ARROYO CENTER

This PDF document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Jump down to document ▼

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

Purchase this document

Browse Books & Publications

Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore RAND Arroyo Center

View document details

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

Foundations of Effective Influence Operations

A Framework for Enhancing Army Capabilities

Eric V. Larson, Richard E. Darilek, Daniel Gibran,

Brian Nichiporuk, Amy Richardson, Lowell H. Schwartz,

Cathryn Quantic Thurston

RAND ARROYO CENTER

Summary

Since the end of the Cold War—and as witnessed by the U.S. military actions in the Gulf War, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq—the U.S. military is likely to prevail in conventional major combat operations against virtually any plausible adversary or combination of adversaries in a conventional military contest. Nevertheless, the United States has faced an entirely different set of challenges in securing the peace, which hinges less upon military prowess than on the ability to employ various forms of *soft power.*

Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a growing realization that the U.S. image in much of the Muslim world may have been facilitating the mobilization and recruitment of Islamic jihadists committed to the destruction of the United States. The subsequent difficulties the United States encountered in fostering stable political equilibria in Iraq and Afghanistan sparked additional interest in capabilities that might assist the United States in securing peace and stability by influencing target audiences while minimizing or avoiding combat entirely.

A good deal of attention presently is focused on how to improve the nation's capabilities to influence others. These capabilities include public diplomacy, strategic communications, information operations, and other means that can be used to influence attitudes, behaviors, and decisions—i.e., "win hearts and minds"—without resort to (or excessive reliance on) the use of force. As will be described, we use the term *influence operations* to describe such efforts, whether the target audience is a specific leader, select elites or members of a decisionmaking group,

military organizations and personnel, specific population subgroups, or mass publics. The aims of this study were fourfold:

- Define influence operations in an operationally useful way.
- Review the scholarly literature related to influence operations.
- Describe the elements of a general model for effective influence operations and provide a framework for integrating influence operations into military campaigns.
- Provide a description and critique of available approaches, methodologies, and tools that might assist in planning, executing, and assessing influence operations.

Defining Influence Operations

In Chapter One, we provide a definition of influence operations:

> Influence operations are the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and postconflict to foster attitudes, behaviors, or decisions by foreign target audiences that further U.S. interests and objectives.

In this view, influence operations accent communications to affect attitudes and behaviors but also can include the employment of military capabilities, economic development, and other real-world capabilities that also can play a role in reinforcing these communications (see Figure S.1).

Somewhat serendipitously, our definition bears a striking resemblance to a recently approved definition of strategic communications:

> Focused US Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of US Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs,

Figure S.1
Elements of Influence Operations

Diplomacy

Public diplomacy

STRATCOMM

CMO (including CA)

PA

IO

Clandestine

Military/ paramilitary force

Other "on the ground"

Economic

- - - - - Synchronization/ coordination/ integration only
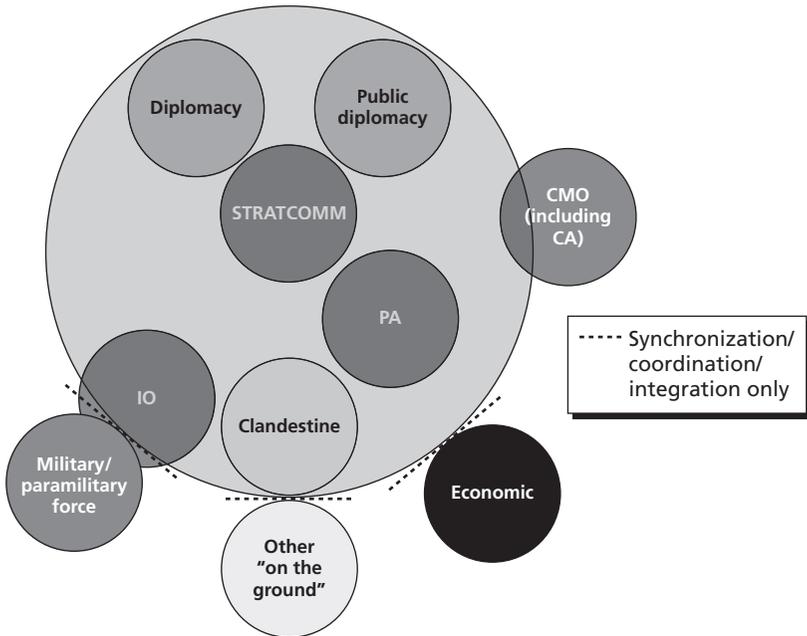
RAND *MG654-S.1*

plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power (DoD, 2006, p. xii).[1]

Thus, readers can generally conceive of influence operations as synonymous with strategic communications in the world of joint operations.

---

[1]   By comparison, the Air Force definition, as of November 3, 2006 (U.S. Air Force Air University, 2006), was the following:

> Informing and appropriately influencing key audiences by synchronizing and integrating communication efforts to deliver truthful, timely, accurate, and credible information: Strategic refers to source of information, message, messenger, audience, timeframe, and/or effect; Communication refers to both what you say and what you do; Requires focus on both internal and external communication efforts; and Requires both peacetime and wartime processes and capabilities.

