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Operationalizing the Insertion of Psychosocial Factors in Operational Planning

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Abstract

The consideration of psychosocial effects in operational planning has received considerable attention, especially in the recent conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Specifically, an escalation of effort towards winning “hearts and minds” vs. defeating an insurgency by kinetic means alone has placed significant expectations on understanding the psychosocial dimension of the indigenous population in theatre. This report addresses the insertion of this dimension into the operational planning process, especially for counterinsurgency. It begins with a high-level view of the planning-execution cycle that qualifies the consideration of psychosocial factors, followed by descriptive planning guidance that quantifies the application and assessment of these factors, and closes with a discussion on the validity of this approach.

Résumé

Une grande attention a été accordée aux effets psychosociaux sur la planification opérationnelle, en particulier lors des récentes campagnes en Afghanistan et en Iraq. À ce titre, l’augmentation des efforts déployés pour conquérir le cœur et l’esprit du peuple plutôt que pour vaincre les insurgés uniquement à l’aide de moyens cinétiques a suscité d’importantes attentes en ce qui concerne la compréhension de l’aspect psychosocial de la population locale dans le théâtre des opérations. Le présent rapport aborde l’insertion de cette dimension dans le processus de planification opérationnelle, surtout pour la contre-insurrection. Le tout commence par une vue d’ensemble du cycle de planification et d’exécution caractérisant la prise en compte de facteurs psychosociaux, suivi des directives descriptives de planification quantifiant l’application et l’évaluation de ces facteurs. Ces étapes se terminent par une discussion sur la validité de cette approche.

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Executive summary

Operationalizing the Insertion of Psychosocial Factors in Operational Planning

Peter Tikuisis; DRDC Toronto TR 2013-015; Defence R&D Canada – Toronto; December 2013.

Counterinsurgency doctrine has long recognized the importance of winning over the indigenous population in the contest for control, yet the means to achieve control have often been elusive, as most recently exemplified in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Understanding the “human terrain” in order to achieve desired effects is widely advocated, but understanding is insufficient without adequate means to gauge the consequential behaviour from courses of action. The aim of this work is to introduce a conceptual framework for the appropriate insertion and analysis of psychosocial factors during the operational planning process to improve the likelihood of achieving the desired end state.

This work was seeded by the development of the Human Environment Analysis Reasoning Tool (HEART), which is an informative resource to help military planners and analysts incorporate human and social sciences into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operational planning-execution cycle. HEART augments human terrain awareness for informed decision making. The present study goes a step further by prescribing appropriate insertion points for psychosocial factors and a method for estimating likely outcomes of courses of action.

It begins with a high-level view of the planning-execution cycle that underlines the importance of considering psychosocial factors, followed by descriptive planning guidance that quantifies the application and assessment of these factors. These steps comprise desired psychosocial effects, course of action selection, and qualitative and quantitative evaluations.

Sommaire

Operationalizing the Insertion of Psychosocial Factors in Operational Planning

Peter Tikuisis ; DRDC Toronto TR 2013-015 ; R & D pour la défense Canada – Toronto; décembre 2013.

La doctrine de contre-insurrection reconnaît depuis longtemps l'importance de gagner le cœur de la population locale lorsque vient le temps de prendre le contrôle. Pourtant, les moyens permettant d'acquérir le contrôle ont souvent été problématiques, comme l'ont illustré les récentes campagnes en Afghanistan et en Iraq. La compréhension de la dimension humaine pour obtenir les effets désirés est largement préconisée, mais sans les moyens adéquats, elle ne suffit pas pour mesurer le comportement indirect des plans d'action. L'objectif de ces travaux est de présenter un cadre conceptuel permettant d'insérer et d'analyser de manière appropriée les facteurs psychosociaux durant le processus de planification opérationnelle, et ce, dans le but d'augmenter les chances d'atteindre l'état final souhaité.

