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Understanding Commanders' Information Needs for Influence Operations

Eric V. Larson, Richard E. Darilek, Dalia Dassa Kaye,

Forrest E. Morgan, Brian Nichiporuk, Diana Dunham-Scott,

Cathryn Quantic Thurston, Kristin J. Leuschner

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Summary

There is growing recognition within the Army and joint world that recent U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan—including information operations (IO) and influence operations—have turned in large measure on an understanding of cultural and other "soft" factors. However, along with this recognition of the importance of these factors have come many questions, including: How do commanders view their requirements for "cultural preparation of the environment"? How can these sorts of factors be considered more systematically in planning and conducting operations?

The objective of our study was to help improve the effectiveness of combined arms and joint operations by characterizing commanders' requirements for information on cultural and other "soft" factors, and by developing practical ways for commanders to integrate influence activities into combined arms planning and assessment. The research entailed structured conversations with commanders and their staffs, a review of senior commanders' and other writings on IO and influence operations, an analysis of task lists, and an assessment of relevant data from the 1st Information Operations Command and the National Training Center.

In our usage, the term *information operations* is as defined by the Department of Defense (DoD):

> [t]he integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, cor-

rupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.

The term *influence operations* can generally be understood as synonymous with *strategic communication* (STRATCOMM), which is defined in Joint Publication 5-0 as

> [f]ocused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.

Put simply, influence operations engender communications and interactions that aim to inform and influence target audiences in concert with other kinetic and non-kinetic activities. Of the core IO capabilities, psychological operations (PSYOP) are the most pertinent to influence operations. To simplify our presentation, we generally use the collective term *influence operations* throughout this monograph.

Commanders' Information Needs for Influence Operations

Our review of a range of sources provided us with a number of insights into commanders' information requirements for influence operations. Perhaps the most important insight is that for the types of contingencies in which the U.S. Army now finds itself (counterinsurgency [COIN] and stability operations), the most critically needed information may have to do with understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and mood of the local civilian populations.

During recent operations, inadequate information on the attitudes and beliefs of local populations has often led to bland messages that did not resonate with specific target audiences and that made it difficult to compete with adversaries more capable of exploiting the local information environment. Understanding the popular mood requires continu-

ous monitoring of key indicators, perhaps more so in Muslim societies that are innately suspicious of the West and the United States. Shifts in popular opinion are especially likely after a single traumatic incident, whether it is a bombing raid that causes severe collateral damage to civilian homes and property or a traffic accident in which U.S. military vehicles accidentally kill a local child.

Our research suggests, furthermore, that success in influence operations depends on commanders' views of the battle space, their understanding of how to employ influence operations to achieve desired end states, and their interest and involvement in integrating IO with other combined arms operations. Commanders who insist that their subordinates develop a coordinated program of IO and influence operations activities and who follow up to ensure these activities take place appear far more likely to succeed in integrating influence operations into the campaign than commanders who take a more passive view of influence operations. Commanders also need to reemphasize the importance of influence operations on a regular basis.

Our research also revealed that there is no single correct answer to the question of which sources of information ought to be drawn upon to accurately assess the local information environment. The most appropriate sources will vary according to the mission, the local context of the operation, and even the individual commander. It is important, however, to establish a clear information sourcing strategy in an area of operation (AO) very early, so that subordinate commanders know what is expected of them over the long term.

We also found that commanders who believed their influence operations had been successful invariably had a clear, uncluttered picture of the key influence variables in the current battle space, the resources available to support influence operations, and the end state they desired for the end of the tour of duty. Commanders who tried to monitor too many variables, who shifted resources back and forth in response to daily crises without a long-term steady state, or who changed themes and messages randomly without any underlying concept of a step-by-step path to victory—these commanders appear to have enjoyed less success.

Developing good measures of effectiveness (MOEs) to assess how a unit's influence efforts are being received by the local population is one of the thorniest problems facing the Army today. Although none of our interlocutors believed that the Army has a particularly good set of MOEs for influence operations in COIN and stability operations, our interviews revealed that three key indicators in particular are being used across units and echelons in Iraq and Afghanistan with some success: the tenor of sermons in mosques, the "on the street" behavior of the locals (obscene gestures toward U.S. troops, amount of anti-American graffiti, etc.), and trends, either upward or downward, in the number of intelligence tips from the local population.

A Framework for Thinking About Commanders' Information Requirements

Our conversations with commanders and our review of the written record suggest that commanders' needs for information generally flow from an interaction of factors within three principal arenas: commanders' guidance regarding the overall mission; the resources available to the commander, which are likely to vary from operation to operation and over time; and the operating environment, including the information domain.

In terms of commanders' guidance, influence operations planning should flow from the top down and be designed and executed in support of coherent politico-military objectives while simultaneously synchronizing and/or integrating kinetic and non-kinetic activities, whether they are conducted by the services or by other DoD or interagency actors. Importantly, units in the field also need the authority and flexibility to operate within these broader, higher-level parameters if they are to be responsive to quickly developing opportunities and challenges. Satisfactorily resolving the tensions between these two desiderata appears to be key to success.

