

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



Working towards a better world

Admiral James G. Stavridis, NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe

Admiral James G. Stavridis assumed duties as the NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, in early summer 2009. A Surface Warfare Officer, Admiral Stavridis has also served ashore as strategic and long-range planner on the staffs of the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and as the Executive Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy and the Senior Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. He is a distinguished graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and holds a PhD and a MALD in International Relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

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It is both a privilege and pleasure to be asked to contribute to this special edition of the *International Review of the Red Cross*. As the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, I oversee all NATO's global operations and regard good relations between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the military as essential.

In today's world, with its complex conflicts and insurgencies, many see an inevitable friction between the military and civilian international and non-governmental organizations. Frankly, I do not. The ICRC has always been a steadfast companion to our uniformed men and women in combat.

Today the focus of the ICRC's work is more on behalf of civilians; but at its inception, the Red Cross was created in response to the plight of wounded soldiers. In 1864, the first Geneva Convention laid down obligations on armies to care for the wounded of all sides and created a new and universal standard of acceptable behaviour. Until then the fate of the wounded was often a matter of chance, but that Convention and the vision of the ICRC's founders was a critical step in spurring the

development of the standards of international behaviour in conflict that we rely on today.

That concern for combatants also dominated the first eighty years of the ICRC, and countless soldiers, sailors, and airmen saw the Red Cross symbol as a sign of hope and help. Through enabling prisoners of war to let their families know they were alive; through providing medical services; through providing care packages to POWs; through monitoring their conditions, the Red Cross was there for us.

Since the end of the Second World War, without changing its concern for protecting the rights of combatants, the ICRC has expanded its focus towards protecting the rights of non-combatants as well. As a leader in the field of international humanitarian law and human rights, the ICRC has consistently raised expectations as to acceptable standards of military behaviour in conflict, thereby improving conditions for military and civilians alike.

Nothing can eliminate the horror of war, but the ICRC by its actions has reduced many of the worst excesses and helped save countless lives. But it remains a sad fact that we still live in a world where atrocities are all too common and the need for the ICRC is as critical as ever.

It is of note that the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which shaped the new path of the modern ICRC, were signed in the same year as the NATO founding treaty, a significant pillar of Western defense. The Alliance fundamentally shares the values expressed in the conventions and greatly values the continuing work of the ICRC.

The ICRC core values that we in Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, and I personally, value are the ICRC's status as an impartial, independent, and neutral organization. There can be no doubt as to the benefits we all gain from those values, as they afford the Red Cross critical access to those affected by conflict and they support the respect for international humanitarian law.

NATO forces and ICRC members are involved in operations around the world. It is the ICRC's impartiality, independence, and neutrality that enable NATO and ICRC to pursue our respective, separate missions under a framework of similar fundamental values in response to crises.

Of course that neutrality can sometimes be uncomfortable. If we occasionally get it wrong – fortunately, I believe this is rare – or are seen as operating close to acceptable boundaries, then we know the Red Cross will speak up. But any discussions on perceived issues are and must be based on our mutual respect. In any event, we gain far more than we lose because we accept those same standards and share those same values. If there is a problem or potential problem we need to know and to be told. Conversely, when we get it right – which I believe is most of the time – it is good to receive outside validation from such impartial authority.

We also trust the judgement of the ICRC precisely because we know that its neutrality, impartiality, and independence are rigorously applied and I know it examines itself routinely to ensure it maintains the standards it has set for itself. Some organizations claiming to be impartial and neutral are perhaps more partial than they like to acknowledge, but our relations with the ICRC have always been clear, and to our mutual benefit.

At the NATO Summit in Lisbon in 2010, the Alliance formally recognized the need for a ‘comprehensive approach’ to crisis management. Such an approach is hugely challenging, but it cannot succeed without cooperation and dialogue with a broad range of non-military agencies and organizations. It was as part of this process that in June 2012, Dr. Jakob Kellenberger, the former President of the ICRC, signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the ICRC and NATO’s two strategic military commands: Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation.

This will help to ensure that our organizations continue a long-term, vibrant relationship. Neither of us can rest on our laurels, but should see our proud histories as a spur to keep thinking with imagination, and to keep striving for continuing achievement.

In closing, I must highlight the courage and professionalism of ICRC delegates operating in hazardous environments over so many decades. We come from different professions, but our relationship is based on mutual respect and deeply held values.

So congratulations on your 150th anniversary, and we look forward to working together in the many years ahead. We are proud partners of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The world remains an often dangerous and always challenging place, but it is a little safer because of NATO and it is more humane because of the Red Cross.