

The Political Imaginary of the Protection of Civilians (PoC): The Tension Between Militarism  
and Humanitarianism in NATO and UN Policy

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A Thesis Submitted to  
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

April, 2024, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Date: April 18, 2024

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**Abstract**

As a relatively new concept, Protection of Civilians (PoC) has only recently begun to be labelled as an explicit objective of interventions involving armed conflict. With its central focus being the protection of the lives of those not party to hostilities, PoC establishes itself as a fundamentally humanitarian concept. However, challenges to this humanitarian foundation emerge as PoC is coupled with interventions comprised of military components, i.e. militarism. This essay endeavors to shed light on the tension between humanitarianism and militarism within the concept of, and policies on, PoC. It advances the argument that these aspects of armed conflict and PoC clash against one another, each striving for prioritization in policies on protection. Moreover, it argues that militarism often takes precedence over humanitarian approaches to civilian protection through the dominance of the use of force. This essay employs relevant literature on PoC and international intervention to offer an examination of the implications that evolve out of the dynamic between militarism and humanitarianism. This examination is pursued through a case study of the PoC policies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN). The case study brings to light the challenges posed to PoC's humanitarian credentials, which are instigated by the political imaginaries of PoC that are centered on the use of force.

## **Acknowledgment**

I would first like to thank my supervisor on this project, Dr. Marc Doucet, for all of the detailed and thoughtful guidance and feedback, without which this essay would likely not have taken shape. I would also like to thank him and the rest of the Department of Political Science for their support and encouragement throughout my studies at Saint Mary's that led me to the completion of this project and my undergraduate degree.

Thanks also to Lauren Trueman, BSc, JD, for answering my relentless questions on interpreting legal policy.

Lastly, I want to thank my friends and peers, Naza, Kamryn, and Devin for their assistance and reassurance on this project and for simply being in the same boat.

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## Introduction

The Protection of Civilians (PoC) doctrine has emerged as a central goal of peacekeeping missions as well as international military interventions more broadly since the late 1990s<sup>1</sup>. As Johnson (2019) notes, by the late 2010s “more than 98% of military and police personnel [...] deployed in peace operations [had] a mandate to protect civilians, as part of integrated mission-wide efforts” (p. 133). By definition, the primary goal of PoC is to protect civilians. This goal clearly adheres to the foundational humanitarian objective of distinguishing between combatants and civilians<sup>2</sup>. Thus, what emerges in the realm of armed conflict, of which PoC plays a role, are two main actors tasked with its resolution: the military and humanitarian actors. One is commonly associated with the use of physical force, and the other is known for assisting innocent lives caught in the crossfire. One can see these roles reflected in the variety of organizations involved in a conflict: from those strictly abiding by the principles of humanitarianism such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to state armies and para-military groups pursuing military objectives. These seemingly polar opposite roles in conflict environments create an image of a scale, with humanitarianism falling on one end and militarism on the other<sup>3</sup>. At times, the roles of these actors overlap, such as when the military provides support to humanitarian organizations to facilitate access to those in need of supplies and assistance, or when humanitarians are armed for self-defence purposes, thus shifting their positioning along this scale depending on the actions and methods employed.

Important for situating oneself in an analysis of conflict responses is the acknowledgment that targeting civilians, deliberate or otherwise, often leads to widespread condemnation from the

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<sup>1</sup> The first United Nations resolution with a specific mandate to protect civilians was adopted in 1999 in response to the conflict in Sierra Leone discussed later.

<sup>2</sup> Labelled as the principle of distinction under international humanitarian law (ICRC 2024c).

<sup>3</sup> See later definitions of humanitarianism and militarism cited from McCormack and Gilbert (2021).

international community. Such condemnation suggests that there is an international consensus on the importance of protecting this population and thus a sense of legitimacy tied to their protection. This consensus is usually grounded in mechanisms such as international humanitarian law (IHL) of which PoC is a cornerstone (ICRC 2024a). Furthermore, “the foundations in IHL mean there are strong ties to humanitarian actors who anchor this notion of PoC in principles of impartiality and neutrality” (Hunt 2019, p. 634). Underscoring how grounded PoC is in IHL, and humanitarianism more generally, opens up avenues for understanding how conflict responses guided by these principles of impartiality and neutrality may evolve to “where civilian protection rationales [are] put forward to justify the escalation of the use of force in response to civilian vulnerability and targeting” (Hunt 2019, p. 635). An escalation of the use of force in such scenarios constrains claims of impartiality and neutrality, but arguably maintains the humanitarian foundation of protection despite sliding towards the militarism end of the scale noted previously. This effectively blends military and humanitarian components of protection into a mutually supportive strategy (Hunt 2019). However, how might this combination and collaboration of components impact the core principles of humanitarianism that PoC embodies<sup>4</sup>? In other words, does this entanglement with military measures lead PoC to drift away from its humanitarian roots towards a more militarized version of itself, accommodating the use of force in ways that might undermine the humanitarian goal of protecting civilians?

Two organizations that appear to reside in between the ends of the scale of militarism and humanitarianism are the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN), each demonstrating, to varying degrees, the blending of military and humanitarian approaches to protecting civilians. This becomes evident in an analysis of the development and

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to distinction, impartiality, and neutrality, the principle of proportionality will be discussed at length later on.

conception of PoC within NATO and the UN and their subsequent policies, with each organization employing protection strategies that highlight the importance of humanitarian assistance (abiding by the principles set out above) while maintaining the possibility, and perhaps likelihood, of the use of physical force. Thus, where this collision between humanitarian and military methods of protection emerges, so too does the motivation for this essay. Drawing from Zanotti's (2011) concept of the "political imaginary", these methods are informed by a certain imagining of PoC that evolves from interpretations of real-world or imagined conflict scenarios which in turn leads them closer to either militaristic or humanitarian rationales for civilian protection<sup>5</sup>.

Citing Rossdale (2019), McCormack and Gilbert (2021) maintain that "militarism is not just about more militaries, but the whole 'social system of values and practices which promote and underpin the use of military approaches to a vast range of situations'" (p. 179). In other words, militarism represents the employment of military techniques and rationale, such as the use of physical force, to approach unique and complex scenarios. Furthermore, McCormack and Gilbert (2021) note that "[c]onventional definitions of humanitarianism suggest it is a moral discourse centred around a presumed universal humanity, rooted in a collection of practices of aid and care that are driven by a neutral desire to 'do good' and an apolitical compassion for the suffering of others" (p.180). Though the authors highlight issues with this understanding of humanitarianism as a moral and universal discourse grounded in apolitical practices of aid and care, it is important to employ the 'conventional definition' of humanitarianism when looking at the role that it plays in NATO and UN policy (McCormack & Gilbert 2021, p.180). Indeed, these policies largely rest on this conventional definition in that they are informed by principles such

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<sup>5</sup> A more detailed discussion of Zanotti's (2011) concept of the political imaginary is developed later in this essay.

as impartiality, neutrality, and being unarmed. Upon deeper exploration, these principles and rationales of humanitarianism and militarism are not black and white, rather there is a significant gray area where an organization can sit in regard to these approaches, particularly concerning PoC.

In assessing the tensions between these approaches, this essay will examine the potential militarization of PoC, a humanitarian concept, informed by the idea of “militarized humanitarianism” put forward by McCormack and Gilbert (2021, p.179). Section one focuses on the contextualization of PoC, tracing its development starting in the mid 1990s alongside the evolution of the concepts of human security and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Section two then moves on to consider the potential implications of interventions that couple PoC goals with military components. This is broken into three categories namely: collateral damage, proportionality/value, and legitimacy/relevance which endeavors to make clear the tension that exists between militarism and humanitarianism as well as the potential presence of ‘militarized humanitarianism’<sup>6</sup>. Section three consists of a case study of NATO and UN PoC policies, applying the framework of implications established in section two to analyse their commitment to civilian protection as well as PoC’s humanitarian credentials. This section traces the development of each organizations’ policies, employing the analytical tool of the ‘political imaginary’ outlined above and discussed further in section 3.1. It delves into the specifics of NATO and UN policy respectively, aiming to uncover potential contradictions between the imaginaries of PoC that are meant to shape their actions, and PoC as a fundamentally humanitarian concept.

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of value, as interpreted for this essay, reflects the significance or insignificance of civilian life in comparison to military objectives and can materialize through monetary value signifying the ‘worth’ of a given civilian or group of civilians.