Beyond understanding the forces and other resources under his immediate command, a commander must understand the forces and other resources available under the command of higher echelons or in

adjacent AOs that may impact his operations, those being assigned to him, and those assigned to subordinate commanders.
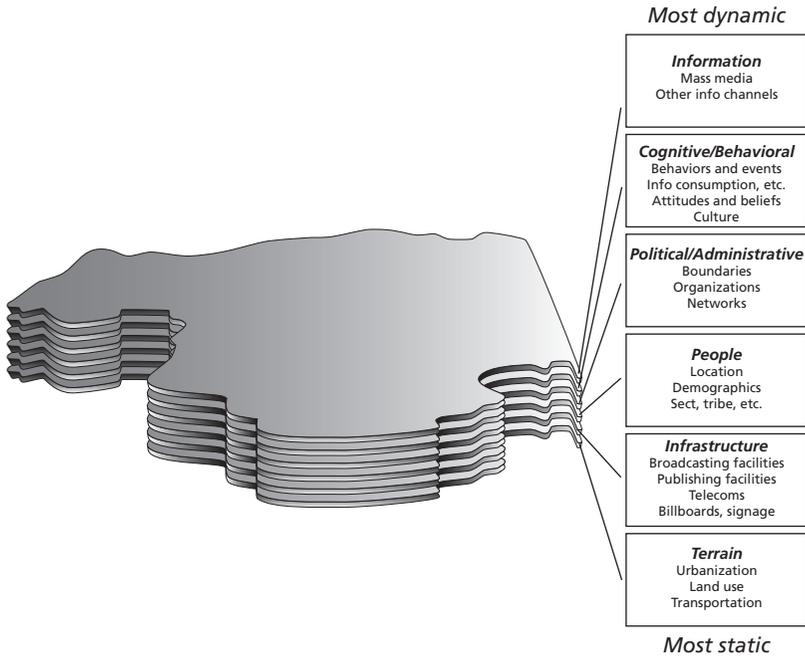
The operating environment arena, especially the information domain, is more complex and requires more discussion. There are currently a great many terms and phrases in use that attempt to capture the most salient features of the contemporary operating environment (e.g., "complex environments," "cultural environment," "cultural intelligence," "cultural preparation of the environment"), but there is little agreement on which framework or terminology should be used, or about exactly what the different terms mean. Our study provides what we believe is a fairly complete and highly intuitive framework for thinking about commanders' information requirements in COIN and stability operations, and for guiding data collection efforts related to the information domain. Moreover, the endorsements we received from commanders and members of battle staffs who were presented with this framework suggest its potential utility as an organizing principle for system and database development.

Lenses to Characterize and Diagnose Features of the Information Domain

Given that the sorts of data and intelligence that are most important to commanders in any given operation are quite context specific and are influenced by the mission, commander, and various other factors, our framework uses three complementary "lenses" to characterize and diagnose features of the operating environment's information domain that are likely to constrain the effectiveness of influence operations and mission performance. Each lens focuses on one kind of information: (1) geospatial, (2) network oriented, or (3) tied to specific political or military stakeholder groups or their leaders.

Geospatially Oriented Information. The geospatial lens for understanding commanders' information needs captures a number of critically important features of the information domain that were identified in our interviews and literature reviews. Our research suggests that many characteristics of the geospatial component of the information domain are best portrayed as a set of overlapping layers, as shown in Figure S.1.

Figure S.1
Geospatially Oriented Aspects of the Information Domain

Most dynamic

Information
Mass media
Other info channels

Cognitive/Behavioral
Behaviors and events
Info consumption, etc.
Attitudes and beliefs
Culture

Political/Administrative
Boundaries
Organizations
Networks

People
Location
Demographics
Sect, tribe, etc.

Infrastructure
Broadcasting facilities
Publishing facilities
Telecoms
Billboards, signage

Terrain
Urbanization
Land use
Transportation

Most static

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These layers, or levels, range from mostly static features of the terrain (such as urbanization, land use, and transportation networks) to more-dynamic features of the environment (such as the changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a given population in a specific region, and the ever-changing mix of new messages and information competing for attention at any given time).

Network-Oriented Information. A second lens for unpacking the information domain of the operating environment can be characterized as overlapping or interlocking networks. This lens provides a view of key features of the broader, political society, including key leaders, their critical relationships, and their sources of authority, power, and influence. Networks can be used to characterize a host of formal organizations or hierarchies—whether they are political, military, bureaucratic, or administrative; economic or business oriented; tribal,

religious, or sectarian. Networks also can be used to characterize informal networks, including those that are personal and professional, or that characterize patronage relationships or criminal enterprises, jihadist discourse, or influence. In addition, physical networks—such as telecommunications; command, control, communications, and computers; and utilities—translate naturally into link and node data. Such data, although quite helpful for influence operations, also can be somewhat difficult to compile and maintain, however.

