

## A Systems Approach and the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF)

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### INTRODUCTION

Three premises provide the foundation for the conclusions reached and recommendations offered in this paper. The first is that language, including metaphor used as a frame of reference in social discourse, shapes and constrains human perceptions of reality and the attendant processing of information. The second is that responding to insurgency while conceptualizing it within the frame of reference of problem/solution is not only futile, but counterproductive. The third is that abandoning a linear, problem/solution frame in favor of a complex adaptive system frame (a paradigmatic shift in perception) generates increased possibilities for understanding and successfully countering insurgency.

Human beings conceptualize in order to provide a “logical” framework for rationalizing thoughts and actions. Abstractions are difficult to conceptualize, so human beings use metaphors to reify them and create frames of reference for interacting with others and the environment. Cause and effect are abstractions that, in Western cultures, have for centuries been concretized in linear, mechanistic terms. Within this frame of reference, relationships between people and things are perceived as regular, predictable and fixable: “broken pieces,” such as convicted felons and rogue states, are “causes” of social disorder, which can be remedied by repairing or replacing the broken parts. During the latter part of the last century, however, the hard and soft sciences began converging on a metaphor of complex adaptive system as a more useful frame of reference, especially for coming to terms with the entangled effects of apparently unrelated things such as those encountered in multi-national market economies, human religious behavior and ant colonies.

On everyone's lips is the mantra: “You can't win a counterinsurgency with military might, bring on the civilians!” At the same time, however, phrases such as “the long war,” “persistent conflict” and “the global war on terror” continue to shape discussions of counterinsurgency in the halls of the Pentagon and, increasingly, in the halls of the Harry S. Truman and Ronald Reagan buildings as well. Although the espoused foundation of the counterinsurgency line of reasoning is that civilian, not military, instruments of power are the

only means for achieving success, the discussion and approach are still framed using linear, problem/solution metaphors such as “lanes of operation,” “clear, hold, build” and “unity of command/unity of effort.” US leadership must move away from this self-defeating frame toward a more successful approach to countering insurgency. US leaders, especially policymakers, must attend to this frame-of-reference issue by generating useful metaphors for conceptualizing insurgency/counterinsurgency and avoiding use of militaristic jargon even though the military must be part of the solution and its jargon is handy and catchy.

To effectively counter insurgencies, the US must convene a broad-based, participatory exchange of perceptions and understandings in an analytical process commensurate with the complex adaptive nature of the system within which insurgencies arise. A tool that facilitates this type of process was approved in July 2008 by Assistant Deputy Secretary-level representatives from across the USG. This tool is known as the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) and this paper discusses how the ICAF can be applied to analyze and thus establish useful frames of reference for countering insurgencies.

### COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS AND A PROBLEM-SOLVING FRAME

A complex, adaptive system metaphor disallows the often relied upon problem/solution frame that a system may be broken (the problem) and in need of repair to restore order (the solution). Policymakers, war-fighters and international development specialists act at their own peril when attempting to counter an insurgency from the perspective of this false possibility. Sending “repairmen” – military or civilian – to “fix” a system perceived to be “broken” engages a complex adaptive system in unintended and surprising ways. Such was the collective experience when activities intended to eliminate government corruption and constrain wide-spread criminal activities in Iraq released an unexpected spate of sectarian violence. While a linear, problem/solution frame of reference is more familiar and seems easier to execute, there is now, if there was not before, enough evidence to persuade that doing so threatens the US ability to achieve its goal of national security. Currently, the counter insurgency problem is framed as: 1) a threat to US national security; 2) requiring a response to a foreign government’s request for assistance in strengthening its legitimacy and effectiveness with its national population; 3) against a threat posed by violent attempts to subvert or overthrow it. No successful or workable solution this problem has been discovered or designed.

An alternative paradigm or frame of reference within which to consider insurgency is required to enable effective action. The metaphor of a complex, adaptive system may provide that frame of reference as well as an environment within which useful options emerge and become available. It is not possible, however, to productively engage a complex, adaptive system while operating from within the paradigm or frame of reference of problem/solution. Attempts at doing so have resulted in the borrowing of a phrase coined to describe problems that seem to have no workable solutions, *i.e.*, *wicked problems*.<sup>\*</sup> The US

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\* The phrase “wicked problems” was coined by Rittel, H and Webber M. “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. Policy Sciences,” Vol. 4. Elsevier, 1973. A wicked problem has these characteristics:  
1. No definitive formulation. Each attempt at creating a solution changes your understanding of the

military has adopted this phrase to describe the unintended results of countering insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq: every solution to the problem [of insurgency] exacerbates the problem or generates new, unexpected and unintended problems. While the concept *wicked problem* may shed some light on the phenomenon it describes, it is a limiting concept as it is formulated from within and is understood in terms of the linear, problem/solution paradigm. It cannot, therefore, serve as a metaphor or frame of reference for finding a means to improve the situation. As Einstein famously said, you cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it. From within the problem/solution frame, one frames the problem and applies knowledge, skills and tools designed to solve it; analysis of complex, adaptive systems begins with an understanding of the system, its elements, their relationship to each other and the principles governing system behavior.