Ultimately, this essay draws attention to the implications of a potentially more militarized imaginary of humanitarianism, and therefore PoC, as well as how these implications materialize through the policies of two international organizations (IOs) that have adopted PoC policies. The main questions of this essay, then, are how does the tension between militarism and humanitarianism exhibit itself in PoC operations and policy and what are the implications of militarism playing a more dominant role in these policies and interventions? By engaging in an analysis of relevant literature on PoC as well as with NATO and UN policies that employ this concept, this essay will serve as an exploration of the ways in which PoC may be mobilized by military components of international interventions, and the repercussions this may have on PoC and its humanitarian credentials. Through highlighting the tension between these key elements of conflict responses, this essay will argue that militarism and humanitarianism are engaged in an indefinite struggle for prioritization in NATO and UN PoC operations and policy, with militarism often taking precedence through the use of physical force, frequently resulting in negative impacts on those these policies and missions are meant to help.

### **Contextualizing PoC**

Although PoC has varying definitions across different governments and organizations, both NATO and the UN share a common focus on protection from physical violence. According to NATO's policy adopted in 2016:

[p]rotection of Civilians (persons, objects and services) includes all efforts taken to avoid, minimize and mitigate the negative effects that might arise from NATO and NATO-led military operations on the civilian population and, when applicable, to protect civilians from conflict-related physical violence or threats of physical violence by other actors,

including through the establishment of a safe and secure environment (NATO 2016, para. 9).

In this interpretation of PoC, NATO identifies that protection encompasses both civilians as well as critical civilian objects and services such as healthcare facilities. Furthermore, they identify the aim of PoC which is to “minimize” and “mitigate” any potential harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure (NATO 2016, para. 9). Importantly, NATO’s definition of PoC includes potential damages as a result of its own actions, and those of other actors when applicable, while centering its understanding on reducing physical civilian harm. For the UN, the revised PoC policy released in 2023 states:

without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state, integrated and coordinated activities by all civilian and uniformed mission components to prevent, deter or respond to threats of physical violence against civilians within the mission’s capabilities and areas of deployment through the use of all necessary means up to and including deadly force (United Nations 2023, p.5).

In its definition, the UN reiterates its stance that civilian protection is the primary responsibility of the host state and, again, centers its understanding on protection from physical violence. Important to note is the inclusion of the ability to use force to protect civilians, pursuant to the authority of the UN Security Council which can legally authorize the use of “deadly force” (United Nations 2023, p. 5). At a glance, NATO’s understanding of civilian protection appears to encompass a broader range of threats to civilians by employing terminology such as “negative effects” which could include responses going beyond the provisions for physical protection (NATO 2016, para. 9). This stands in contrast to the UN’s definition which strictly addresses physical protection components. However, both definitions capture, for the most part, the idea

that PoC “should be seen as a positive obligation to protect people from threats to their rights to life and protection against ill-treatment, while respecting – that is not infringing – these rights in the process”, albeit minimizing threats typically not understood as physically violent such as starvation, dehydration, hypothermia, etc. also present during times of armed conflict (Foley 2017, p.4).

Given the minimization of threats other than those considered to be ‘physical violence’, Johnson (2019) puts forward the idea that PoC has frequently been realized in the form of military responses with “the ultimate test confronting peace operations [being] to which extent they were able to physically protect civilians under imminent threat” (p. 135). However, from the policy adopted by the UN, military response, specifically the use of force, primarily makes up only one of its components under its framework for PoC; namely tier two concerning physical protection analyzed later (UN Police n.d.). This differs from NATO’s four components of protection: understanding the human environment, mitigating harm, facilitating access to basic needs, and contributing to a safe and secure environment (NATO n.d.)<sup>7</sup>. Arguably, NATO’s four components appear much more directly linked to protection through the use of military force since these components are derived from a handbook establishing the framework for NATO personnel to address civilian protection in its operations. NATO (n.d.) explicitly acknowledges that the mitigation of harm component is “primarily a military line of effort”, focusing on responses to threats of physical violence against civilians (p.23). Moreover, the facilitating access to basic needs component represents the presence of NATO military forces assisting humanitarian aid workers to deliver critical supplies and services to civilians (NATO n.d.).

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<sup>7</sup> Understanding the human environment represents an overarching component that is applicable to the other three since it relates to the civilian perspective and what civilians view to be threats to their safety, therefore influencing responses falling under the other three components (NATO n.d.).

Lastly, contributing to a safe and secure environment reflects the role that NATO's military forces are seen as playing in relation to the goal of reducing conflict and tension to make way for the proper functioning of local institutions and government (NATO n.d.). With this brief introduction and contrast in mind, an in-depth analysis of each organization's policies will be undertaken later with the goal of bringing to light the dynamic that is present between humanitarian and military elements of NATO and UN policies and how this dynamic materializes in the midst of a response to an armed conflict.

### ***Tracing the Evolution of PoC***

PoC itself is a relatively new concept, but it evolved out of a broader transition marked by the end of the Cold War from more traditional conceptions of security centered on the state to one that emphasizes the security of people, which was defined as 'human security'. Booth (1991) identifies the traditional conceptions of security as those "which privilege[...] the state and emphasize[...] military power" (p. 317). The concept of human security marked a shift of the referent of security from states and their interests to people and aspects of human development (Booth 1991; UNDP 1994). The post-Cold War environment "lift[ed] the shadow of bipolar politics that clouded relations between countries, but gave way to the recognition of new threats" (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy 2007, p.1). Put differently, without the concentrated threat emanating from tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, a space was created "for a 'broadening' or 'updating' of the concept of security" (Booth 1991, p. 317). This 'broadening' and/or 'updating' of security conceptions encompasses human security as threats that may or may not imminently affect the security of the state, but that were seen to impact the lives of people. From Booth's (1991) intervention in the debates on broadening the concept of security,

“poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on” should be recognized as legitimate security concerns (p. 319). This transition to a people centered approach to security was reflected in the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) 1994 Human Development Report which held that:

[t]he concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust. It has been related more to the nation-state than to people.... Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives (UNDP 1994, p. 22).

The report’s focus on security as threats to the daily life of people is often noted as part of the initial post-Cold War debates in the UN that sought to recognize and identify security threats that do not necessarily center on the state as the referent, but rather focused on threats related to human development.

This transition to a people centered approach to security formed the basis for the concept now known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). First significantly addressed in 2001 by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), the Commission’s report also titled *The Responsibility to Protect* “insisted that the primary responsibility for protecting civilians lay with the host state and that outside intervention could only be contemplated if the host proved either unwilling or unable to fulfill its responsibilities” (Bellamy 2006, p. 143). The concept of R2P sought to tie the security of the population to the responsibilities of states and opened an avenue for the involvement of the international community if the people of a given state faced grave and/or existential security threats<sup>8</sup>. As

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the ICISS (2001) report refers to military intervention being justified if there is “serious or irreparable harm occurring to human beings, or imminently likely to occur” identifiable as “**large scale loss of life**, actual or

Bellamy (2006) explains, “after the publication of *The Responsibility to Protect* [report], the ICISS commissioners and supporters lobbied hard to persuade [UN member] states to endorse the concept and to adopt it at the 2005 World Summit” (Bellamy 2006, p. 144). Because of this push on the part of ICISS supporters, language identifying the role of states to protect its own population was included in the 2005 World Summit document as well as language identifying the potential responsibility of UN member states to assist in fulfilling that obligation (Bellamy 2006; United Nations 2005, p.30). The strength of R2P’s inclusion in the World Summit document is debatable, however its adoption by the UN carried with it the sense of an obligation or duty endowed upon the international community to intervene when it bears witness to the most egregious crimes, shielding civilians from crimes against humanity among others (Bellamy 2006; Foley 2017, p. 47). Furthermore, it can “be said to have been endorsed at the UN’s highest decision-making levels and to reflect a global consensus, at least in abstract, that people should be protected against such crimes” (Foley 2017, p. 48). The adoption of elements of R2P at the 2005 World Summit can be taken as a reflection of the emerging post-Cold War international consensus developed at the UN on the importance of protecting civilians.

Before proceeding, it is important here to briefly underscore the differences between the concepts of R2P and PoC. Although they each refer to protection, they are not synonymous. Where R2P is typically understood as a normative principle, PoC is understood as a legal framework, governing intervention in a way that centers the lives of civilians and their protection (Hunt 2019). In line with this, Hunt (2019) describes R2P as “a moral and political principle - an expression of political commitment and a guide for action to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity”, whereas PoC “is a framework concerned

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apprehended, with genocidal intent or not [...]” as well as “**large scale ‘ethnic cleansing’**, actual or apprehended, whether carried out by killing, forced expulsion, acts of terror or rape” (p. XII, emphases in original).

with mitigating harm to civilians resulting directly or indirectly from armed conflict” (p. 633-634). Besides the notion of protection and a people centered approach to understanding security and insecurity, what these two concepts have in common is their proclaimed ability to justify and legitimize intervention which will be discussed in later sections. However, certain implications emerge when protection and people-centered approaches are incorporated into intervention mandates, particularly those with military components. These implications are exhibited in three main forms discussed here: collateral damage, proportionality/value, and legitimacy/relevance.

