current situation in Afghanistan is a paradigm of the modern developmental challenge, a struggle between the interdependent demands of development and stability. On the one hand, a degree of stability is required to create an environment wherein development can occur, while on the other hand, a level

of development is necessary to foster social and political stability. As a result of these competing tensions, an array of concurrent developmental and security activities are taking place in Afghanistan.

Within this locus of activities, CF efforts are centered in three broad areas: security, mentoring and reconstruction, with CIMIC activities coming under the auspices of the latter category of reconstruction and development.<sup>9</sup> Though the specific activities undertaken by CIMIC operators vary from operation to operation, NATO doctrine defines the CIMIC mission as, “The co-ordination and co-operation, in support of the mission, between the NATO Commander and civil actors, including national population and local authorities, as well as international, national and non-governmental organizations and agencies.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, CIMIC supports operational objectives by working with local and international stakeholders to address developmental issues. Though CF CIMIC units have some internal resources, a significant aspect of their work involves coordinating the needs of local communities with the capacities of potential service providers. A recent event in the village of Kharut is a simple illustration of such work. Social and economic activity in the small farming community had been disrupted by an irrigation canal that ran through the centre of the village. This five-metre wide canal, impassable except for a makeshift log bridge, for all intents and purposes divided the community in half. This situation was a serious impediment to village activities, causing time-consuming detours of vehicular traffic and disrupting the majority of day-to-day economic and social activities.<sup>11</sup> In order to address this issue, CIMIC operators met with local leaders to develop a solution to meet the needs of the community. In this case, a bridge designer was contracted and local workers were hired to undertake the construction work.

Though *prima facie* this type of work can appear deceptively simple, in reality, it is often a formidable endeavour to coordinate the activities and needs of disparate local and

international stakeholders. Even under ideal circumstances, these types of multi-party undertakings are replete with opportunities for misunderstanding and disagreement. Far from ideal, conditions in Afghanistan are complicated by a conflation of daunting environmental and cultural obstacles. Of crucial importance with regard to the operational environment, is the fact that nation-building activities are taking place concurrently with combat operations. The absence of a peace settlement is a powerful mitigating factor. Not only does it entail a heightened level of risk for CIMIC operators, but also for local individuals and communities. In other words, with respect to this latter point, there are often repercussions for Afghans who cooperate, or are perceived to cooperate, with pro-government organizations such as the CF.<sup>12</sup>

Challenging environmental conditions are further compounded by an array of cultural hurdles. In a sociological sense, culture is understood to be those ways of thinking and acting that help to distinguish members of one society from members of another society.<sup>13</sup> When considering Canada and Afghanistan through such a lens there is a plethora of cultural differences, which could potentially influence interactions between members of the two societies.<sup>14</sup> One such consideration that is especially salient to the current discussion is what social anthropologists refer to as “context.” That is, the manifold of activities that surround and influence communication transactions between individuals and groups.<sup>15</sup> Following Hall, societies are often bifurcated into those that are low context and those that are high context. Low context societies, such as Canada and the United States, are characterized by direct and explicit communication, wherein the precision of terminology is important and communication transactions are routinely viewed as isolated or compartmentalized occurrences. In contrast, communications within high context societies, such as those found in Africa and Asia, tend to be indirect and implicit. And, rather than being viewed as isolated events, communication transactions tend to be interpreted in light of the

overarching social narrative in which they occur.<sup>16</sup> Given this understanding, where does Afghanistan fall in a taxonomy of cultural context? Though there is a paucity of information regarding Afghanistan in the literature, extrapolation from countries in its cultural and geographic proximity suggests that Afghan society is likely high context.<sup>17</sup> While it is evident that this type of contextual assessment is a blunt analytical instrument, it does highlight some potential impediments confronting CIMIC operators. Namely, it illustrates that societies such as Afghanistan can be difficult for outsiders to rapidly enter and operate within.

Having briefly looked at CIMIC operations in Afghanistan and some of its associated challenges, we now turn to the subject of conflict resolution training. Before delving into this subject in detail, it is helpful to situate conflict resolution within the broader framework of pre-deployment preparations. As with other CF personnel, CIMIC operators undergo an extensive period of training prior to deployment. This training encompasses activities ranging from general military skills to more mission and unit specific tasks. Given this already substantial level of preparation, why the incorporation of conflict resolution training? In answering this question, two important and interrelated points are examined; operational effectiveness and environmental fit. First, the argument for enhanced operational effectiveness, that is, the notion that conflict resolution skills contribute to mission success. Such contributions can be further sub-divided into those internal to the unit and those external to the unit. When considered from an internal perspective, conflict resolution skills contribute to morale, and, consequently, operational effectiveness by fostering communication and understanding amongst unit members.<sup>18</sup> When considered in their application external to the unit, interest-based skills are valuable tools to help CIMIC operators develop the rapport and trust that is crucial to their success. This latter point is especially important, given the nature of CIMIC work. CIMIC operators are illustrative of the so-called "Strategic Corporal" concept wherein the actions of individual