Ces travaux découlent de l'élaboration de l'outil de raisonnement sur l'analyse de l'environnement humain (HEART), une source d'information aidant les analystes et les planificateurs militaires à inclure les sciences humaines et sociales dans le cycle de planification opérationnelle et d'exécution de l'OTAN. Cet outil accroît la sensibilisation liée à la dimension humaine pour des prises de décision éclairées. La présente étude va plus loin en précisant les points d'insertion appropriés pour les facteurs psychosociaux et une méthode d'estimation des résultats probables des plans d'action.

Le tout commence par une vue d'ensemble du cycle de planification et d'exécution soulignant l'importance de prendre en compte les facteurs psychosociaux, suivi par les directives descriptives de planification quantifiant l'application et l'évaluation de ces facteurs. Ces étapes comportent les effets psychosociaux désirés, la sélection des plans d'action, ainsi que les évaluations qualitatives et quantitatives.

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1 Introduction

“Gaining and maintaining that support [i.e., the support and will of the population] must be our overriding operational imperative – and the ultimate objective of every action we take.”

(Gen. Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF, July 6, 2009)

Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine has received considerable scrutiny in the wake of the recent Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns (e.g., Ucko, 2012). It is a proven strategy, but only under favourable conditions such as targetable insurgents and governing regimes that are not too corrupt to reform (Kaplan, 2013). In such instances, COIN doctrine has long recognized the importance of winning over the indigenous population in the struggle for control (Galula, 1964). However, changes in the asymmetrical battle space due to modernization and globalization have intensified the challenge of COIN application. Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a renewed effort to channel considerable resources towards achieving stable regimes capable of denying safe haven to armed non-state actors. Yet, investment in the development and utilization of social and behavioural science information deemed critically important to COIN is still considered inadequate (US/DoD, 2011). Actionable interpretation of such information requires a validated and calibrated approach to achieve desired effects. Further, the multitude of operational options to be weighed by planning staff can be daunting, especially in light of the inexactness of possible outcomes. Biddle (2009) cautions us that there is not a single, analytically derivable right or wrong course of action (COA); instead one is faced with hard judgements in choosing between better odds at a higher cost and worse odds at a lower cost.

The aim of this report is to highlight the appropriate insertion of psychosocial (PS) factors during the operational planning process, not to replace the process. PS factors encompass elements of human psychology and sociology considered pivotal to the success of conducting modern era COIN operations. Whereas World War I (WWI) is described as a chemist’s war, World War II (WWII) as a physicist’s war, and the Cold War as an intelligence war, current irregular/asymmetrical conflict is described as the social scientist’s war (King, 2010). If one accepts that *“An insurgency can never be militarily defeated. It can only be managed until a political solution is found”* (Mukerjee, 2006), which is also the position held by then-Commander International Security Assistance Force Gen. Stanley McChrystal (COMISAF, 2009), it is then imperative to consider PS theories, methods, and models in operational planning to achieve the desired end state efficiently and effectively.

This author along with others recently developed an internet-based visual knowledge resource called the *Human Environment Analysis Reasoning Tool* (NATO, 2011) to (i) promote the development and utilization of PS-based theories, methods, and models congruent with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) approach to conducting operations, and (ii) help operational analysts and planners navigate through the myriad of PS factors in an operational context. These aims and those of this report are supportive of NATO’s operational design concepts. For example, *“[a]n understanding of the end-state is a crucial element of any plan”* (NATO, 2010, p. 5A-1), but to understand the end-state—that is, the “political and/or military situation” (ibid.)—requires an understanding of the current state. This must also include an

understanding of the human terrain and the PS factors that characterize it. How, not why, PS factors must be incorporated into the operations planning calculus is the present focus.

This report begins with a high-level view of the planning-execution cycle that places PS factors in qualitative perspective. It is then followed by descriptive planning guidance that quantifies the application and assessment of PS factors, and closes with a discussion on the validity of its insertion in operational planning.

2 Planning-Execution Cycle

“Start operations with an understanding of the end state and desired outcomes.”