## **Implications of Militarized Humanitarianism**

### ***Collateral Damage***

Civilian casualties as a result of armed conflict are often considered a tragedy of war. However, when this occurs under a mandate stipulating specifically to protect the lives of non-combatants, higher numbers of injuries and deaths become enigmatic. With this in mind, an important concept aimed at describing the consequences of armed conflict on civilians is that of collateral damage. Bruce Cronin’s book *Bugsplat: The Politics of Collateral Damage in Western Armed Conflicts* (2018) provides a comprehensive analysis of this notion which he describes as being “a political concept that explains inadvertent civilian casualties during war” (p.1). Cronin (2018) analyzes predominantly Western military organizations (including NATO) and their interventions, exploring how closely rules governing armed conflict are followed and respected during their operations. He argues that rather than being ‘inadvertent’, many of the casualties inflicted on the civilian population by these militaries only happen because of *how* these groups intervene not just *because* they intervene. Cronin (2018) cites many examples, however, one that

is particularly relevant to this analysis is NATO's air campaign over Serbia in 1999<sup>9</sup>. Looking to make the case that there are ways to intervene that would pose less risk to the civilian population than bombing from high altitudes, Cronin (2018) ultimately argues that the methods employed by Western military organizations are composed of "reckless war-fighting strategies", referring to a likely more dangerous and destructive approach to intervention (p.20). He explains that "[a]lthough NATO's stated purpose of the war was to protect Kosovar-Albanians from Serbian attacks, they refused to deploy ground forces, which virtually all analysts agreed would be the only way to effectively do so" (Cronin 2018, p. 133). He continues, stating that "[b]y prosecuting the entire war from the air - and flying at heights designed to protect the pilots but also make it much more difficult to verify targets - NATO transferred the risk to Serbian civilians, resulting in significant numbers of noncombatant deaths and injuries" (Cronin 2018, p. 133). In this case, there was clearly an alternate route – identified by analysts as the deployment of ground forces - to achieving NATO's strategic military goals without putting as many civilian lives at risk (Cronin 2018, p.133). This demonstrates the significance of considering *how* an intervention is executed, especially when the strategies used are deemed to be reckless or more dangerous for civilians but perhaps safer for intervening forces (Cronin 2018).

Apart from strategies that might appear reckless in terms of leading to potential or greater civilian casualties, it is important to look at what else the case of intervention in Serbia unearths concerning military intervention and its relation to the civilian population as well as the concept

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<sup>9</sup> Briefly, the 1999 NATO air campaign over Serbia was in response to a longer-term ethnic conflict between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians instigated by the desire for independence from Serbia on the part of Kosovar Albanians. This resulted in mutual attacks between "Serbian forces, Albanian civilians, and the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army]" (Steinke 2015, p. 46). Serbia's President, Slobodan Milošević was planning the violent and mass expulsion of Kosovar Albanians from Kosovo as the conflict continued, initially hindered by diplomatic means in 1998 but eventually continued in 1999 despite diplomatic negotiations in Rambouillet, France (Steinke 2015). With the refusal on the part of Milošević to comply with NATO's terms established in Rambouillet as well as his continued targeting of Kosovar Albanians, NATO authorized air strikes on the humanitarian grounds of preventing mass Kosovar Albanian casualties that lasted from March to June 1999 (Steinke 2015, p. 48).

of collateral damage itself. With it being a mission supposedly designed to protect, and with NATO being made up of states who “adhere to [the] precepts” of IHL, why were the lives of civilians indiscriminately endangered (Cronin 2018, p. 128)? Cronin (2018) answers this when he equates the notion of collateral damage to “a legal loophole” for those inflicting the casualties, including those intervening (p. 1). This loophole is made up of the criteria for establishing which deaths and injuries inflicted upon civilians are justifiable in comparison to a pursued military target; otherwise known as the principle of proportionality. As defined by the ICRC (2024b), “the principle of proportionality prohibits attacks against military objectives which are ‘expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated’”. Essentially, it is a calculation weighing the military target against potential damage, including civilian death. This is specifically why scholars such as McCormack and Gilbert (2021) take issue with the strict separation of militarism and humanitarianism, as the principle of proportionality clearly demonstrates the crux of the humanitarian-militarization duality, pointing to a few issues that arise upon closer inspection of this principle, which will be examined in the section below. Ultimately, the concept of collateral damage represents a way of dismissing civilian casualties caused by intervening forces, demonstrating a method of minimizing civilian lives to maintain the credibility of an intervention.

### ***Proportionality and Value***

Turning now to a more detailed focus on the principle of proportionality introduced above, Cronin (2018) first notes that this principle is objectively immeasurable. There is no way to determine with complete certainty that a military target is worth sacrificing any number of

lives (Cronin 2018). Cronin (2018) argues that “[p]roportionality is the most difficult of the main principles [of IHL] to evaluate in practice because it requires balancing two incompatible values: civilian casualties and military necessity” (p.31)<sup>10</sup>. Through highlighting the incompatibility of weighing military necessity against potential civilian casualties, Cronin (2018) makes clear the inherent tension within the principle of proportionality, underscoring the balance at play between the lives of civilians and military objectives. An additional aspect of this tension is the fact that those who are carrying out this evaluation are likely military commanders whose primary concern is fulfilling mission objectives. Thus, Cronin (2018) highlights the loophole where the value of a military target can be calculated as more significant than the lives of local civilians and obscured by claims of collateral damage (p.31). Simply because a calculation is undertaken, the pursuit of a military target can be deemed proportionate to the number of casualties it inflicts, and therefore abiding by IHL. In turn, because a specific target is labelled as proportionate, the civilian casualties resulting from its pursuit can be dismissed as collateral damage and portrayed as an unfortunate inevitability of armed conflict. Additionally, this raises the point that “military convenience is not the same as military necessity”, underscoring the simplicity of labelling casualties as collateral after pursuing a potentially more convenient, yet destructive, route (Cronin 2018, p. 44). This idea of military convenience and efficiency is further supported by the 2001 ICISS report which states that “[o]ften, modalities for the proactive use of force have been determined more by military expediency than by any sense of responsibility to protect humanitarian interests”, highlighting the frequent prioritization of military objectives over “humanitarian interests” such as PoC (p. 63).

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<sup>10</sup> Here Cronin (2018) is referencing the other main principles of IHL namely: the principle of humanity, the principle of distinction, and the principle of military necessity (ICRC 2024d).

Secondly, the principle of proportionality in many of the cases analyzed by Cronin (2018) presents a unique moral dilemma. The fact that military targets are pursued after intense calculations of the civilian casualties they might inflict can be problematic as it then becomes non-accidental and collateral damage becomes almost entirely foreseeable (Cronin 2018). This is emphasized by the title of Cronin's (2018) book: *Bugsplat*. He explains that this name was drawn from the United States' analytical software tool used to predict the potential outcomes and destruction of a variety of military strikes (Cronin 2018, p.2). Without delving into the specific details, the point was essentially that the collateral damage - particularly civilian casualties - inflicted as a result of the potential strike, to those employing the software, resembled the image of bugs hitting a windshield at high speeds, effectively comparing the lives of civilians to dead bugs (Cronin 2018, p.2). Although this is perhaps an extreme case, and one that was later rectified, it captures the ways that the lives of civilians may be minimized in comparison to military goals.

When this minimization occurs, it becomes irrelevant how foreseeable their injuries and deaths may be, as they are clearly outweighed by the overall military objective. This is especially evident when one considers the urgency or lack thereof of achieving said objective. As Cronin (2018) explains,

[i]n all of the cases studied in this book, most of the collateral damage inflicted by the western powers occurred not during heated battles or under conditions of uncertainty brought about by the fog of war, but rather after careful deliberation and planning, under circumstances that were highly favorable to the attackers (p.131).

When the time to deliberate is present, it is difficult to imagine how some decisions to neutralize a specific military target can be made in light of how many civilians may be impacted and killed

as a result. Time granted under conditions “highly favorable to the attackers” should, in theory, allow for solutions that reduce rather than increase collateral damage (Cronin 2018, p. 131). However, as the quote above shows, this is not always the case. Looking at how civilians are viewed among interveners with the capacity of lethal force allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how a humanitarian discourse of ‘protection’ may be appropriated and translated into policy, but not thoroughly implemented or used instrumentally for military objectives. Important in relation to this is to determine the value of human life and upon whom it is attributed.