soldiers are recognized as crucial components of overall mission success in modern warfare.<sup>19</sup> The growing recognition of the need for soldiers to have a wide range of negotiation and communication skills is not limited to Canada. A recent paper from the US Army Institute for the Behavioral and Social Science argues for the requirement to provide US soldiers with a greater level of negotiation training. In particular, the authors advocate augmenting current skill sets with "non-directive," or interest-based training to better enable soldiers to function in the modern battle space, characterized by a multiplicity of concurrent and diverse operations ranging from combat operations to peace building activities.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to improved operational efficiency there is also an argument from fit, that is, the notion that interest-based conflict resolution is well suited for use in Afghanistan. As previously noted, trust and understanding can be necessary prerequisites to substantive discussion in high context societies. From this vantage point, interest-based communication with its relational focus would seem to be well suited to help establish this important interpersonal rapport. Also relevant to the issue of cultural fit is the notion of indigenous or original dispute resolution (ODR) mechanisms. That is, the manner in which disputes have traditionally been handled within a given society, is conflict approached in an adversarial manner, framed as a win-lose proposition, or is it dealt with in a consensual and collaborative manner? Social commentators such as Reade and McKenna-Reade contend that ODR processes in many non-Western nations have historically been of the latter consensual variety.<sup>21</sup> They note that traditional Asian and African societies are characterized by a "consensual predisposition" toward conflict where relationships and face saving are important considerations. As with the notion of context, ODR research suggests an environment conducive to interest-based problem solving.

In conclusion, a few words about our training initiative. Given current space constraints, comments in this area are necessarily somewhat

cursory in nature. While pre-deployment conflict resolution training is normally delivered as an integrated four to five-day package, for ease of discussion it is divided into three broad components; conflict theory, communication and practical application.

The theoretical component provides participants with an appreciation of key concepts pertaining to interpersonal conflict, including dispute resolution approaches and conflict management styles. Particular attention is paid to the different avenues that are available to address conflict (i.e., power-based, rights-based and interest-based).<sup>22</sup> Although the focus of the training is interest-based, the goal of this examination is not to advocate for a particular approach, but, rather, to assist participants in gaining an understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and appropriateness of the respective options. While, with respect to conflict management styles, a variety of psychometric tools are used to encourage participants to reflect on their personal conflict management style and its potential impact in conflict situations. This theoretical portion allows individuals to enhance their knowledge of interpersonal conflict and consider their role in dispute resolution. Pedagogically, this material is approached through discussions and exercises ranging from largely abstract conceptual examinations to more specific operational applications.

In the field of conflict resolution it is generally recognized that there is an intimate relationship between interpersonal conflict and communication. In other words, a lack of communication, or poor communication, can often lead to conflict, while good communication is frequently the most expeditious means of diffusing or resolving conflict. Though this observation can seem trivial, experience shows that when it comes to activities such as communication, there is often a considerable gap between an individual's conceptual awareness and their practical ability. It is one thing to "know" what good communication entails; it is quite another thing to be a good communicator. As a consequence, communication is

approached in a multi-faceted manner. Participants are exposed to a variety of technical skills to provide them with the requisite foundation to conduct interest-based conversations. In addition to specific skills, a collaborative communication model is introduced as a means to structure and guide problem solving. As important as technical tools and structure are, often the key determinant in successful communication is orientation – the way in which conversations are approached. Are conversations seen as learning opportunities entered in an open and curious manner, or are they seen as competitive struggles approached with rigid positions and assumptions?

The last and largest portion of conflict resolution training is practical application, wherein participants have the opportunity to practice interest-based skills in a series of coached role-plays. The value of such experiential learning with regard to communication and dispute resolution is difficult to overstate. Without such hands-on application it is a difficult, if not insurmountable, task to bridge the chasm between theoretical learning and skills development. Unless individuals are provided sufficient time to become comfortable with the interest-based approach, it is unlikely that they will be able to employ it in actual conflict scenarios where risk and emotion are often elevated. In order to maximize training value, role-play scenarios are customized to meet the needs of the specific unit. In this case, scenarios were developed with input from CIMIC operators previously deployed to Afghanistan. Role-play scenarios range from relatively simple disagreements between colleagues to more complex situations involving multiple parties from external organizations and the local community.