(Hukill, 2009)

Figure 1 (following page) positions the actual conflict state and desired end state at the top of the planning-execution cycle. The state is not restrictive and can be considered in a generic campaign sense, representing one or some combination of geographical space, political situation, economic conditions, etc. Outcome is represented by Δ , which is the difference between the actual or resultant conflict state and the desired end state. The solid line represents the conventional pathway via a COA to achieve the operational objective, which often entails the use of kinetic means (i.e., physical force). However, the strategic implications of such action (i.e., the resultant conflict state) cannot be fully appreciated if consequential PS effects due to the action are ignored. That is, PS effects can lead to unintended behavioural changes in the affected population to such a degree as to not only undo the military achievement of the action but push the strategic objective further away (i.e., tactical success does not guarantee the desired strategic outcome).

For example, 77% of Afghans responded in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) poll that COIN air strikes were unacceptable (McGivering, 2009), which counters the effort to win the hearts and minds of the affected population, and possibly compromises human intelligence as well as promoting insurgency recruitment. For completeness, then, the overall effects of a COA must include, in addition to the immediate physical effects, the responses of the affected population (shown as the dashed portion in the lower left of the schematic figure), such as sabotage in retaliation for innocent lives lost or damaged property. Mission effectiveness goes beyond the performance of the COA. It must include the resultant PS effects and actions of the affected population (Larson et al., 2009; Mackay, Tatham, & Rowland, 2012).

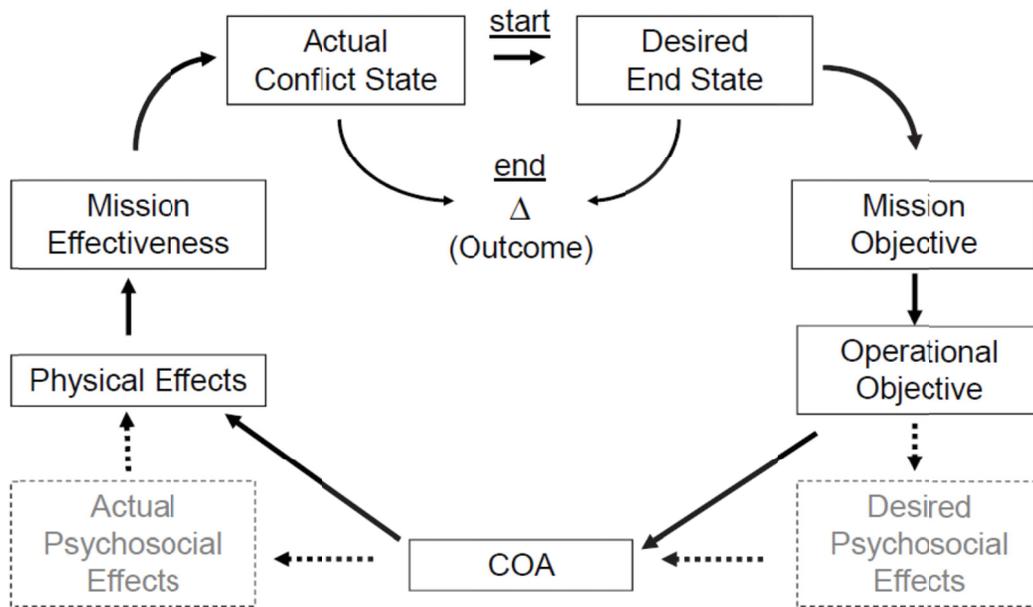


Figure 1: Schematic of the planning-execution cycle.

Note. The dashed/greyed pathway includes the assessment of psychosocial effects not usually considered. COA comprises the development, analysis, selection, and execution of a course of action.

