



U.S. Navy (Ferry Mitchell)

Mission Creep or Mission Misunderstood?

By ADAM B. SIEGEL

In the decade of the 1990s the term *mission creep* became a buzzword. Changing views of roles and missions brought greater prominence to the underlying phenomena the concept described. Even though its precise meaning is uncertain, mission creep influences military operations on the policy, operational, and tactical levels. The time has come to examine why this concept arouses such passions.

In an operations order, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe stated that Implementation Force (IFOR) should “avoid mission creep” during Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia and Herzegovina (December 20, 1995–December 20, 1996). In his operational plan, the commander of both NATO Southern Region and IFOR indicated that “mission creep is to be resisted.” The term arose in other contexts throughout Joint Endeavor, with commanders citing the threat of mission creep as

a basis for avoiding actions. The validity of some actions was defended despite the threat of mission creep. The term even found its way down to enlisted personnel, who explained certain actions as necessary to avert mission creep. All this took place without defining the term. The lack of any common definition produced a trump card that stifled debate and led to rejecting tasks that may have been justifiable aspects of the military mission. Richard Holbrooke, chief negotiator of the Dayton Accords, asserted:

The military did not like civilian interference “inside” their own affairs. They preferred to be given a limited and clearly defined mission from their civilian colleagues and then decide on their own how to carry it out. In recent years, the military had adopted a politically potent term for assignments they felt were too broad: “mission creep.” This was a powerful pejorative, conjuring up images of quagmire. But it was never clearly defined, only invoked, and always in a negative sense, used only to kill someone else’s proposal.¹

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A key question was where proper civilian control over the military ended and mission creep began. It was debated in staff meetings, around negotiating tables, and by the media (which often pushed for greater NATO involvement in nonmilitary aspects of the war-to-peace transition).

Various mission creep concepts arose in discussions on operations in Bosnia. Usually they reflected divergent views on employing military force. These concepts of mission creep also revealed institutional and personal anxieties on the part of civilians and military parties alike.

Command Concerns

In no small part concern over mission creep derives from fears that military forces might be either misused or events could put an operation into greater danger. Examples include:

- *Losing focus on what matters.* Some fear that diverging from military missions will lead commanders to focus more on secondary issues, taking attention and assets away from vital areas. This assumes that initial planning and mission statements capture the most important needs and that anything that happens later distorts planning. This reflects the view of those who do not want the military engaged in civilian tasks.

- *Losing focus on security risks.* Involvement in the civil sector can lead forces to lose perspective and misdirect their traditional focus on maintaining a secure environment. This view assumes that increased military involvement in the civil sector puts forces at greater risk.

- *Loss of certainty.* Many individuals and organizations prefer clearly delineated tasks.² Nontraditional duties usually create uncertainty.

- *Entanglement.* Engaging in additional tasks makes it more difficult to withdraw when missions are completed than if forces adhere to limited mandates.

- *Added costs.* The assumption of civil tasks can cost money and lives. Some fear that forces may bear such burdens without adequate compensation. This concern can be driven in part by outside players who view the military as rich by comparison to their own organizations and question why the military cannot perform more nontraditional roles.

- *Misuse of military capabilities.* This fear arises from nongovernmental organizations which believe the military should not be engaged in certain activities (and that it is an expensive instrument for some nontraditional roles) and from officers who decry the impact of humanitarian assistance on combat readiness.

- *Professional distaste.* Some members of the military prefer not to be involved in what they perceive to be do-gooder humanitarian or law enforcement tasks such as drug interdiction which risks corruption.

Each of these anxieties helped drive the discussion over operations in Bosnia. Colored by differing interpretations, they add to the challenge of understanding various perspectives on mission creep.

Alternative Framework

Tensions over mission creep derive partly from a notion that distinct civilian and military (or political, economic, cultural, humanitarian, or developmental) missions exist in places like Bosnia. Though that may be true, all missions must support an overall objective. Thus rather than separate missions, a more accurate conception might be the civil-military mission, with diplomatic, military, and other roles in support of such objectives. Then much of the controversy would be centered on realigning mission-essential tasks rather than engaging in unsuitable activities.

Policymaking would be enhanced by a broader definition of mission creep, one that divides it into categories. Such an effort would also provide a framework for appreciating mission change. Four categories of mission change have emerged, each with its own rationale.

Task accretion is the accumulation of added tasks viewed as necessary to achieve initial mission objectives. Such changes generally occur on the ground as the man on the spot believes necessary. Task accretion happens not because of changes in desired outcomes but rather changing perceptions of what is required to achieve objectives.

During Operation Provide Comfort in 1991, Marine Corps and other forces restored basic utilities in northern Iraq to encourage Kurdish refugees to return to the cities. Such actions were not included in initial tasking nor envisioned during planning for movement into Iraq but were deemed necessary for achieving mission objectives.

Mission shift occurs when forces adopt tasks not initially included that, in turn, lead to mission expansion. There is a disconnect between on-the-scene decisions to involve forces in additional tasks and political decisionmaking about objectives.

