
Conflict Analysis and Military Planning

Colonel Ellen L. Haring, RES USAR USARC

e-mail: ellen.l.haring@us.army.mil

Colonel Ellen Haring is a US Army civil affairs officer. She is currently assigned as an assistant professor to the Army's Command and General Staff College where she teaches courses on joint, multinational and interagency operations.

ABSTRACT

Military planning doctrine teaches Commander's to develop operational design concepts and planners to operationalize these concepts via executable plans. Military doctrine fails to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of conflict and this failure results in operational campaign plans that do not address the root causes of conflict. Current military doctrine has no method for understanding the dynamics driving conflict and some of the key doctrinal concepts used during planning are grossly flawed. Specifically, the doctrinal concept of center of gravity identification addresses symptoms rather root causes of conflict, thus directing military efforts toward short term conflict reduction measures. The recently approved Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) is a tool that, if used properly by military planners, will significantly improve operational design and center of gravity identification and help the military community conduct operations that will lead to durable and sustainable peace. This paper examines how the military should utilize the ICAF to inform its planning efforts and improve prospects for long-term peace.

"First rule of the game is to see things as they are and try not to create an alternative reality which fits our own narrative."

Dr. Hamid Hussain

INTRODUCTION

Operational design and center of gravity (COG) determination are critical strategic and operational planning constructs for planning military operations. Newly emerging doctrine outlines the importance of operational design and the array of operational problems with increased degrees of complexity facing the military. To meet the increasingly complex challenges, the new doctrine proposes a less linear and more dynamic approach to operational design than previously used. The new approach identifies the criticality of properly framing the operational environment in order to understand all of the adaptive and interactive systems at play. COG determination follows the design phase and is established during planning. COG identification is not new but needs to be updated. Both operational design and planning should immediately incorporate the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework into their cognitive and procedural processes in order to greatly enhance the long-term outcomes of military operations.

Conflict prevention officers, working for the US Government have developed a framework that will significantly reduce the guesswork inherent in operational design and COG determination if applied early in the design and planning process. The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF), approved by the US Government in the summer of 2008, offers a methodology for assessing the causes of parties in conflict or in danger of lapsing into conflict (Figure 1). It is a powerful tool, that if properly applied will better inform the entire military planning process by clarifying the complex and ill-structured nature of the operating environment currently facing military commanders. The ICAF is intended for use by all government agencies in order to “develop a commonly held understanding ... of the dynamics driving and mitigating violent conflict within a country” (ICAF 2008, 1).

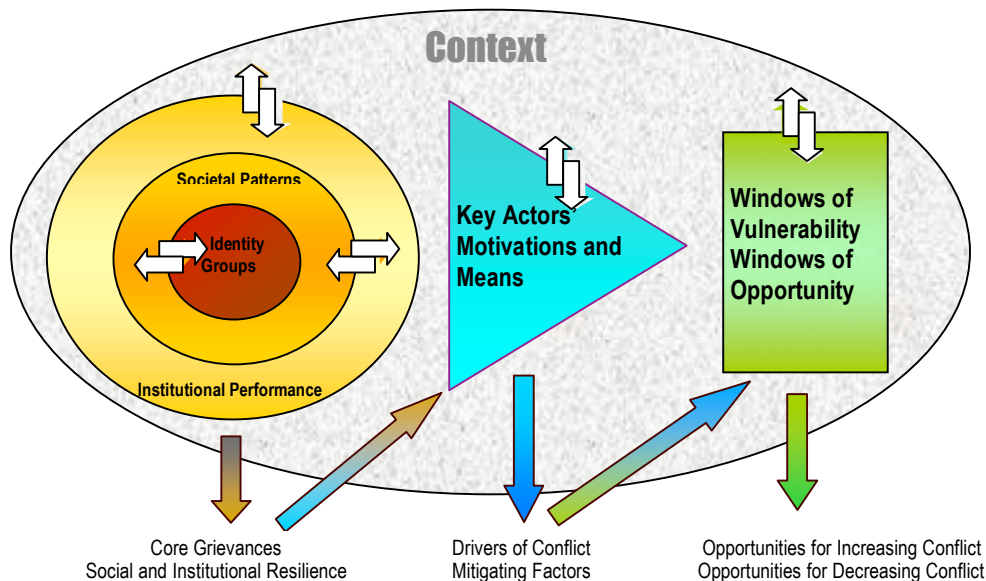


Figure 1: The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework.

A conflict specific ICAF is best developed by a team of regional and country experts from multiple government agencies, the international community and, when possible personnel engaged in the conflict. An ICAF is a “non-linear approach to conceptualizing and analyzing conflict and instability” (Irmer 2008, 3). An ICAF product takes 2-5 days to develop, and once completed the ICAF will have framed the environment and identified critical factors in the conflict that should directly inform and feed design and planning. The Department of State has completed several ICAFs and examples from those products are illustrative of the process and its utility to military planners. A superficial understanding of the framework is required and the ICAF model is graphically displayed below.