Operating within the frame of a complex, adaptive system requires a different set of knowledge, skills and abilities from that required for framing and positing solutions to problems. The complex, adaptive system analyst cannot rely on her or his perceptions, experience and mental acuity alone. An analysis from inside a complex, adaptive system frame requires a group of people with relevant expertise and a variety of perspectives to engage in a structured dialogue. The main attributes required of the participants are a tolerance for ambiguity, a desire for understanding and a modicum of humility. Such an analysis requires a metaphor and an approach different from that currently employed by most commanding officers, senior diplomats and international development program designers.

### **THE INTERAGENCY CONFLICT ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK (ICAF)<sup>†</sup>**

Moving away from the no longer useful, linear problem/solution frame toward a complex, adaptive system frame requires a two-fold acknowledgement: 1) policymakers, war-fighters and development practitioners frequently lack a complete understanding of the complex, adaptive system within which they operate; and 2) a more useful understanding must emerge from the system itself – not simply from the experience or knowledge of US civilians or military personnel. The ICAF assists participants in jointly examining a complex, adaptive system from a complex, non-linear, systems perspective. In this way, it assists participants in

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problem.

2. No stopping rule. Stakeholders, political realities, or resource issues change the end game.
3. Solutions are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.
4. No definitive formulation and no stopping rule means the only success is when stakeholders "feel good enough."
5. No immediate or ultimate test of a solution; solutions generate a wave of unpredictable consequences.
6. Every implemented solution has consequences. Unanticipated side effects are the norm.
7. No well-described set of potential solutions; stakeholders have different views of what is acceptable.
8. Each is unique, decision making must often be delayed until the last possible moment to assure success.
9. Symptoms of other problems; changing constraints and interlocking issues are embedded in a social context.
10. Causes can be explained in numerous ways, stakeholders have varying views on what the problem is, who or what is causing it, and how to resolve it.

<sup>†</sup> A copy of the *Principles of the ICAF*, adopted by the Reconstruction and Stabilization Policy Coordinating Committee on 15 July 2008 is attached.

analyzing a complex, adaptive social system from an appropriate frame of reference; it does not take a linear, problem/solution approach.

The ICAF's underlying methodology has been tested, simulated and applied. During each application of the ICAF, whether in training or pilot test situations, most participants are uncomfortable with this unfamiliar, non-linear approach to conceptualizing and analyzing conflict and instability. As a culture, we are highly motivated to frame and solve problems and describe and plan a "fix". The ICAF process is a pre-design event – it places enormous effort on extracting participants' thought processes from the linear, problem/solution paradigm and engaging them in a process reflective of and compatible with complex, adaptive systems. The result is an improved, because better informed and better thought-through, collective understanding of the situation and basis for going forward with coordinated whole-of-government strategic planning or individual agency program design.

The output of an ICAF is not a solution, nor a plan for devising a solution to a problem. It is, instead, a reliable method of bringing a group of people, with disparate perspectives (*e.g.*, military, diplomatic and development assistance) on a situation to a shared understanding of situational dynamics and forces impelling a society toward conflict or instability (Figure 1). It also brings this diverse group of people to a shared understanding of the social and institutional resiliencies in a country and the dynamics that hold systems in place and provide reservoirs of strength and goodwill among the population that can be encouraged and drawn upon. This has come about through a variety of facilitated group processes allowing for sharing and expanding of very different understandings and perspectives on facts and circumstances.