Review of the Scholarly Literature

In Chapters Two through Five, we review the scholarly literature related to influence operations at the individual level (Chapter Two), the group and network level (Chapter Three), the adversary leadership coalition level (Chapter Four), and the mass public level (Chapter Five) and identify approaches, models, and tools that might assist in the planning, execution, and assessment of influence operations. The following are among the conclusions reached:

- *Influencing Individuals.* There is an abundance of theories and models that seek to explain individual-level attitudes, persuasive communications, and behavioral change, and although several appear to be relatively generalized and empirically robust, even the best of these have relatively modest explanatory power. In light of the uncertainties regarding which sorts of appeals are most likely to result in attitude or behavioral change, planners would do well to embrace an adaptive process that tests the relative efficacy of cognitive, emotional, and social appeals and that modifies communications accordingly.
- *Influencing Groups and Networks.* Among the more promising behavioral models at the group and network level are models of social power, opinion leadership, and the diffusion of innovations. These models can help to explain influence and the diffusion of ideas within groups and networks, and they suggest that targeting those who are influential and are opinion leaders constitutes an effective and efficient influence strategy. Research on factors affecting group performance and social choice theories of group decisionmaking suggests other points of leverage for influencing group dynamics and decisionmaking that are available to influence planners, including manipulation of information, agendas, and group decision rules.
- *Influencing Adversary Leadership Coalitions.* Scholars have identified a wide range of influence strategies, including deterrence and coercive diplomacy, to achieve political-military objectives against adversary leaders and coalitions, in addition to diagnostic criteria

for evaluating the likely efficacy of these strategies. Other scholars have developed agent-based rational choice or expected utility models that have a good predictive track record and appear to provide a sound basis for forecasting the outcome of influence efforts, developing policy and strategy, and identifying key stakeholder groups that should be targeted. Taken together, this body of work can assist planners in identifying which target audiences should be the focus of their efforts and which are less important.

- *Influencing Mass Publics.* Planners can benefit from an understanding of the roles of opinion leadership and individuals' information environments in the diffusion of attitudes among mass publics, perhaps especially the credibility of different leaders and information channels and the processes by which members of the public become aware of messages, accept or reject these messages, and change attitudes or behaviors on the basis of the messages they receive.

These various literature areas provide a complementary and highly integrative set of microfoundations and macrofoundations for understanding the determinants of influence.

A General Model for Influence Operations

In Chapter Six, we identify nine key planning questions that can be used to guide the development of influence operations. These questions can generally be divided into those dealing with strategic-level issues and those dealing with target audiences.

The first four questions focus on the strategic-level picture and the underlying political dynamics related to achievement of U.S. coalition objectives:

- What are current U.S. objectives? Are current objectives likely to be achieved, and if not, what outcomes are most likely under present or plausible conditions?

- Which actors or groups are most influential in political-military outcomes?
- What strategies (e.g., force or negotiation) are most likely to influence these groups and yield desired outcomes?
- How much authority/influence do group leaders have over their supporters/followers?

These questions are likely to be of greatest interest to the White House, to National Security Council staff, and to such interagency actors as the Departments of State and Defense. They will also interest the regional component commander and joint force commander and most likely would need to be addressed by intelligence analysts working for the services, the Department of Defense, or the larger intelligence community.

Five additional questions need to be answered for each of the key target audiences identified during influence strategy development so that effective substrategies can be developed for each:

- Which sources and information channels do target audiences use and find most credible?
- How are target audiences' attitudes structured, and how stable are they?
- What messages are they already receiving?
- What message sources, content, and formats are most likely to be accepted and to foster change?
- How many messages need to be sent to them? What other actions need to be taken to achieve influence objectives?

Notwithstanding the vast uncertainties regarding the likely efficacy of influence efforts, we believe that this analytic protocol can help planners focus on key issues that need to be understood and to narrow the range of options to the most practical, effective, and efficient ones.

Analytic Tools for Supporting Influence Operations

Furthermore, we identify how various social science approaches and tools might be used to assist in answering these questions, focusing on those approaches and tools that we feel might be profitably employed in planning and executing influence operations but perhaps are not as well known as they deserve to be.

The first two tools may be helpful in assessing strategic-level issues:

- *Agent-Based Rational Choice* or *Expected Utility Modeling* appears to be highly suitable for use in developing influence strategies and illuminating the first three strategic-level questions. In particular, we view this tool as being useful for identifying which stakeholder groups are likely to be most important to a political outcome and, therefore, are most deserving of influence efforts. We judge this to be a mature technology that is ready for operational use in planning influence strategies and operations.
- *Social Network Analysis (SNA)* tools appear to be quite useful for describing, in a visual way, formal political or administrative, tribal, patronage, clerical, and other networks that, taken together, constitute a nation's authority structure. We see SNA tools as potentially useful in bootstrapping an understanding of these authority structures and in identifying key leaders (nodes) who should be targeted by influence efforts. There also is some recent theoretical work—as yet unsupported by empirical evidence that might provide the desired level of confidence that the theories are more than plausible guesses—that focuses on influence within networks and that ultimately may prove to be valuable to planners.