What does the future hold for pre-deployment conflict resolution training? While we have received some anecdotal feedback, a more systematic analysis will not occur until later this year when units that have undergone conflict resolution training begin to return to Canada. Given that this initiative is still in the developmental stage, there are a range of questions that need to be considered, including,

perhaps most importantly, to what degree are interest-based skills suited for use in the operational theatre? That is, are they amenable to use with the full spectrum of audiences, internal as well as external, or are they most effective when used amongst groups that share linguistic and cultural similarities? This paper has argued that, from a conceptual perspective, there is a potential fit between interest-based conflict resolution and Afghan society. While theory often drives practice, in accordance with standard scientific methodology, theoretical concepts need to be reviewed and validated against experience – does this hypothesis stand

up to experience?<sup>23</sup> While, from a training delivery perspective, can conflict resolution training be better incorporated into broader pre-deployment preparations? For instance, can it be more fully integrated with cultural training, or, perhaps, delivered earlier in pre-deployment work-ups to facilitate issues associated with unit formation and cohesion? ■

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## Notes

1. This paper is based on comments made by the author at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on Conflict Resolution organized jointly by Carleton University, Saint Paul University, and the University of Ottawa, held in Ottawa, Canada 1 February 2008. The views offered are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the CF.
2. The term "soldier" is used in a broad sense to encompass all CF members regardless of environmental affiliation (i.e., air, sea or land).
3. To date this has been largely a "bottom-up" initiative driven by the requests of individual units.
4. Similar pre-deployment training has been conducted with other units (e.g., Mission Support Squadrons and psychological operations).
5. Interpersonal conflict is understood to be disputes amongst individuals or groups of individuals.
6. Department of National Defence, CANFORGEN 064/03 ADMHRMIL 022 May 03, *Conflict Management Program (CMP)*, available at [http://vcds.mil.ca/vcds-exec/pubs/canforngen/2003/064-03\\_e.asp](http://vcds.mil.ca/vcds-exec/pubs/canforngen/2003/064-03_e.asp) (accessed June 17, 2008).
7. For similar views see Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 40-55; and Cheryl Picard et al., *The Art and Science of Mediation*, (Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Ltd, 2004), 120-122.
8. Department of National Defence, *Task Force 1-08: Background Information Updated January 2008*, available at <http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/lfwal/tf108/backgrounder.htm> (accessed May 18, 2008).
9. For an introduction to CIMIC from a Canadian perspective see Graham Longhurst, "The Evolution of Canadian Civil-Military Cooperation," *Canadian Military Journal* Vol. 7 No. 4 (Winter 2006-2007), 55-64, available at [http://www.journal.dnd.ca/engraph/Vol7/no4/09-longhurst\\_e.asp](http://www.journal.dnd.ca/engraph/Vol7/no4/09-longhurst_e.asp) (accessed June 17, 2008).
10. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *AJP-9 Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) Doctrine* (June 2003), 1-1, available at <http://www.nato.int/ims/docu/AJP-9.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2008).
11. Charmion Chaplin-Thomas, "Slippery Logs to Solid Concrete in 30 Days," available at [http://www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca/cip-pic/afghanistan/library/sff\\_kharut-en.asp](http://www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca/cip-pic/afghanistan/library/sff_kharut-en.asp) (accessed May 15, 2008).
12. Fraser Clark, "A Pipe Major with a New Tune," available at [http://www.ccfcom.forces.gc.ca/site/fs-cv/2008/03/27\\_e.asp](http://www.ccfcom.forces.gc.ca/site/fs-cv/2008/03/27_e.asp) (accessed May 15, 2008).
13. Geert Hofstede and Gert J. Hofstede. *Cultures and Organizations* 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 4.
14. Examples of such differences include language, dress and religion.
15. Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 89.
16. *Ibid.*, 90-103.
17. Hofstede, esp. 210-212, 89-112. This has also been confirmed in the author's conversations with soldiers who have returned from Afghanistan.
18. For a discussion of unit cohesion and its importance to the military, readers can see Christopher Straub, *The Unit First*, (Washington: National Defence University Press, 1988).
19. Charles Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine* Jan 1999 available at [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm) (accessed May 15, 2008).
20. Integrative is used in a manner that is largely synonymous with interest-based. Orly Ben-Yoav, Brian Wortinger and Sean Hannah, "Winning the War and the Relationships," US Army Institute for the Behavioural and Social Science, (Arlington Va.: 2007).
21. Carol Reade and Mark Reade-Mckenna, "From Antiquity to the Factory Floor," *International Journal of Conflict Management* Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2007), 108-127.
22. Brad Coates, "Alternative Dispute Resolution and the Canadian Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* Vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 39-46.
23. Carl Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1966), 16.

## List of Abbreviations

ADR	alternative dispute resolution
CF	Canadian Forces
CIMIC	civil-military cooperation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODR	original dispute resolution