Effects is a term adopted by military theorists and doctrine authors to refer broadly to the outcomes of discrete activities conducted by the military and/or other actors (Stewart & Tikuisis, 2009). Effects are often assessed by the physical changes due to such activities simply because they are visible. But effects from a psychosocial perspective also include the consequential cognitive and behavioural changes, intended or otherwise. Cognitive effects are obscure and include mental changes in intent, motivation, attitude, perception, and belief leading to behavioural change in targeted or affected populations owing to a COA. Behaviour is observable (“outward”) and can either be forced or self-directed. For example, forced evacuation is a COA that can be imposed but risks negatively affecting the “inward” cognitive state of the affected population. The concern here is unintended self-directed behaviour in response to COAs that create negative cognitive effects. By considering these potential effects when choosing a COA (see the dashed/greyed pathway in the lower right of the schematic figure), the likelihood of desired vs. unintended (negative) effects should increase. This is consistent with the counsel of Hukill (2009) to understand the system whose behaviour you intend to affect and to create cognitive effects with a focus on consequential behaviour.

3 Planning Guidance Comprising Psychosocial Considerations

“Determine the desired effect in a coherent process from strategic to tactical.”

(Ruby, 2008)

This section describes the insertion of PS factors in operational planning, essentially expanding on the dashed/greyed pathway in Figure 1. We begin with an explicit high-level statement of the problem (e.g., “insurgency has undermined security and stability”) that initiates the “Mission Objective.” Success depends upon getting the correct definition of the problem (Kipp & Grau, 2011), which requires an unvarnished understanding of the problem through various dimensions. In addition to understanding the military, political, economic, and environmental dimensions (similar to PMESII¹) of the battle space, it is essential to understand the psychological (individual, identity, worldview) and social (group, culture, norms) dimensions of the people of interest (whether directly targeted or affected), usually referred to as human terrain analysis (e.g., see Bartholf, 2011).

The mission objective is a high-level directive in response to the stated problem. For example, “defeat the insurgency” addresses the problem of a violent insurgency. It is emphasized, however, that there is no explicit requirement to apply kinetic means towards this objective. Similarly, the August 2009 COMISAF mission for the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) that mandated the protection of non-insurgents/non-combatants does not prescribe how the mission is to be accomplished. This is reserved for the more specific operational objective. “Shape and secure province ‘X’ by removing its insurgents and gaining local support against further insurgency” is an example that expresses *what* needs to be done, but not *how*. That tactical detail is left for the COA, expanded upon further below.

Fewer insurgent attacks would signify that the above-stated mission objective is being met. How to achieve this varies with the people of interest, which involves identifying the individual(s), group(s), society, or regional population that will be targeted or affected. There is also no restriction on who constitutes the people of interest, which can range from adversaries, adversarial sympathizers, neutrals, adversarial competitors, and passive and active supporters. If dealing with insurgents, direct targeting of their leadership might be appropriate. Offers of amnesty and employment to dissuade member loyalty and recruitment might also suffice. If dealing with the non-insurgent population, then provision of increased security and development to eliminate a support base for the insurgency might be required. There is no restriction on applying various concurrent initiatives with a common desired end state. In fact, this would be consistent with a comprehensive, yet measured approach that is considered essential for success in asymmetrical conflict (Leslie, Gizewski, & Rostek, 2008; UK/British Army, 2009; US/Army & Marine Corps, 2006).

¹ PMESII comprises political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information.

COAs are instructional blueprints of the tactical objective involving kinetic, non-kinetic, or some combination of these means. Although the non-kinetic option might be desirable and more effective in achieving long-term stability (Kipp & Grau, 2011), kinetic means might be necessary, and either can lead to (un)intended effects on the people of interest. The optimal COA is the one that has the best chance of achieving the desired cognitive and behavioural effects in support of the *overall* mission objective and ultimately the desired strategic end state. If kinetic force must be applied, then its execution must be accompanied by a campaign that mitigates any negative repercussions amongst the non-insurgent population.

The key is to create “inward” cognitive effects that influence/shape the people’s of interest understanding and will (e.g., worldview, attitude, and/or intent) so as to achieve the desired “outward” behaviour. For instance, referring to the above example of defeating an insurgency, desired cognitive effects can range from insurgents’ weakened resolve, diminished appeal for insurgent recruitment, increased trust and support of local community leaders, etc. Mackay et al. (2012) remind us that such changes can be achieved by “*embracing proper, proven, social and behavioural science*” (p. i).