In 1993, a French army general flew to Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina and denounced Serbian attacks on the city as part of a drive to engage the U.N. Protection Force in its defense of refugees and other civilians. His actions and the reactions of Bosnian Muslims created pressure for the declaration of safe havens. That basically shifted the character of the U.N. mandate.

Mission transition comes about when a mission undergoes an unclear or unstated shift of objectives. This occurs at higher headquarters and in political sectors in an environment of gradual and perhaps unclear or unrecognized modification. The changes may neither be explicitly stated nor lead to reevaluation of forces involved and assigned tasks.

Escorting food convoy
to Biado, Somalia.



U.S. Navy (R.J. Chiez)

Although it is harder to provide a clear instance of mission transition, one might be supported by the United States to U.N. operations in Somalia in 1993. The available record indicates that the administration was moving toward a new policy while the military continued operations in pursuit of objectives established following attacks on U.N. and U.S. forces. If political leaders made the transition to a new policy and changed mission objectives, as seems possible, they did not clearly communicate this shift in orders to the military.

Mission leap occurs when missions are radically changed and thus alter military tasks. These are explicit choices, whether or not political or military leaders recognize their implications.

When several NATO members began relief efforts for Kurdish refugees in Turkey in 1991, it was a short-lived emergency program. Within days it became a coalition mission to help Kurds return home (including safe havens in northern Iraq). Some Allied nations maintained assistance to the Kurds in Iraq for more than five years, and no-flight enforcement continued until 1998.

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Missions change like the tasks required to achieve them. Denying this reality only compounds the problem. These four categories explain why military involvement is transformed during an operation. They provide a framework for understanding when such changes might lead down a dangerous path.

It is apparent that task accretion, mission shift, mission transition, and mission leap are part of conducting peace operations. In fact many efforts—such as IFOR—represent them all, at least as possibilities. Rather than just decrying mission creep, this approach offers a focus on real problems which are generally lumped under the term.

Task accretion and mission shift refer to bottom-up situations where on-the-ground factors drive change. Mission transition and mission leap are top-down; decisions taken away from the scene lead to some form of mission change. Task accretion and mission leap are inevitable parts of an operation, illustrating conscious decisions reached at higher headquarters or on the scene to change or radically modify mission constraints. They reflect the reality that not everything can be foreseen before conducting an operation—that situations are not always static and thus responses to them may not be either.

Serious problems arise with mission shift or transition. In both cases there are disconnects between political objectives and military operations.



55th Signal Company (Nicholas J. Blair)

Manning checkpoint,
Joint Endeavor.

They lack clarity regarding desired endstates, which constitutes an aggravating factor. Policy guidance and interaction between engaged forces and higher headquarters are needed to avoid missteps in such shifts and transitions.

Misguided Typology

In developing terminology to explain mission change perhaps the focus should be turned to defining long-term objectives for using force and assuring that the resulting tasks accord with them. In sum, a number of factors contribute to mission creep. The fact is that operations are not static. Missions change because tasks or endstates change. In essence tasks change because the situations are different than expected or shift in unexpected ways.

This view of mission change suggests that policymakers and planners must explicitly state their assumptions about missions and that each should have an information requirement. Thus no military plans should be considered complete unless assumptions are directly associated with some means to verify their validity.

When new information calls any assumption into question it should prompt evaluations of missions, forces, and tasks. If tasks are at issue, the forces deserve examination. If endstates are the concern, operations must be fully reviewed, including the forces.

To understand issues related to mission creep, a key is ensuring the consistency of military activities on the ground with political objectives. This requires a commitment to clearly identify mission goals. Both political leaders and military commanders must engage in constant dialogue to ensure congruity. This becomes all the more critical when the nature of an operation changes.

The following three situations can create the greatest risk:

- changes in policy that do not lead to reviews of force structure or tasks
- shifting environments and actions on the ground that do not lead to reviews of policy
- decisions about force structure, tasks, missions, or policy that are not made in relation to the true purpose of a military operation and are divorced from the realities on the ground.

This sort of approach—linking objectives, guidance, planning, and tasks—typically occurs most significantly at the onset of operations. Such reviews do not always take place as operations are extended or marginal changes are made in guidance, which increases the possibility that political and operational realities become separated.

In identifying the dangers of evolving tasks and missions, both civilian and military leaders must evaluate those missions and tasks on all levels of command. They should not lose sight of the relationship between political objectives and military operations. Decisionmakers must grasp why privates on the ground do or do not undertake a task. Without that common view, a military operation will risk becoming divorced from political aims. This is the true peril—that an operation might inadvertently head toward failure due to a lack of understanding of the relationship between actions on the ground and long-term objectives.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 216.

² One definition of mission creep is derived from situations in which the military moves from well-defined or achievable missions to ill-defined or impossible ones. This implies setting up forces for failure since missions become unachievable. Accordingly, some may fear that mission creep results from efforts to blame the military for the failures of others. Such a definition also leads to loss of certainty.