Political or Military Stakeholder Groups and Their Leaders. Another lens through which to understand information and influence operations is provided by target audience analysis. This process involves identifying which groups or individuals need to be targeted, and whether targeting them means informing, influencing, cultivating, or incapacitating them. Each group or faction needs to be characterized in terms of its group identity and general worldview, as well as its specific aims, grievances, motivations, intentions, morale, basic strategies, leadership, and organizational structure. It also may be necessary to collect and maintain a number of types of information on key individuals who influence developments and thus need to be directly or indirectly courted or influenced.

Remaining Challenges

In addition to producing findings that can help the Army and the joint world make progress in conducting effective influence operations, our research identified four emerging challenges that need to be addressed.

Ensuring Vertical Integration of Information and Influence Operations Across Echelons

A recurring theme from our research is the need for integrated planning, execution, assessment, and information flows between echelons to ensure complementarity and synergy in influence operations. Brigade- and battalion-level personnel noted emerging difficulties between brigade- and corps-level influence operations, as well as between brigade

and battalion operations. Commanders and former officers on battle staffs suggested that perhaps the biggest challenges lie in the battalion-brigade relationship, where disconnects between themes and messages and long approval times appear to be especially significant. The question of how best to balance the dual desiderata of top-down strategic and operational guidance with tactical-level authority and flexibility in execution to ensure responsiveness seems likely to be a recurring challenge for future commanders. Vertical integration might be enhanced by the adoption of the sort of top-down, metrics-based planning and bottom-up assessment process we describe.

Ensuring Horizontal Coordination and Integration Across Adjacent Areas of Operation

Our interviews and other research suggest that the importance commanders place on coordinating influence operations activities with commanders in adjacent AOs, and the mechanisms used to ensure this coordination, are somewhat ad hoc in nature. Our structured conversations with commanders and former members of battle staffs indicate that difficulties in synchronizing across AOs have led to different messages being emphasized at different times in different sectors. Such practices may result in confusion among Iraqis who move across brigade boundaries or talk to relatives in other AOs and find that different messages are being emphasized, and may raise questions about what the principal U.S. message might be at any given time. While the metrics-based planning and assessment process we describe could enhance the transparency of activities conducted by units in adjacent AOs, so, too, could other, less formal communications between units.

Ensuring Continuity in Information and Influence Operations Across Rotations

It is also critically important that newly arriving commanders be cognizant of and honor the promises made by their predecessors and minimize abrupt changes in influence operations that may confuse or increase uncertainty or fear among locals. In particular, significant efforts should be made to ensure both greater continuity in the application of influence operations across brigade rotations and the availability

of operation-relevant information about the information domain and local population across rotations.

Our interviews with commanders suggest that current efforts to ensure smooth transitions between units, and to thereby enhance a sense of continuity in influence operations, may be inadequate. Some commanders thought that rather than building upon lessons learned by their predecessors during earlier unit rotations in an AO, units have tended to rotate in and immediately begin making changes without making a full appraisal of what elements of IO and influence operations might already be working. Additional efforts and mechanisms are needed to provide units that are rotating in with an endowment of relevant experiential information—chronologies, network analyses, contact files, databases, and other types of information—that can assist a new commander in understanding the history and authority structures of the AO. Moreover, it is not clear that the incentives for commanders support the sort of continuity needed for effective influence operations: Rather than rewarding a commander for making changes to his predecessor's influence operations, it might be better to reward him for improvements in relevant metrics. A common system and database not only could enable deploying units to monitor developments in the AO into which they will be deploying, but also could foster the development of institutional memory needed to achieve the desired level of continuity.

Overcoming Doctrinal Stovepipes

The final challenge is what we see as a necessary doctrinal shift, moving from a joint and Army conception of influence operations as a set of discrete stovepipes to one that focuses more on their contributions to achieving the objectives of combined arms, joint, and combined operations.

Our interviews and other analyses suggest that the success of influence operations in the field increasingly depends on commanders' ability to think beyond current doctrine, which tends to focus on the employment of IO in major combat operations, and treats IO and its related and supporting capabilities as discrete, somewhat isolated disciplines rather than capabilities whose employment needs to be planned,

synchronized, and executed in concert with the other combined arms to produce desired effects and outcomes.

We think that Army influence operations doctrine should better consider the employment of influence operations across a wider range of operation types, from COIN and stability operations to major combat operations, and should focus more on principles for effectively integrating influence operations disciplines with traditional combined arms. Additionally, Army education and training should train future commanders in the principles of employing influence operations across a wider range of mission types, and should seek to promulgate best practices from the field for better integration of influence operations into combined arms operations.

In combination, these measures, if coupled with educational and training programs that teach soldiers how to integrate influence efforts with other activities, could give the next generation of Army commanders the tools they need to plan and execute more-effective influence operations.