4 Measures of COA Merit

“War is a human endeavor ...”

(Gen. Mattis, March 18, 2009)

Two measures of merit of COAs with respect to the insertion of PS effects are proposed. The first is a qualitative evaluation of the candidate COA, which can also be viewed as a measure of the potential success of intended effect. This involves a set of criteria to assess the quality of the desired cognitive effect(s) and subsequent behaviour in the people of interest owing to a COA. Although not exhaustive, criteria for consideration should include:

- probability (i.e., how likely will the effect occur),
- onset (how long before the effect is evident),
- visibility (how recognizable/noticeable will the effect be),
- depth (how penetrating is the effect with regard to the peoples’ of interest understanding and will),
- longevity (how enduring is the effect—stable or perishable),
- durability (how brittle or robust is the effect—is it susceptible to unplanned/uncontrollable events, competing initiatives, or external interference),
- impact (how likely will the effect contribute to achieving the mission objective), and
- synergy (is the effect a force multiplier or reducer due to interference/interaction when coupled with other effects and/or actions).

The operational analyst/planner must weigh each criterion and determine the overall pass/fail threshold accordingly.

The effectiveness of a COA is the second merit filter to consider. It begins with a quantitative estimate of the cognitive, behavioural, and physical effects, all collectively simplified to three possibilities: *intended (positive) effect* (i.e., improvement), *unintended (negative) effect* (deterioration), and *no effect*. The analyst/planner must weigh these judgments and reject the COA if unintended negative effects overwhelm the intended positive effects. This can be rather complicated and somewhat abstract given that metrics to judge possible effects quantitatively do not exist²—most often effectiveness is judged qualitatively. Whatever quantification schema is applied (e.g., numeric value, rank-ordered), assessment of COA effectiveness is only meaningful in a relative sense (i.e., by comparison with other COAs).

Once a COA is selected and executed, then actual effects must be carefully observed and recorded. The impact of the COA is based on the observable effect(s) towards achieving or not

² Metrics to judge the progress of a COIN campaign such as Afghanistan have been proposed (e.g., Kilcullen, 2009), but these relate to observables whereas the challenge here is to estimate possibilities.

achieving the mission objective. The actual mission effectiveness is the difference between the overall *intended (positive) effect* and the *unintended (negative) effect*. If the difference is positive, then the outcome is a desirable reduction in Δ (i.e., a decrease in the gap between the actual conflict state and the desired end state shown in Figure 1). A worsening of the conflict state (i.e., gap expansion) would suggest revision of the COA as a minimum response and revision or replacement of the mission objective as a more sweeping response.

5 Discussion

“Shaping is the ability to influence and inform the perceptions, allegiances, attitudes, actions, and behaviours of all principal participants in the Area of Operation.”

(British Army Field Manual, 2009)

The Oman (Dhofar) COIN 1965–1975 described in the British Army Field Manual (FM) *Countering Insurgency* (2009) is a case study that demonstrates the efficacy and validity of PS considerations. The insurgency that arose in the Dhofar region was due to an intolerable lack of social support by the Sultan of Oman. Prior to 1970, the Sultan’s Armed Forces’ strategy was the singular military application of kinetic force to eliminate the insurgency. Realizing that this strategy was failing, the Sultan’s son, Qaboos bin Said, led a successful coup against his father and installed a more comprehensive approach that brought security and development to the region, which was welcomed by the population. This strategy ultimately undermined support for the insurgency and is currently recognized as “shape-secure-develop” doctrine (UK/British Army, 2009) that convincingly demonstrates the need to focus on the affected population.³ It is also echoed by COMISAF (2009) guidance *Protecting the people is the mission* and by US Army and Marine Corps FM 3-24 (2006) that emphasizes the needs and security of the local population. Such considerations are crucial in the planning-execution cycle (see Figure 1) to achieve the desired psychosocial effects in the people of interest. These effects cannot be overemphasized, as articulated by Hammes (2007): “[s]uccess is not just improved security but must be accompanied by the population’s perception that security has improved” (p. 26).