With the concept of proportionality then, how are the lives of civilians ranked and prioritized alongside military goals? Fassin (2012) furthers Cronin’s (2018) discussion of western war-fighting strategies to highlight whose lives are valued and those who are subsequently put at risk. As is clear in the cases studied by Cronin (2018), factors of value play into the perception of collateral damage and therefore the ‘humanitarianness’ of an intervention (i.e., to what extent the intervention is humanitarian). The asymmetrical attribution of value where the lives of interveners appear to be worth more than those of civilians is underscored when Fassin (2012) questions “that which separates the sacred lives of Western soldiers from the sacrificable lives of local civilians” (p. 227). Cronin’s (2018) discussion of NATO’s 1999 air campaign over Serbia, for example, demonstrates what he identifies as “risk transfer” where, as discussed above, the risks of conflict faced by pilots was entirely offloaded onto the civilian population as a result of the military strategy pursued (p. 132). This is overtly contradictory to the humanitarian principle of ‘do no harm’ but fits with military goals of improving force security and effectiveness in terms of achieving military objectives. As Williams (2015) demonstrates, the asymmetric distribution of power that is present during interventions shifts

whose security is at stake. With the greater war-fighting technology available to, particularly, western military organizations enabling them to be further removed from the physical battlefield, it greatly increases the security of the western soldier while significantly decreasing the security felt by those on the other side of the intervention, including civilians (Williams 2015).

William's (2015) analysis also relates to the question of value in terms of how lives are monetarily assessed in cases when civilians are killed. As Fassin (2012) explains, during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, an American soldier's life was essentially valued at \$400,000 in compensatory payments for loss of life, whereas an Iraqi civilian's life (and death by 'error') was valued at \$2,500 (p.235). Known as ex-gratia payments, monetary compensation by the United States for civilian deaths in the case of Afghanistan were of similar amounts under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led by NATO, amounting to an average of approximately \$3,000 per payment in 2012 and decreasing in 2013 and 2014 to approximately \$2,000 and \$1,500 respectively (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2015)<sup>11</sup>. From this logic of monetary compensation, pursuing a military strategy that is potentially more effective which places intervening soldiers at a greater distance from the conflict, perhaps seems worth it despite the risks such a strategy imposes on civilians. Thus, the principle of proportionality and the notion of value offer an insightful framework for understanding how the lives of civilians are viewed by interveners, uncovering the dynamics present between military targets and civilians when a calculation of proportionality takes place. With this in mind, what the concepts of collateral damage, proportionality, and attribution of value have in common, is the undermining

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<sup>11</sup> As noted later, NATO does not have a formal process for restitution for harm done as a consequence of its actions, thus while these payments were made as a result of the ISAF led by NATO, they were made by the United States.

of humanitarian ideals of protecting civilians in favor of more robust, militarized forms of intervention.

### ***Legitimacy and Relevance***

How, then, can an intervention strategy that minimizes the lives of civilians in comparison to interveners and their strategic military objectives be understood as legitimate? What can appear as the crass martial calculation of the value of civilian life by those leading interventions is not always evident; especially under a PoC mandate. When the stated aim of an intervention is for humanitarian purposes and to protect innocent civilians from violence, it is troubling to believe that this may not be the primary objective. An international intervention meant to protect civilians is often placed in contrast to military campaigns waged for the purposes of geographical, political and/or military gains. Such campaigns would not be recognized as a legitimate operation by the international community, primarily due to the universally agreed upon principle of sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention that form the foundation of the UN Charter.

However, what does tend to justify and legitimize an intervention is the idea of protecting those who have nothing to do with an armed conflict, yet are bearing most, if not all, of its consequences. It is in this sense that “the legitimacy of [UN] peacekeeping operations has been linked to the ability to protect civilians” (Casey-Maslen & Vestner 2022, p. 170). Thus, operations evolving from an invocation of R2P and/or operations with a specific PoC mandate could be categorized as humanitarian in nature, and therefore legitimate, because their stated purpose was to alleviate the suffering of innocent victims of armed conflict. Yet, ideas that continue to circle the concept of PoC are those of ‘humanitarian intervention’ and ‘humanitarian

war'. These terms seek to establish operations as humanitarian, and therefore label them as such; regardless of the implications of the second word in these titles while maintaining the air of legitimacy linked to PoC. Scholars such as Slim (2001) and Pommier (2011) argue that there are issues with tying violence and war to the concept of humanitarianism. Slim (2001) captures these problems when he states that:

[p]romoting the humanitarian idea can project credibility and legitimacy. The very fact that all power tends to want to adopt humanitarian discourse indicates the very real strategic significance of the idea and its language. Whoever can claim to be humanitarian, and so be mitigating violence can earn for themselves an extraordinary allure - even, paradoxically, when the claim to be humanitarian is made from the very act of being violent (p. 337).

Drawing from Slim (2001), one could argue that it can be beneficial to the reputation of intervening forces to use humanitarian language to disguise the less laudable reasons for their interventions. Gaining legitimacy and being portrayed as the protectors of civilian life during armed conflict diverts attention from the variety of ways that participating in the conflict can negatively impact civilians. McCormack and Gilbert (2021) further this idea, explaining that “[d]espite the humanitarian narratives that have propelled military intervention and war, these military engagements invariably result in mass civilian casualties and deaths, and though fought in the name of humanitarianism and humanity, they are where, paradoxically, civilians are killed in order to be saved” (p.184-185). This paradox is only clear, however, because of the appropriation of humanitarianism to justify and legitimize military interventions with goals not necessarily aligned with PoC. As was noted earlier in relation to the discussion on collateral damage as examined by Cronin (2018), in certain scenarios civilians are killed as a result of

“reckless war-fighting strategies” designed not for protecting non-combatants, but instead for military effectiveness and efficiency, perhaps even for the sake of military convenience (p.20).

Following Slim’s (2001) argument, Pommier (2011) highlights the principles of humanitarianism as being unarmed and impartial, demonstrating that violence toward a group, regardless of the actions they are undertaking, threatens the rudimentary ideals of humanitarianism. He argues that “undertaking humanitarian action with the strong support of military action, [deprives] humanitarian action of its strictly civilian character” (Pommier 2011, p. 1070). The more humanitarianism is employed as a strategy for obtaining legitimacy by those who are a party to an armed conflict, the more it is distanced from its ultimate goal of mitigating the effects on those subjected to said conflict. Using humanitarianism as a justification, or, in some cases, as an excuse for participating or acquiescing to an armed conflict demonstrates the co-option of this term by intervening forces. This is likely done to maintain their international standing and their claim to be adhering to international law and human rights, resulting in harmful consequences as it leaves the underlying principles of the concept behind, replacing them with militarized principles of efficiency and effectiveness, especially when international law and human rights are being violated. Slim (2001) summarizes the issues with this while simultaneously providing the clearest solution, stating that:

[t]hose urging or using violence to protect people might be advised to put aside the humanitarian veil and declare openly why they are going to war [...]. Such clarity would allow violence to be violence that must then be judged as a right or wrong in any given situation. It would also allow humanitarianism to be the unarmed and impartial protection of civilians and non-combatants that will always be necessary, but never sufficient, to

protect those around whom violence breaks, even the violence intended to save them (p. 337-338).

Slim (2001) is suggesting here that if an intervention is in fact undertaken for reasons associated with humanitarianism, deciding whether that intervention can be deemed humanitarian, in theory, should come after the fact. If humanitarianism is only employed to avert accountability or to justify ulterior military objectives, it should be recognized as such. McCormack and Gilbert (2021) bolster this idea, contending that “humanitarianism became a way to ‘use’ the military as it was folded into rationales for interventions” (p.183). The appropriation of humanitarianism for the purposes of justifying and legitimizing military interventions as “a force of good” ultimately “obfuscates [their] lethal force” concealing the fact that conflicts, regardless of their label as humanitarian or not, can harm and kill civilians disproportionately (McCormack & Gilbert 2021, p. 187; United Nations 2023). Yet, as Slim (2001) makes clear, strictly humanitarian responses are insufficient on their own to protect civilians, once again drawing out the dynamic between militarism and humanitarianism.

Additionally, the potential reputational benefits just discussed introduces the aspect of organizational relevance, which in many ways is linked to, and derived from, legitimacy. As Tallberg and Zürn (2019) explain “legitimacy influences whether IOs remain relevant as the focal arenas for states’ efforts to coordinate policies and solve problems. In a world of forum shopping and organizational turf battles, legitimacy is a crucial resource for IOs wishing to fend off multilateral competitors and unilateral action” (p. 582). This illustrates the worry felt by organizations that if their authority and legitimacy is called into question, they may be replaced by other institutions or dissolved completely. The trajectory from irrelevance to dissolution is captured by Patterson (2010) who posits that “[a]n organization experiencing reduced relevance

would not likely continue functioning at the level it had previously” further stating that the terms “[i]rrelevant and ineffectual are synonymous and we would therefore expect an irrelevant organization, by definition, to be largely inactive and ineffectual” (p.49; p.50). Following Patterson’s (2010) line of argument, illegitimacy leads to irrelevance, and irrelevance has the potential to render an organization ineffectual and insignificant. As the scholars above have demonstrated, and from the rationale of IOs such as NATO and the UN, irrelevance is something they are right to fear because it threatens their very existence.