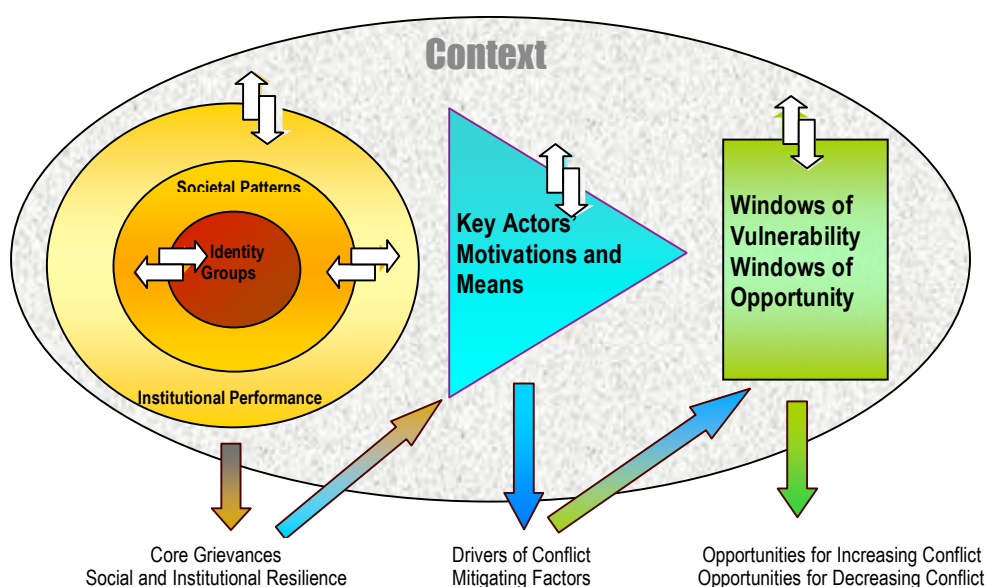


Figure 1: The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF).

## THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS

The component parts of a complex adaptive system are described in the ICAF as: a) Context; b) Identity groups; c) Societal patterns; d) Institutional performance; e) Key actors and their

motivations and means; and f) Windows of opportunity and vulnerability. In the first step of the process, participants identify component parts (a) through (d) and through a facilitated dialogue come to understand how the components interact. Relying on this shared understanding of these interactions, the participants then describe them in terms of various social groups' perceptions that they are being prevented from meeting their basic needs and who or what they blame for that (core grievances). Participants also describe the interactions of these component parts in terms of various social and institutional abilities to meet their needs and help them peacefully resolve conflict or avoid crisis (resilience). In the second step, participants describe the dynamics increasing and decreasing conflict/instability by discussing and coming to a shared understanding of why and how key actors mobilize constituencies around the core grievances or resiliencies. In the third step, participants look into the near-term future to identify expected events that might increase uncertainty thereby providing an opportunity for increasing or decreasing conflict or instability. The framework itself is depicted in Figure 1.

There are any number of ways for members of the US interagency to conduct an ICAF analysis. For example, an Ambassador might request an ICAF facilitator to assist the Country Team in applying the analytical process to better understand the current state of affairs in the country in order to assist them in preparing a coordinated, whole-of-government application for National Defense Authorization Act § 1207 funding. Other applications of the ICAF include one- to three-day application workshops conducted in Washington, DC among various members of US agency headquarters as a standalone analytical effort or as a component part of an in-country weeks-long effort to bring members of the US interagency to a shared understanding of the current on-the-ground situation in country. The process itself is one that can be applied also in conjunction with international partners, host country governments and local and international non-governmental organizations. The specific application will determine the nature, scope and focus of the analysis.

To date, the ICAF has been applied in two different settings, as a three-day application workshop in Washington, DC with between 17 and 30 representatives from various offices of the US interagency with country-specific responsibilities and a three-week field application with 11 representatives from the US Embassy, including USAID, Department of Defense and the intelligence community. The specifics of the process for applying the ICAF may vary according to the setting within which it is applied (*e.g.*, DC or in-country), the purpose for which it is conducted (*e.g.*, achieving a shared understanding of country conditions or preparation for interagency planning) and the individual(s) leading the effort. However, the process of applying the ICAF always includes data gathering, synthesis and analysis and reporting-out of the findings.

## DATA GATHERING

The critical component of the ICAF analysis is the interagency perspective brought to each of these process components. The best approach to data gathering for purposes of interagency application of the ICAF is engaging country-specific experts from as wide a variety of US government agencies with firsthand knowledge of conditions on the ground. Participants in an ICAF analysis supplement their personal and institutional knowledge by reading as much relevant documentation as can be collected and stored on a shared website, including opinion surveys of the population, social, political or economic reports written by government

offices, local and international think-tanks, relevant newspaper reporting and other analyses. Additionally, as a group, the ICAF team may receive briefings from local and international non-governmental organizations, members of the country's Diaspora, and other experts from academia or the development community. Additional methods for gathering data include interviews conducted by the ICAF team members of individuals and groups living and working in the country under analysis.

## DATA SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

Much of the "art" of an ICAF analysis resides in the ability of the ICAF team leader's ability to facilitate the team's presentation, sharing and organization of the data collected. Different team leaders may use different approaches, but large and small group brainstorming sessions are a critical piece of gaining both a revelation of team members' differing perspectives as well as team consensus on a range of shared observations. Thus far, each application has included large and small group efforts resulting in important pieces of data being sorted into the six categories of the ICAF. One particularly helpful method for achieving this was having the ICAF team members capture the key observations made or insights received during the data collection period. This was accomplished by asking each team member to individually write-down a "headline", as for a newspaper story, for each observation or insight, and beneath the headline, three to five bullet points describing some "evidence" in support of the headline.

