2025 Annual Civil-Military Cooperation Foresight Conference Report

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The Hague, international city of peace and justice. It hosts the Dutch government, the International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court and over 200 international organisations and non-governmental organisations. For the second year running, the Annual Civilian-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) Foresight Conference (ACFC25) was hosted by NATO Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE) at Majoor Jan Linzel

Complex bringing together people from more than 30 countries from 15th to 19th of September.

The conference aimed to bring together theory and practice about civilian-military cooperation, especially in a politically unstable world given the Russian war in Ukraine and humanitarian crisis in Gaza as mentioned at the conference. Last year, ACFC24 had discussed whether CIMIC capabilities were ready for the future. However, this year, the conference was moving beyond the assessment methods, focusing on implementing change to adapt for the future. The conference focused on how to evolve CIMIC capabilities, doctrines, and integrating insights like human security and multi-domain operations. The conference gathered a diverse group of civilian, academic, and military experts, including NATO SHAPE Assistant Chief of Staff Brigadier General Marc Lobel, CCOE Director Colonel Andreas Eckel, Aurelius Lab founder Prof. Peter Roberts, and Dominique Gassauer from UN OCHA, among many others.

CIMIC's ability to adapt

The conference had a general mood of the desire to change and adapt. Many speakers focused on how the future is not a question, and instead it is a call. CIMIC was mentioned as a bridge between now and the future, getting highlighted as a core aspect of evolving NATO's ability to respond to crises. It was acknowledged by the military leaders that conversation in CIMIC is skewed towards the military, giving civilians less influence even though they are still involved in the decision-making process. This was confirmed by military leaders as they acknowledged how civilians feel like NATO military command did not take CIMIC seriously. It was claimed that NATO had shifted to adapt into the modern era and unconventional practices, both at military and civilian levels. New plans were drafted by the NATO High Command to defend Europe through changing NATO's approach into crisis management.

Speeches and panel talks by civilian members included the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, Gaza and Yemen. It was claimed that such crises must be a part of the CIMIC role. It was mentioned that difficult conversations for such a crisis were mostly avoided due to profit/loss of companies, and other political factors influencing the decision-making process.

Role of technology and application of CIMIC capabilities

Military leaders and civilian experts often disagreed on the role of technology in CIMIC. While military leaders claimed that technology would eventually change everything in CIMIC, many civilian experts were more cautious, suggesting that technology will not change everything and human factors and trust would still remain critical. Another interesting part of ACFC25 was the Table-Top Crisis Simulation hosted by Prague-based civilian think-tank European Values Center for Security Policy. It outlined

a possible contingency scenario led by Russia and China, focusing on the strategic level of national and allied decision-making processes. This exercise highlighted the importance and complexity of CIMIC, and without transparency and trust, decision-making can be ineffective. To many participants, it reinforced CIMIC's role as a bridge. It further showed how CIMIC is not only a cooperation in the field of crisis, but also about a strengthened resilience.

Conclusion: Adapting to an unconventional political arena

In conclusion, the ACFC25 demonstrated the opportunities and challenges of CIMIC in modern unconventional politics. It highlighted the importance of adapting. As one of the speakers noted, 'Standing still is moving backwards'. The overall tone of the conference was one of urgency and the commitment to change, both by military executives and civilian experts. Discussions, panel talks, simulations and debates highlighted CIMIC's role as a bridge connecting operational logistics and societal and humanitarian needs. It was made clear that CIMIC will play an important role in navigating the crisis response management in the future.

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