This section has sought to establish a pattern of implications derived from the literature on international intervention that becomes evident when analysing operations comprised of military components. This is not designed to be a comprehensive list of the problematic aspects that accompany a ‘militarized humanitarianism’. Rather, the selection of collateral damage, proportionality/value, and legitimacy/relevance are meant to be illustrative examples of what can emerge as a pattern of minimization when analyzing how civilian protection is conceptualized by those carrying out interventions. These three implications provide an analytical framework for understanding the extent to which civilian lives are incorporated and prioritized in operations and policy with the stated aim of PoC. Though these implications may vary in visibility when applied to an analysis of NATO and UN policy which will be undertaken in the next section, it is useful to bear in mind how these concepts serve to undermine goals of protection through the minimization of civilian life and civilian casualties.

### **NATO and UN Case Study**

As examined in previous sections, when the mandate of an intervention seeks to protect civilians and, therefore, claims a humanitarian rationale, it can lead to scenarios that obscure the

degree of militarism and violence present in interventions with a use of force authorization. This then connects to the implementation aspects of PoC when analyzing NATO and the UN. The methods of implementation speak to how each organization prioritizes the alleged main objective that is protection. In the case of NATO, there is a focus in their definition of PoC on their own actions that may impact civilians. However, as Koops and Patz (2023) note, “PoC can become conflated or equated with basic obligations under international humanitarian law and operational considerations to avoid and minimize civilian casualties as part of harm mitigation measures during NATO operations” (p.13). In this section of their analysis, Koops and Patz (2023) are drawing a distinction between the protections afforded to civilians in armed conflict under international law that requires the avoidance and minimization of civilian casualties (i.e. “basic obligations”), and an intentional integration of measures designed to respect, promote, and further civilians’ protected character under IHL (p.13). Emphasizing the mindfulness of NATO’s own actions in their PoC definition may, therefore, simply be a ‘basic obligation’ already required under IHL, potentially highlighting limited commitment to go beyond these obligations. Thus, in the case of NATO, what separates these basic obligations from the more intentional, ethical demands of protecting civilians is open to interpretation.

The UN, on the other hand, an organization that establishes and, in many ways, is considered as responsible for responding to violations of IHL, clearly strives to actively ensure through legal mechanisms, as well as its own policies, that civilians are protected. However, drawing from the previous use of McCormack and Gilbert (2021) and their analysis of militarism and humanitarianism, even in the context of more intentional or proactive efforts to protect civilians, “the principles of ‘proportionality’ and ‘distinction’ that are at the core of IHL and which are intended to limit ‘collateral damage’ actually provide the terms under which violence

is permitted and legitimized.” (p.182)<sup>12</sup>. In other words, these core principles, of which the UN is a strong supporter, are precisely what permits certain casualties with minimal repercussions and accountability. Restricting PoC to ‘basic obligations’ under IHL may therefore establish understandings of protection that do not sufficiently address the need for additional provisions to protect civilians. In the next section, these understandings of protection are analysed as imaginaries to illustrate how NATO and the UN come to determine their mechanisms and frameworks for responding to threats against civilians.

### ***The PoC Imaginary***

This section offers a comparison of what can be described as the ‘protection of civilians imaginary’ that informs the PoC policies of the UN and NATO. The concept of “imaginary” draws specifically from the work of Zanotti (2011) and her use of the term “political imaginary” in her analysis of post-Cold War international intervention. Zanotti (2011) employs the term ‘political imaginary’ to explain how policies and frameworks tailored to these interventions are derived from certain understandings, or ‘imaginaries’ shaped by a blend of real-world and imagined scenarios as well as guided by human rights regimes such as IHL and international human rights law (IHRL) in the case of PoC. Making use of the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti beginning in the 1990s which focused on the reformation of penal institutions, she argues that the imaginary influencing this mission was drawn from 18th century Enlightenment reformers, which in turn shaped the work the UN carried out in Haiti (Zanotti 2011). In line with this shaping feature of intervention, the concept of the ‘imaginary’ is applicable when analyzing PoC because its evolution and subsequent policies have drawn from an imaginary consisting of

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<sup>12</sup> The principle of distinction is defined as the differentiation between combatants and non-combatants (ICRC 2024c)

conflict scenarios - both real and imagined -, broad shifts in how security is understood, and the development of protection principles such as R2P that determine the form an intervention will take. The initial real-world components of the UN and NATO's PoC imaginary can be traced to the conflict in Sierra Leone in the early 1990s for the UN on the one hand, and NATO's involvement through the ISAF in Afghanistan starting in the early 2000s on the other. Both of these scenarios shaped how each organization understood and formulated PoC frameworks and continues to shape how they may be implemented. In this case, the UN and NATO share overlapping, though not entirely similar, imaginaries when it comes to civilian protection. Indeed, Foley (2023) notes that "[i]t is doubtful that a single definition of 'protection' could ever encompass what the phrase brings to mind when it is heard by a lawyer, a humanitarian aid worker or a soldier", and the argument could be made that a single definition likely would not encompass the PoC imaginaries of IOs such as the UN and NATO in their entirety ( p. 27). In the preceding sections, the fundamentally humanitarian character of the PoC concept was highlighted. However, in relation to the UN and NATO's responses to armed conflict, PoC may be imagined differently, perhaps in "military terms" (Johnson 2019, p. 135).

This is illustrated in Williamson's (2017) analysis of NATO's approach to the protection of civilians. In her evaluation of NATO's performance when it comes to civilian protection, she draws a distinction between the different definitions of PoC, sharing the "humanitarian definition" of protection established by the ICRC (Williamson 2017, p. 14)<sup>13</sup>. Williamson (2017)

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<sup>13</sup> The definition she includes from the ICRC states that "[p]rotection encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law" (Williamson 2017, p. 14). However, its use here is to highlight the distinction she draws between different conceptions of PoC, implying there are understandings beyond the 'humanitarian' conception of PoC.

ties this understanding of PoC to international humanitarian actors such as the ICRC and lists certain tasks that would fall under this approach to civilian protection such as “referring victims to services”, “negotiating ceasefires”, “tracking displacement”, etc. (p.14-15). Furthermore, she states that “NATO should be prepared to engage with these stakeholders [humanitarian actors] and to welcome their input for improving operational effectiveness” (Williamson 2017, p. 15). What this section of her work demonstrates is that the way NATO has conceived of PoC is different from that of international humanitarian actors, but that NATO should consider those actors’ humanitarian PoC imaginary when evolving its own conceptions, policies, and imaginary. Therefore, what exactly forms the basis for NATO’s understanding of PoC?

### ***Forming NATO’s PoC Imaginary***

As previously noted, both the UN and NATO have developed policies specifically tailored to address civilian protection concerns during their involvement in armed conflict. Each, however, developed in unique ways under different circumstances. NATO’s 2016 policy was largely inspired by its involvement in Afghanistan through its leadership of the ISAF, particularly between 2003-2014 (Rynning 2018). During this time, NATO was facing growing pressure, specifically on the part of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to reduce the number of civilian casualties as a result of its operations (Rynning 2018). Rynning (2018) highlights that during its mission, the ISAF was facing issues of “doctrinal clarity” which he describes as “how clearly heads of state and government articulate the political ambitions; how easy it is to build ‘response options’ on this basis; and then how easy it is to translate them into ‘military planning’” (p.221). In other words, Rynning (2018) is describing the lucidity, and lack thereof, of plan implementation routes at the tactical executory

level. Rynning (2018) explains that “[p]roblems in this chain of doctrinal clarity dogged NATO’s ISAF command (2003-2014) when broad ambitions and limited means to counter the Taliban insurgency led NATO/ISAF to actions that caused an alarming number of civilian casualties” (p.221, parentheses in the original). Because of the level of civilian casualties that “threatened to spin out of political control,” under a miscalculation of resources and achievable objectives, NATO started on its path toward its 2016 PoC policy, derived from its “lessons learned from a decade’s worth of Afghanistan warfare” (Rynning 2018, p. 221; p.235). Though the goal of this section is not to provide a comprehensive account of the history and results of NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan, the later aspects of the mission are indeed what paved the way for the 2016 policy analyzed in this paper and, therefore, provide the necessary context to grasp NATO’s PoC imaginary. In this way, NATO’s PoC imaginary was established and consolidated in the context of an armed conflict responding to the 9/11 attacks on one of its founding members, the United States. As will be examined in this section, the origins of NATO’s PoC imaginary inevitably shape a large part of its implementation of, and commitment to, civilian protection.