Following this crafting of "headlines" and "evidence," the ICAF team members, working in small groups, place the headlines/evidence within the appropriate ICAF categories. The placement of each observation/insight within a category is accomplished with the leader facilitating a dialogue that results in agreement about the specific category in which the observation/insight should be placed. The analysis continues with facilitation of a group dialogue that begins to generate a narrative about how the data, now arranged as components of the ICAF, produce the six outputs: Core Grievances/Social and Institutional Resilience; Drivers of Conflict/Mitigating Factors; and Opportunities for Increasing/Decreasing Conflict.

## REPORT-OUT

The report-out of findings has varied from application to application depending upon the type of output requested as well as the objective to be served. One requested output was a single-page statement of the top three foreign assistance objectives for a particular country, another was a statement of potential entry points for future program planning and design, and yet another was a systems map depicting key dynamics (social, political, institutional) likely to be affected by an almost certain future event.

## FROM ICAF TO PLANNING

When requested, the final task for analysts conducting an ICAF analysis is to segue into planning by conceptualizing potential entry points for engaging the USG in the situation

analyzed. Potential points of entry may range from recommendations to policymakers to suggestions for various departments or agencies about types of interventions that might be useful. The results of an ICAF can also be used by planners and others to inform a whole-of-USG approach to engaging in a country or region to minimize conflict and increase stability. Currently, all most all intervention planning and design, military and civilian, is conducted from within a problem/solution frame. Untested, as of yet, is the enormous potential for employing the results of an ICAF in a planning process also predicated on a complex, adaptive system approach rather than the usual problem/solution approach. As discussed above, such a planning process would differ from current problem/solution-based planning processes in the same way the ICAF analysis differs from traditional efforts to describe situational awareness. Planning from within a complex, adaptive system frame would be particularly useful to the US and others who hope to counter insurgencies in helpful and positive ways.

Discussion of how the USG might engage in such planning is beyond the scope of this paper, but the necessary conditions include those discussed above as relating to the ICAF and also an understanding of the principles governing the complex, adaptive system manifesting as insurgency. The principles governing complex, adaptive systems have been described throughout time and in a variety of ways from within various contexts, a brief mention of them is made here:

1. The system is what it is, it is neither positive nor negative (ignoring, misconstruing, discounting/inflating the role of component parts to conform to planners' values is counter-productive);
2. System "component parts" include the unknown and unknowable, planners' tolerance for ambiguity is directly proportional to their ability to understand and successfully engage complex, adaptive system dynamics (it is more useful to include the unknown than to "assume it away" in the form of planning assumptions);
3. The system dynamic is persistent, and it is more efficient to understand and work with it than to attempt to disrupt or reverse it (understanding, beyond simple description or explanation, of system dynamics is required and can be gained by repeated applications of ICAF during design and implementation);
4. Component parts of the system are interdependent and nested (partnership and war are different expressions of the same interdependence, it is impossible to understand or counter an insurgency without understanding the global conditions within which it arises);
5. Thought and action feed and nurture the system, "causes" of system behavior are actually results of inputs from and reactions to internal and external environments.

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## CONCLUSION

Successful countering of insurgency by the USG and other governments requires nothing short of this paradigmatic shift in perception; expanding or retooling existing diplomatic, military and development approaches is insufficient. Recent introduction of concepts such as transformational diplomacy, irregular warfare and conflict sensitive development exemplify the fact that a new frame of reference is a fundamental precondition to successfully assessing, planning and engaging others in pursuit of US national and global security. The ICAF is an approved tool that assists senior- and working-level public servants in abandoning the problem/solution frame and adopting a more useful perspective for interacting with complex, adaptive systems.

The ICAF's policymaking applications include development of recommendations for senior officials in DC and the field compiled by a broad-based group of USG and other experts who apply the ICAF to an emerging, continuing or receding incidence of insecurity, including the destabilizing contributions of an insurgency. For the military, particularly those engaged in "irregular warfare," application of the ICAF assists in framing, assessing and engaging situations from a perspective other than problem/solution, opening up possibilities to genuine, sustainable human security. Applications of the ICAF assist the development assistance community as a way of moving away from contractor-based design and implementation of projects toward joint discovery with local populations the complex dynamics masking available and ready-to-support local resilience sufficient to overcome destabilizing influences.

The ICAF is approved, tested and available for use. It is one mechanism for beginning to move the USG away from the current, counter-productive problem/solution frame into a challenging yet promising possibility of engaging a complex, adaptive system from within.