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Complex Operational Environments: Enabling Success through Increased Situational Understanding

Since the beginning of the War on Terror, the Army has focused the majority of its operational capacity towards counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Early in these campaigns, units were forced to negotiate many complex operational variables, to include an ill-defined and fluid enemy as well as different languages, culture, and social dynamics. Units often suffered from degraded situational understanding contributing to less than perfect military decision making, at all levels of war, and likely had adverse affects on mission accomplishment. As the conflict became protracted, commanders relied on the experience of multiple deployers to the same countries for cultural understanding, language familiarization, and historical context.

Complex Operational Environments: Enabling Success through Increased Situational Understanding

by

Captain John Solomon

“Time and time again, the U.S. has undertaken to engage in conflict without fully considering the physical, cultural, and social environments that comprise what some have called the human domain” - Strategic Landpower Task Force.

What is a complex environment?

Since the beginning of the War on Terror, the Army has focused the majority of its operational capacity towards counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Early in these campaigns, units were forced to negotiate many complex operational variables, including an ill-defined and fluid enemy as well as different languages, culture, and social dynamics. Units often suffered degraded situational understanding which often contributed to less than perfect military decision making, at all levels of war, and likely had adverse affects on mission accomplishment. As the conflict became protracted, commanders relied on the experience of Soldiers with multiple deployments to the same countries for cultural understanding, language familiarization, and historical context.

Now, as America’s military transitions from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan towards Strategic Landpower, units are faced with the challenge of applying valuable lessons learned from 13 years of combat in unfamiliar geographic areas. Key to the success is the understanding the operational environment. Operational environments, as defined in Joint Publication 3.0, are a composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander. These elements are inherently complex and in most cases require a depth of understanding not resident to the deployed unit.

Until the Army institutionalizes regional expertise, units will experience knowledge gaps similar to Iraq and Afghanistan. To help units better understand their environments, commanders and staffs can take advantage of external enablers to more rapidly achieve a level of cultural and historical understanding. TRADOC is uniquely positioned to assist operational units with this across a broad spectrum of domains to include the tactical, socio-cultural, as well as predictive modeling.

Complex Operational Variables

The central theme of the Asymmetric Warfare Group's observations during a recent deployment with CENTCOM Forward - Jordan (CF-J) and SOCCENT Forward - Jordan (SF-J) focused on the challenge of understanding an extremely complex operational environment. The employment by CF-J and SF-J, and the focus of this article highlight enablers which helped shape the Operational Environment through an increased understanding of the enemy, adversary, friendly, and neutral systems; or elements of operational variables. The Army uses operational variables to understand and analyze the broad environment which they are conducting operations in. These are defined by those broad aspects of the environment, both military and non-military, which may differ from one operational area to another affecting campaigns and major operations (FM 3.0).

TRADOC organizations such as the Human Terrain System (HTS), the TRADOC Intelligence Support Activity (TRISA) and US Army Ranger School were instrumental in assisting US and partnered forces in better understanding the complex environment as well as linking Operational and Institutional training efforts in Jordan. The mission of the HTS is to develop, train, and integrate a social science based research and analysis capability to support

operationally relevant decision-making, to develop a knowledge base, and to enable socio-cultural understanding across the operational environment.

In June 2013 during Operation Eager Lion, MG Gary H. Cheek, Deputy Commanding General, ARCENT, recognized the need for CF-J to further refinement of the operational variables. He asked Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) Operational Advisors to develop a proof of concept for HTS support to increase understanding of the unique problem sets in Jordan. By coordinating with the TRADOC G-2, CF-J welcomed Ms. Stacy Pollard, a Social Scientist, in September 2013. She had an immediate impact with the CF-J Staff and provided a level of regional understanding that could not have been obtained through traditional Intelligence Preparation of the Environment.

While primarily concerned with the stability of Jordan, CF-J grappled with understanding unique drivers of stability and instability which could be influenced through US Government efforts. Using her experience from working and living in five countries within the region, Ms. Pollard provided insight that only a regional expert could provide, and thus facilitated the refinement of CF-J's most pressing concerns to Jordan's stability. The 20 day pilot relationship between CF-J and HTS was so productive that Major General Dana J.H. Pittard, Deputy Commanding General, ARCENT, requested that Ms. Pollard return to CF-J for a more in-depth partnership.

Another example of CF-J's successful partnership with TRADOC enablers is the series of Jordan Stability Studies conducted in the summer and fall of 2013. These studies were conducted using the Athena model used by TRISA's Operational Environment Laboratory (OEL) to collect and validate culture data in order to develop Human, Social, Cultural, Behavior (HSCB) models

and databases. These models were then used by CF-J's staff to understand how factors resulting from the conflict in Syria could affect the stability and security of Jordan.

Athena is a scalable, lap-top, decision support tool that allows commanders and staffs to explore complex social science components of the Operations Environment and to project Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information (PMESII) trends over time - normally three months to three years into the future. Once the TRISA-OEL team deployed and updated the model with the Commander's goals, objectives, guidance, endstate, and other Staff/Interagency input, the team began executing Athena simulations. The 30 day embedded partnership validated several CF-J assumptions and challenged others, as well as identified several possible issues for future exploration and analysis.

The TRISA-OEL capability was viewed by MG Pittard and his senior staff as a unique asset that filled a critical gap in understanding the Operational Environment and anticipating potential outcomes. The TRISA-OEL team has been asked to re-deploy to Jordan for further analysis in 2014 due to the rapidly changing Operational Environment dynamics.

With HTS and TRISA partnerships primarily focused on understanding the Operational Environment across both the military and nonmilitary operational variables, there are additional, non-traditional enablers that can help Regional Aligned Forces focus on understanding and developing the friendly or partnered military force. The central theme of employing these enablers is expanding partnerships by improving operational and Institutional capacity of our partner nations.

Complex Operational Environments; Cone and Solomon

An example of this is SF-J's partnership with the Jordanian Ranger School. Supporting SF-J, AWG conducted an assessment of the course POI, with the goal being to help economize and professionalize the course while producing Jordanian Rangers capable of quickly integrating with operational units. This would allow deployed Army Advisors to transition from continually retraining on basic skills due to Soldier turnover to more complex training efforts, such as integration of ISR and synchronization of operations and intelligence.

After adjusting from a 25 week Ranger School training plan to a more efficient 17 week POI, AWG and SF-J sought to expand the professionalism of the course and increase

the level of US and Jordanian partnerships through a Ranger Instructor exchange presented itself. COL Kyle E. Lear, the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade Commander, was extremely supportive of the initiative and deployed two Ranger Instructors to Jordan. The partnership between the US Army Ranger School and the Jordanian Ranger School is significant since it bridges the Operational and Institutional gap by improving the quality of instruction in the course, the Soldiers graduating, and the units that they are assigned. This allows the operational units to focus training on accomplishing the greater mission, instead of allocating assets to entry level skills.



Jordanian Ranger Instructor conducts a class on the use of the M203.

Conclusion

One of the big lessons learned for the Global War on Terror is the power of understanding foreign language, culture, network, history. The Army must learn to expertly apply this lesson in a new era of persistent conflict among a global population with increasingly complex operational environments and dynamic operational variables. As demonstrated in Jordan, forward deployed forces can benefit greatly from outside expertise to bridge knowledge gaps.

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