### ***NATO’s 2016 PoC Policy***

NATO’s policy in general is significantly more limited in scope than that of the UN, though it addresses similar issues within PoC. Rynning (2018) highlights why exactly NATO’s policy may be narrower than the UN’s, explaining that:

the ultimate signal from NATO is that it is a political-military actor that can help create secure spaces in conflict areas; that it will be particularly mindful of not causing harm to

civilians and protecting them from violence as it does so; but that it does not assume responsibility for wider development and governance issues (p.222).

This explanation very much reflects what will be discussed later as the centrality of the use of force that comes with a focus on establishing physically secure environments. Rynning (2018) describes this as a shift in methods for crisis management. Prior to the 2016 PoC policy, NATO was operating under what was referred to as The Comprehensive Approach which “was NATO’s answer to the challenge of coordinating lines of operations (security, governance, and development) in crisis management operations” (Rynning 2018, p. 232, parenthesis in the original). However, Rynning (2018) notes that in contemporary NATO operations, The Comprehensive Approach “is ‘totally dormant’ as one NATO officer offered in an interview” (p.232). This reflects the notion expressed in the quote above that NATO does not take on the responsibility of government/development issues, instead centering their approach on the establishment of physically safe and secure environments, as reflected in their 2016 PoC policy (Rynning 2018, p. 222).

Within the 2016 policy, NATO outlines and identifies key aspects of a PoC framework. These key aspects of the framework include its definition of PoC, its consistency with IHRL and IHL, as well as other areas related to protection namely identifying vulnerable groups, highlighting the role of the local community, addressing the role of other international actors, responding to threats to civilians created by its own actions as well as others, the possibility of the use of force, and including capacity building and training initiatives (NATO 2016). All of these relate back to the core focus of establishing a physically safe and secure environment and signals a much heavier focus on the military/martial aspects of protecting civilians. This is made clear by Rynning (2018) where “given NATO is a politico-military alliance, it can come as no

surprise that NATO's approach to PoC [...] is concerned with military organization" (p.228). In other words, when examining NATO's PoC framework, one can conclude that this framework places a greater emphasis on the military aspects of conducting an operation, which is in line with the Alliance's identity as a primarily military organization.

In this way, it may appear to reside closer to the militarized side of the scale discussed at the outset of this paper. Yet, with the inclusion of a policy specifically and solely addressing the humanitarian concept of PoC, the Alliance could be interpreted as moving toward a human-centered or human security focus that places greater emphasis on the potential consequences of military operations on civilians. Such a move would signal concerns associated with the 'humanitarian' rather than the 'martial' face of the PoC imaginary. However, upon closer analysis of their 2016 PoC policy, a few key points demonstrate that this shift may not be the case because they remain focused on the martial aspect of civilian protection. These points consist of their commitment, or lack thereof, to the centrality of PoC as a main component of mission planning and execution; the protection of their own forces; and credibility and legitimacy concerns. Though making the case of whether NATO is or is not actively carrying out this shift toward a more robust humanitarian version of the PoC imaginary is beyond the scope of this paper, the aspects that form the *appearance* of this transition are established through the interplay of militarism and humanitarianism. Incorporating protection perspectives in the form of PoC represents a humanitarian consideration *within* an existing military framework. The consolidation or dissolution of this incorporation signifies tension between militarism and humanitarianism and, as will be explored, this can be seen in both the UN and NATO's PoC policies.

Regarding NATO's commitment to PoC in its operations, there is some disparity between what is stated in its PoC policy and what is advocated by NATO through its 2022 Strategic Concept. This document "reaffirms NATO's values and purpose, assesses the security environment and guides NATO's approach to the threats, challenges and opportunities ahead" (NATO 2022a). However, PoC is only referenced explicitly once when it is stated that "[h]uman security, including protection of civilians and civilian harm mitigation, is *central* to our approach to crisis prevention and management" (NATO 2022b, p.9, emphasis added). By definition, this implies that its approach to operations revolves around the significance of civilian protection. However, in NATO's 2016 policy, the centrality of PoC is never established. Instead, language such as 'include' and 'encourage' are used in reference to civilian protection perspectives, arguably signifying a weaker stance on the implementation of PoC. This contrasts rather significantly with the 2023 UN policy which asserts that "[a]s it is a priority mandate, all components *must* integrate and *prioritize* POC activities in their workplans, activities, training, and monitoring and evaluation" (p.7, emphases added). Important to consider, however, is the fact that NATO policy is developed and adopted through the consensus of all member states, whereas the UN policy, established by the Department of Peace Operation (DPO) for use by its specific peace missions, does not share this requirement (NATO 2022b). That being the case, it points to why UN language can be stronger as it does not reflect a direct commitment by member states to protect civilians, instead simply acting as a framework for peace operations.

Additionally, there are elements missing from the NATO policy that would indicate the centrality of civilian protection and harm mitigation that is reflected in the UN policy. Holt and Keenan (2018) highlight that "[n]oticeably missing from the protection of civilians policy and concept is a NATO commitment to recognize and dignify civilians suffering harm as a result of

their operations through the making of amends or other post-harm assistance” (p.13). Through this neglect to address the longer-term impact and implications on civilians with their involvement in armed conflict, NATO maintains its more militaristic imaginary of protecting civilians through the use of force, minimizing the role of collateral damage in armed conflict and deflecting allegations of harm with assurances of proportionality.

It is also worth noting that clause number six of the 2016 policy states that “NATO’s fulfillment of its responsibilities under this policy is subject to the legal basis for the specific NATO operation, mission or activity and to the specific Council-approved mandate, without prejudice to force protection and collective defence obligations” (NATO 2016, para. 6). To break down this section, subjecting the fulfillment of PoC responsibilities to the legal basis for an operation ensures that NATO will not breach international law while carrying out these responsibilities; likely deriving its legal basis (i.e. what NATO is permitted to do) from the consent of the UN Security Council, the primary international body presiding over issues of international peace and security (NATO 2016; United Nations n.d.). As far as “the specific council-approved mandate”, this is in reference to NATO’s decision-making authority – the North Atlantic Council (NAC) – comprised of all NATO member states where decisions are made by consensus (NATO 2016, para. 6; NATO 2022c). The “Council-approved mandate” established and endorsed by member states lays out the form and extent of an operation along with its key objectives (NATO 2016, para. 6). Lastly, the inclusion of “without prejudice to force protection or collective defence obligations” serves as a reassurance to member states that actions taken to protect civilians will not inhibit the Alliance’s protection of its own forces and personnel, nor will it obstruct NATO’s ability to defend its member states (NATO 2016, para. 6).

Deserving of more focus is the phrase on force protection just discussed. This section of the policy ties closely to the discussion of collateral damage as well as proportionality and value explored earlier. When civilian protection may come at the expense of protecting NATO forces, a form of calculation takes place where civilian casualties are balanced against the security of NATO personnel. This clause ensures, however, that this calculation is skewed in favor of the latter. Applying the framework of proportionality and collateral damage here shows that the lives of civilians may be minimized if the means of protecting them inhibit NATO force protection in any way. Therefore, even if PoC formed a central component of operations as the 2022 Strategic Concept claims, civilian protection may quickly be sidelined if force protection is at risk. This was perhaps most clearly illustrated in the previously cited 1999 NATO air campaign over Serbia where the protection of Alliance pilots took precedence over safer strategies for civilians. The fact that this clause is included potentially demonstrates the unwillingness of member states to commit to the prioritization of PoC, specifically when the security of their own forces is threatened, as defined under the term ‘force protection’. As previously discussed with the use of Cronin’s (2018) work, this is often a major part of what leads to collateral damage.

Lastly, the inclusion into the 2016 policy of the continued credibility and legitimacy of NATO being dependent on its ability to protect civilians mirrors Casey-Maslen and Vestner’s (2022) point about the same being true for the UN (p.170). In clause number three of the 2016 policy, it is stated that “the growing strategic and operational significance of the successful implementation of PoC-related measures in operations and missions shows that a sound approach to PoC by NATO is important for its continued credibility and legitimacy” (NATO 2016, para. 3). Clause three is of note for one important reason which is that it equates civilian protection to

the primary mechanism of achieving what is deemed to be key to continued relevance: legitimacy.