We also identify two approaches that we believe might be useful for assessing communications in a competitive information environment:

- *Automated Content Analysis* is an approach for analyzing texts that seems likely to be useful for influence operations. In particular, we see content analysis as a tool for tracking the content of foreign

leadership statements and media reports, for ascertaining whether strategic communications messages are penetrating key media, and for similar limited purposes. We judge automated content analysis to be a mature technology that should be relatively easy to adapt to operational use for these purposes.

- *Semantic Network Analysis* is another technique for analyzing texts that is primarily used by communications researchers. The approach is similar to social network analysis insofar as it uses nodes and links (or relational ties), the defining feature of which is that a connection of some form is established between the nodes. In the case of semantic networks, however, the links typically are between words or people using words. This approach ultimately may be helpful in developing tools for summarizing texts or assessing meaning, but we judge that the approach is still somewhat immature and will require further testing and refinement before it is likely to be operationally useful.

Finally, we identified an analytic approach that can be used to map attitude structures and to provide a generalized environment for reasoning about and designing persuasive communications.

Galileo Metric Multidimensional Scaling was one of the most interesting approaches we came across in our survey of social science approaches that might be suitable for supporting influence operations. In many ways, this theory was the closest any social science approach came to providing a framework for thinking about how to effect attitude changes for planning, conducting, and assessing the impact of influence operations on attitudes and behaviors. The approach is based on survey instruments that ask respondents to judge the distances (a proxy for similarities or differences) between relevant attitude objects (e.g., people, places, things, or events, toward which one may have an attitude). The approach uses advanced factor analytic techniques to construct a multidimensional map of attitude objects in a common cultural "space." These maps can be used for identifying potentially potent themes for influence messages and for measuring any resulting change. We judge that the operational utility of Galileo for the analysis of attitudes and influence messages should be tested and assessed for possible operational use.

Implications for Planners

Our reviews of the social science literature related to influence at the levels of the individual, group and network, adversary leadership coalition, and mass public and our case studies of influence in commercial advertising and marketing, American-style political campaigns, and public diplomacy (Appendixes A through C) suggest that there are a number of characteristics that seem to be associated with effective influence operations:

- They are aimed at achieving *specific desired objectives and effects*, typically a change in a key attitude, belief, preferred policy, or behavior.
- They are directed toward *key target audiences*, whether an individual, a decisionmaking group, a military unit, a population subgroup, or the mass public of a nation.
- They make use of the most effective combination of *information channels*—i.e., those channels that are both most likely to reach the target audience and are most likely to be viewed as unbiased and credible.
- They are mindful of *audience characteristics*, including preexisting attitudes and beliefs that may condition an audience's willingness to be influenced.
- They are *timed to influence actors before they decide or act*, in the case of leaders and decisionmaking groups, *or before attitudes crystallize*, in the case of mass audiences.
- They make use of messengers with compelling *source characteristics*—i.e., those whose professional or technical competence, likeability, credibility, trustworthiness, or confidence makes them effective spokespersons.
- They rely upon messages with *compelling message characteristics*—i.e., those whose content, format, cognitive and emotional appeal, and other characteristics will most resonate with the audience.
- They *facilitate adaptation* by providing timely feedback on effects so that information channels, messengers, themes, messages, etc. can be modified to increase their persuasiveness.

In achieving these desiderata, planners should be mindful of three practical implications that result from the heterogeneity of the scholarly literature, the absence of a larger meta-theory of influence, and the situational or context dependence of persuasion efforts:

1. The various theories described above can provide only starting points for planners and operators; they will need to be adapted or fashioned to meet the specific requirements of each situation.
2. Even after detailed analysis, vast uncertainties are likely to remain regarding the efficacy of various alternative approaches to communication of messages to target audiences.
3. The vast uncertainties associated with the enterprise of influence lead to the requirement for an adaptive, robust, metrics-based planning, execution, and assessment process that can underwrite a capability to plan, test, and assess the results of different sorts of strategies, communications, and appeals and to modify the approach based on the results. The requirements of such a metrics-based process for influence operations are well beyond the scope of the present effort and are described in some detail in other, related work (Larson et al., forthcoming).

By constructing influence campaigns on solid theoretical and empirical foundations at the micro and macro levels, and testing and adapting target audience responses to these efforts, planners are far more likely to avoid pitfalls and, in some cases, even achieve their influence objectives.

However, as described in this report, the required level of intellectual and analytic effort for such endeavors can be substantial. The effort may in many cases not only outstrip the capabilities of planning staffs but also may require more intensive inputs and effort than their results perhaps merit.