Several aspects of COIN that appear paradoxical can be better understood from a PS perspective. For example, the observation that “[s]ometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is” (US/Army & Marine Corps, 2006, p. 1-26) is certainly borne out by the BBC poll (McGivering, 2009) that found Afghans largely opposed air strikes. This re-iterates the importance of considering PS effects owing to a COA. Moreover, the statement that “[s]ome of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot” (ibid., p. 1-27) affirms the application of non-lethal means for achieving the desired cognitive effects and behaviours. “*Tactical success guarantees nothing*” and “[i]f a tactic works this week, it might not work next week; if it works in this province, it might not work in the next” (ibid., p. 1-28) is the reason why actual effects must be carefully observed and recorded once a COA is selected and executed. This is also why the estimation of effects is particularly challenging given the mercurial nature of the perceptions of the people of interest, especially when unintended consequences arise from a COA. Finally, “[s]ometimes doing nothing is the best reaction” (ibid., p. 1-27) can be prudent given the possibility that all candidate COAs might actually score negatively in terms of mission effectiveness.

³ Also referred to as “clear-hold-build” (US/Army & Marine Corps, 2006, p. 5-18).

These examples convincingly demonstrate why PS factors must be considered in COIN operational planning. How these factors are applied has largely been the focus of this report. Much attention has been directed at achieving desired cognitive effects in the people of interest in theatre, which is especially challenging given the uncertainty of the cognitive state, yet it is absolutely critical to ensuring desirable behaviours. The qualitative and quantitative evaluations of COAs proposed herein conform to planning for a desired outcome in a coherent manner from strategic to tactical, in addition to assessing effects rather than performance alone, as advocated by Ruby (2008).

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List of symbols/abbreviations/acronyms/initialisms

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
COA	Course of Action
COIN	Counterinsurgency
COMISAF	Commander International Security Assistance Force
DND	Department of National Defence
DOD	Department of Defense
DRDC	Defence Research & Development Canada
DRDKIM	Director Research & Development Knowledge and Information Management
FM	Field Manual
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
HEART	Human Environment Analysis Reasoning Tool
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSA	NATO Standardization Agency
PMESII	Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information
PS	Psychosocial
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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The consideration of psychosocial effects in operational planning has received considerable attention, especially in the recent conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Specifically, an escalation of effort towards winning “hearts and minds” vs. defeating an insurgency by kinetic means alone has placed significant expectations on understanding the psychosocial dimension of the indigenous population in theatre. This report addresses the insertion of this dimension into the operational planning process, especially for counterinsurgency. It begins with a high-level view of the planning-execution cycle that qualifies the consideration of psychosocial factors, followed by descriptive planning guidance that quantifies the application and assessment of these factors, and closes with a discussion on the validity of this approach.

Une grande attention a été accordée aux effets psychosociaux sur la planification opérationnelle, en particulier lors des récentes campagnes en Afghanistan et en Iraq. À ce titre, l’augmentation des efforts déployés pour conquérir le cœur et l’esprit du peuple plutôt que pour vaincre les insurgés uniquement à l’aide de moyens cinétiques a suscité d’importantes attentes en ce qui concerne la compréhension de l’aspect psychosocial de la population locale dans le théâtre des opérations. Le présent rapport aborde l’insertion de cette dimension dans le processus de planification opérationnelle, surtout pour la contre-insurrection. Le tout commence par une vue d’ensemble du cycle de planification et d’exécution caractérisant la prise en compte de facteurs psychosociaux, suivi des directives descriptives de planification quantifiant l’application et l’évaluation de ces facteurs. Ces étapes se terminent par une discussion sur la validité de cette approche.

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counterinsurgency; course of action; influence activity; non-kinetic effects

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