This dimension of continued relevance and legitimacy is linked to the call for the prioritization of PoC in all stages of mission planning and execution as it reflects “the characterization of PoC as a means to an end, not an end in itself, highlighting the need to clarify the core tasks of militaries under such a mandate” (Koops & Patz 2023, p. 13). Here Koops and Patz (2023) identify that NATO mechanisms had not always viewed PoC as an “end in itself” as it was “often not understood as a stand-alone concept” resulting in it potentially not being viewed as a “core task” and therefore not a key mission objective (p.13). Placing PoC at the center and treating it as a “core task” at all levels of planning ensures that mission goals revolve around the achievement of an environment free of imminent danger directed at civilians (Koops & Patz 2023, p. 13). In other words, PoC policy as a core task would view protecting civilians for the sake of protecting civilians. Although the idea that PoC must be central if the Alliance’s “continued credibility and legitimacy” is dependent on it, laying out the route for achieving credibility and legitimacy in a policy specifically addressing the vulnerability of civilians in some ways displaces civilian protection and serves to center PoC policy on the protection of the Alliance from allegations of the inability to protect and, therefore, shield it from claims of irrelevance (NATO 2016, para. 3). Additionally, at the time of writing, NATO released The Secretary General’s Annual Report for 2023, laying out the progress, initiatives, and activities carried out by the Alliance last year. Pointing toward the trend of the displacement of PoC identified above, NATO’s (2023) annual report only discusses PoC in passing during reference to its overarching human security considerations, while ensuring the inclusion of increased training to “improve[...] peacekeeper protection” and identifying its “intensified work in a range

of areas including active and passive protection of forces” (p.125; p.79). This further demonstrates the potential displacement of civilian protection in favour of centering NATO and UN personnel, again redirecting the referent of protection onto the Alliance and the UN and minimizing civilian protection concerns.

### *The UN PoC Imaginary*

Turning to the UN, the origins of its PoC policy can be traced alongside the discussions that led to the inception of the concepts of human security and R2P discussed previously. 1999 was when PoC was formally included as a mandate in a peace operation in response to the conflict between militias in Sierra Leone. As Foley (2017) explains,

[b]oth countries [Liberia and Sierra Leone] were devastated in the fighting that followed, with civilians bearing the brunt of well-publicized atrocities that included the use of child soldiers, cannibalism, slave labour, and the common practice of hacking off people’s limbs (Foley 2017, p. 110).

Highlighting the grave nature of the crimes committed against civilians contextualizes the pressure faced by the UN to mitigate these atrocities, resulting in Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1265 (1999), which acknowledged the importance of protecting civilians and incorporated civilian protection into peace operation mandates. This acknowledgment is embodied by the resolution’s language which “[s]tress[ed] the need to address the causes of armed conflict in a comprehensive manner in order to ensure the protection of civilians on a long-term basis” and “[e]xpress[ed] [the Council’s] willingness to consider how peacekeeping mandates might better address the negative impacts of armed conflict on civilians” (UNSC 1999, p.1; p.3, emphases in original). Both of these sections within the resolution demonstrate the UN’s

commitment to recognize and improve the conditions of civilians in armed conflict through their protection.

From the initial Security Council resolution and the broader discussions on human-centered approaches to security as captured by the concept of human security, the UN continued incorporating civilian protection concerns into its agenda, resulting in protection-specific policies culminating in the 2023 Policy on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping authored by the UN's DPO. On a basic level, the UN PoC imaginary, expressed in the form of the 2023 policy, consists of a broad and comprehensive perception of the roles and responsibilities necessary to minimize and mitigate the threat of imminent physical harm to civilians in armed conflict. Spelled out in eighty-eight clauses, the UN ensures that their approach is a multifaceted one that considers the multiple complexities that accompany a mandate to protect civilians in an unstable and insecure environment. They establish a three-tiered system of protection that serve as broad umbrellas for more specific tasks associated with civilian protection. Each of the three-tiers addresses a distinct yet "mutually accommodating" aspect of PoC with the first tier being "[p]rotection through dialogue and engagement"; tier two being "[p]rotection through physical protection"; and tier three "establishing a protective environment" (United Nations 2023, p. 9). The tiers represent the framework for identifying each phase of protection that takes place during a peace operation with a PoC mandate. Furthermore, throughout the policy there is significant reference to longer-term consequences of armed conflict, with an emphasis placed on vulnerable populations such as women, children, and minority groups. Frameworks are also included for addressing the failure to protect during peace operations and reparations for damages incurred as a result of these failures; something that is notably absent in the NATO policy.

Although the 2023 UN policy is more detailed on paper than NATO's, there are incompatibilities between the policy and the turn that some of its peace operations are allegedly taking. Scholars such as Hunt (2017) and Karlsrud (2023) maintain that the UN may be adopting a more offensive posture when it comes to its peace operations. Hunt (2017) explains this as a "robust turn" in how the UN engages in intervention. Karlsrud (2023) also points to a shift in UN operations where "[t]he UN presents itself as a tool that with some modifications, can continue to be used for international security, in the shape of support to counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations"; which would be generally associated with more militarized tasks (p.267). Hunt (2017) draws a distinction concerning "more muscular and forward-leaning operations" as one between traditional peacekeeping operations and peace enforcement missions (p.109; p.111). He notes that "[d]octrinally, the level at which force is employed is vital in differentiating between 'peacekeeping' (i.e. force limited to tactical level) and 'peace enforcement' (i.e. force employed in pursuit of operational objectives)" (Hunt 2017, p. 111, parentheses in original). This distinction is important specifically because of the implications that accompany a more militarized imaginary of PoC as discussed in the previous sections. This connection to a PoC imaginary with a martial face is strengthened by Hunt (2017) when he claims that:

the short-term benefits of robust action by peacekeepers to defensively protect civilians or offensively degrade those who would imperil them may also lead to new insecurity for the very people it is designed to protect unless it is accompanied by a clear medium and long-term strategy for securing and sustaining a protective environment (p.116).

Highlighting the implications of short-term, primarily military, strategies for protecting civilians further demonstrates the tension between militarized and humanitarian imaginaries of PoC

because prioritizing the goals achieved through militarization to the detriment of goals achieved through humanitarian methods is what Hunt (2017) identifies as potentially leading to longer-term insecurity for civilians. Yet, arguably both approaches to protecting civilians- short and medium to long-term- are necessary.

Though it is clear that PoC is imagined somewhat differently between a military alliance (NATO) and an organization focused on diplomacy and development (the UN), they both center on the potential use of force in terms of how scenarios to protect civilians are imagined as suggested by Johnson (2019). Where both organizations note the importance of humanitarian actors maintaining their unarmed and impartial status, humanitarian methods of protection in the absence of the potential use of military force are not at the center of either policy. This is highlighted in the case of the UN's PoC approach when the policy states that the "creation of security conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance...[is] often a separately mandated task of peacekeeping operations, go[ing] beyond the scope of [its] present [2023] policy" (United Nations 2023, p.8). Put differently, the aspects of PoC less associated with kinetic force such as enabling humanitarian workers to deliver food to civilians in imminent danger of starvation are considered to be outside the scope of the UN PoC policy. This is slightly contrasted by NATO (2016) acknowledging that "[t]hreats to the physical safety of humanitarian workers can negatively impact the provision of humanitarian aid and imperil civilian populations. The NATO or NATO-led force, in accordance with its mandate, can play an important role by contributing to the provision of a safe and secure environment", effectively capturing the "trend [that] points to undertaking humanitarian action with the strong support of military action, thus depriving humanitarian action of its strictly civilian character" (para. 17; Pommier 2011, p. 1070). Here, as expressed by Pommier (2011), the strain between enabling

humanitarian aspects of PoC through military means is apparent, with NATO including the possibility of assisting humanitarian actors and the UN (2023) deferring it to “separately mandated” initiatives (p. 8).

Importantly, asserting whether military or humanitarian imaginaries of PoC are more, less, or equally as effective at achieving the goal of protection is not the focus here. What is, however, is demonstrating the tension present between the two and how the NATO and UN policies on PoC at times vacillate between martial and humanitarian imaginaries of protection, indicating the point where the unarmed nature of humanitarianism clashes with the centrality of the use of force of militarism. This clash emerges in spite of the fact that at the heart of PoC is an imaginary that signals a humanitarian rather than a martial rationality, indicating a potential misunderstanding intrinsic to a PoC imaginary centered on the use of force. It appears as though who is threatened is obscured (i.e., civilians), resulting in policy focused on who is seen as capable of eradicating the threat (i.e., UN/NATO personnel/forces). To elaborate, although a policy establishing mechanisms to protect civilians will by definition focus on the solutions to threats against civilians, policy dominated by the use of force may indirectly center on those with an increased capability of kinetic force (i.e., UN peacekeepers or NATO forces) as opposed to civilians. PoC is a humanitarian concept because those under threat are people not party to an armed conflict and, by extension under the terms of IHL and IHRL, are considered as benefiting from the fundamental and non-derogable ‘right to life’ (Foley 2017, p.239-240). In a way, the use-of-force-centered PoC imaginary, as a feature of both NATO and the UN’s approach to protection, skips the referent of the threat, i.e., civilians and their non-derogable ‘right to life’, directing its attention onto those with the means of neutralizing it, i.e., NATO and UN personnel (Foley 2017, p.239-240). This can be understood through the presence of “Dialogue and

Engagement” as tier one of the UN policy, and its comparative absence in NATO’s 2016 policy (United Nations 2023, p.10). Dialogue and engagement represent an aspect of protection with, arguably, more separation from the use of force and where the solutions for civilian protection are centered on their involvement as well as the involvement of other actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), state actors, and non-state actors. In other words, the incorporation of dialogue and engagement may speak to a slight displacement of the use of kinetic force in favour of the inclusion of more peaceful, and possibly longer-term solutions. The centrality of the use of force as well as this presence/absence of a core solution of dialogue and engagement may speak to why NATO is criticized by Cronin (2018) as engaging in conflict in ways that increase the likelihood and severity of collateral damage whereas “cases of [collateral damage in UN peace operations] are rare” (Hunt 2017, p. 115).

Through each of the organizations’ policies, the way that the UN and NATO imagine PoC becomes clear. Their PoC political imaginary is necessarily shaped by foundational events that endangered civilians and called for an international response. However, through the contextualization of the events that lead to the development of their specific PoC policies, a militarized rationale is uncovered, standing in contrast to the humanitarian ideal of protection for the sake of protection. While each organization claims to center its conflict responses on civilian protection, their actions’ incompatibility with their policies at times call this claimed prioritization of protection into question. Though PoC is imagined by both NATO and the UN as reducing imminent threats against civilians, this section has shown that by focusing on the use of force, and therefore short-term approaches to civilian protection, their PoC policies may not fully address the variety of threats faced by civilians, and in some cases, may even create or worsen them.

## Conclusion

Drawing from the analysis developed in this essay, it becomes clear through looking at each organization's policies for PoC that *how* interventions are executed is just as important as why they happen in the first place. Through the use of humanitarian language, the 'why' may very well be the sentiment of 'basic obligation' to protect civilians facing major threats and atrocities; but 'how' these interventions are imagined reveals the extent to which those intentions are aligned with a humanitarian rationale and to what extent harm to civilians is still considered permissible even in the context of a policy meant to protect those considered to be innocent.

As this essay has shown, levels of collateral damage are one way of identifying the commitment, or lack thereof, to protect civilians on the part of organizations involved in armed conflict such as NATO and the UN. Influenced by the calculation established by the principle of proportionality, collateral damage unearths the value assigned to civilians in a given armed conflict, underscoring their potential minimization in comparison to the prioritization of other military objectives and force protection concerns. Additionally, even though it is a principle established by IHL, proportionality carries with it a level of death and destruction that is entirely legal and therefore considered to be completely legitimate. This triangular connection between proportionality, legitimacy, and relevance makes visible the means through which interveners can carry out operations that inflict large numbers of civilian casualties while maintaining their status of legitimacy and therefore relevance; arguably a paramount goal for IOs such as NATO and the UN. Through an analysis of NATO and UN PoC policy, this essay has shown that the implications of 'militarized humanitarianism' -i.e. collateral damage; proportionality/value; and legitimacy/relevance - collectively permeate the policies and mechanisms designed for civilian protection. It has demonstrated that the joint role of humanitarian and martial imaginaries in

these policies prioritizes the epitome of militarism: the use of force. This is done by prioritizing the protection of intervening forces, sidelining aspects of protection going beyond the use of physical force and engaging in more robust forms of intervention with increased tasks typically associated with the military. Though humanitarian elements are clearly included in NATO and the UN's policies, language remains that undermines efforts not associated with the use of force such as NATO failing to include restitution and reparation provisions and the UN deferring certain humanitarian tasks to other policies and mandates.

With the inclusion, but albeit minimization of these humanitarian components of a PoC policy, an important revelation to note is the fact that the scale outlined earlier, with the polarizing sides of militarism on one end and humanitarianism on the other, may be entirely redundant. As McCormack and Gilbert (2021) highlight, the conventional understandings of humanitarianism “seem to position humanitarianism and militarism as quite separate endeavors”, when in reality they are in a constant state of struggle with each other, indefinitely intertwined (p.180). To maintain the image of the scale then, it is useful to view both the UN and NATO as residing in the middle meeting point, the crux of the militarism-humanitarian “nexus”, with either side of the scale falling away (McCormack & Gilbert 2021, p. 180). One could argue that each organization's protection policy attempts to drift toward humanitarian legitimacy but is unable to leave behind completely the militaristic techniques and rationalities that form the foundations of their PoC imaginaries. This middle point is where ‘militarized humanitarianism’ becomes clear as identified by McCormack and Gilbert (2021). The visual representation of this resembles the humanitarian worker arming themselves for self-defence purposes noted at the outset of this paper, but it also resembles many mandates drafted to protect civilians and the policies that guide the fulfillment of them, centered on the use of force.

Two potential limitations of this essay consist of the aspect of civilian agency in protection, as well as addressing thoroughly the underlying problematic aspects of humanitarianism. Where the focus for this essay was on the relationship between militarism and humanitarianism as it exhibits itself through NATO and UN policy, the role that civilians play in responding to armed conflict and their relationship to the use of force fell beyond its scope. Nevertheless, it is important to identify that actors beyond those intervening in armed conflict may have unique experiences with militarism and humanitarianism, particularly civilians, and may engage in different approaches to their own protection. Further exploration could extend this analysis to the PoC imaginaries of civilians as well as governments. In this way, however, Paffenholz (2015) highlights the dynamics and problems within and between conceptions of what can be described here as ‘local’ and ‘international’ imaginaries of PoC<sup>14</sup>. Critiquing the binary distinction of the ‘local’ and the ‘international’, as well as the multiplicity of power relations amongst and between this binary, creates an additional lens through which approaches to intervention and conflict resolution can more accurately capture the roles of those involved.

Moreover, there is extensive literature highlighting the inherent problems with humanitarianism. Although some aspects of this are addressed to demonstrate that humanitarian intervention may lead to further harm when coupled with military components, there remain other aspects within enactments of humanitarianism that extend beyond its susceptibility to military appropriation. This is in reference to the definition of humanitarianism described by McCormack and Gilbert (2021) in the introduction of this essay. The definition of

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<sup>14</sup> Paffenholz (2015), through her critical approach to ‘local turn’ peacebuilding scholarship, specifically approaches the ideas of agency, resistance, dominance, and power in relation to binary constructions of the ‘local’ and the ‘international’ of which she highlights are not monolithic and separate agents of peacebuilding. Rather, she underscores the nuance of power and resistance within and between these groups, showcasing the significance of better understanding the multifaceted composition of agents that contribute to, or destabilize, peace initiatives.

humanitarianism included here for analyzing NATO and UN PoC policy is considered by McCormack and Gilbert (2021) as the conventional definition, which suggests it is an apolitical concept based on “a presumed universal humanity” and “practices of aid and care” (p.180). Highlighting this understanding of humanitarianism as ‘conventional’ indicates that there are conceptions of humanitarianism that may shift these assumptions of it being an apolitical method of care, toward it being a method of control. Barnett (2011) explains, in the context of refugees and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), that “there is a fine line between care and control, where governing moves from simply providing public goods that refugees want, to deciding what kinds of public goods they should want and what kinds of interventions are in their best interests” (p.121). He further underscores that certain aspects of ‘care’, deemed as necessary measures by humanitarian actors, may put those receiving this care at risk, despite it being identified by humanitarian interveners as “in their long-term interests” (Barnett 2011, p. 121). Here, Barnett (2011) highlights that rather than being apolitical, humanitarianism may base its solutions to conflict on what actors external to it deem as necessary, controlling responses to align with these solutions in spite of the fact that they may not be appropriate for a given conflict scenario. In this way, future explorations of militarism and humanitarianism could consider the variety of ways that humanitarianism itself may contribute to conditions conducive to further suffering through the relationship between care and control.

Ultimately, what this essay’s exploration of the tensions between militarism and humanitarianism as well as the analysis of how these tensions materialize in policies on, and implementation of, PoC demonstrates, is that a large degree of caution is warranted when interrogating initiatives directed at protecting civilians; not only because of humanitarianism’s clear strategic use in military interventions, but also because humanitarianism may not always be

the impartial and unobjectionable form of intervention that it appears to represent. These are factors that permit humanitarianism to be “both the cause and consequence of violence that states [and by means of the frameworks provided by IOs as shown here] eke out on their own and other populations that results in the prolongation - not the end - of suffering” (McCormack & Gilbert 2021, p. 185). To expand, when humanitarian rationales are deployed in interventions with military components, it has the potential to prolong, and in some cases worsen, the consequences of armed conflict on civilians; ultimately standing in sharp opposition to the fundamental ideal of the humanitarian rationale of PoC which is to alleviate human suffering. This idea effectively captures the repercussions of the militarized deployment of humanitarianism in armed conflict and international intervention more broadly.

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