The first step in applying the ICAF is to have participants describe the component parts of the framework identified in the model as; a) Context; b) Identity Groups; c) Societal Patterns; d) Institutional Performance; e) Key actors and their means and motivations; and f) Windows of vulnerability and opportunity. Next participants develop an understanding of the dynamic interactions of the component parts listed as a-e in order to identify; g) Core Grievances and Social and Institutional Resilience; h) Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors; and, i) Opportunities for Increasing or Decreasing Conflict. It is the combined interactions of the component parts that yield g, h and i that are the most important in terms of addressing a long term resolution to the conflict (ICAF, 2008, 4-8).

Core grievances include threats to security, identity and recognition as perceived by various identity groups. Every community has social and institutional structures where grievances are addressed by community members. When social and institutional mechanisms function well then core grievances are generally adequately addressed and conflicts are resolved. When they either don't exist, or fail to function adequately then core grievances fester until some catalyst drives the people involved into violent conflict as a means of seeking resolution. The catalyst is generally a key actor who mobilizes a following but key actors can also act as mitigating factors if they are able to channel energy via peaceful means of redress. Finally, there are points in time where events converge that provide opportunities for either increasing or decreasing the level of conflict. Such events may include elections, natural disasters, or economic turmoil (ICAF 2008, 5-8).

A completed ICAF of the long-standing conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese government in Sri Lanka serves to illustrate this tool's utility. The ICAF identified the core grievances of the Tamils as: 1) their need for physical security from Sinhalese police and military forces, 2) livelihood insecurity because they have been barred from tenured lands, and 3) recognition of rights to speak their own language and practice the Hindu religion. Since this conflict developed into a violent insurgency in 1976 there have been a number of key Tamil actors who have emerged to drive the Tamil people to action around their core grievances. There have also been mitigating factors, like the efforts of the Indian government to act as peace negotiators in this conflict. It is important to note that key actors have changed throughout the course of this conflict and that as long as the core grievances remain unaddressed new actors continue to emerge to drive this conflict. The Sinhalese have their own set of core grievances and these too are outlined in the Sri Lankan ICAF (Irmer, 2008, 2-4).

OPERATIONAL DESIGN

The first place for ICAF use in military planning is during the operational design phase. Operational design and problem framing are concepts that have received extensive and in-depth study in the last two years as military officers have grappled with highly complex operational problems. Problem scenarios have been separated according to degree of complexity from "well structured" and easily solvable to "ill-structured", where every problem is unique and dynamic with no fixed set of potential solutions (CACD, 2008, 10).

Operational problems that fall into the ill-structured category require commanders and their planners to take these problems and give them enough structure to develop actionable plans that lead to long-term solutions. As commanders and planners grapple with providing structure to the problem set, the ICAF provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of the systems involved in the problem.

Specifically, the ICAF frames the operational environment and provides commanders and their staffs with actionable entry points as well as potential lines of operation. The entry points are identified in the ICAF as opportunities for increasing or decreasing conflict and they occur during windows of vulnerability and opportunity. Lines of operations should be focused on resolving each of the core grievances. Clearly, it will not be within the capability of the military to address all core grievances but the intent of the ICAF is that it be used as an interagency tool. There will be core grievances that other elements of the interagency are

better suited to resolve but those should be understood, articulated and captured during the design phase.

OPERATIONAL PLANNING

After the commander has structured and framed the problems during the design phase planning commences. Before explaining how the ICAF should be applied to COG development during planning some existing COG concepts must be reviewed because they will be challenged by the ICAF. First, military planners are taught that, generally speaking, a single COG exists at the strategic (national) level and at the operational (theatre) level and that both must be identified before planning commences. COGs can shift or change over time as the dynamic of the conflict changes and when they do, adjustments must be made to the planning effort.

At the strategic level, COG determination focuses on “*military force, an alliance, political or military leaders, a set of critical capabilities or functions or national will*” (JP 5-0 2006, IV-8). At the operational level COGs are “*often associated with the adversary’s military capabilities*” (JP 5-0 2006, IV-8). Next military planners use a set of nested, linear concepts to help understand, isolate and dissect COGs. They are, from top to bottom, critical capabilities, critical requirements and critical vulnerabilities. Critical capabilities are *actions* that the COG can execute in pursuit of their objectives. Critical requirements are the *resources* required to execute those actions and critical vulnerabilities represent *weaknesses* or deficiencies in the resources that are vulnerable to exploitation.

Once a COG is identified it is the planning focus of multiple lines of operations that directly or indirectly target the COG. Lines of operations are planning constructs developed to orient and visualize operations in time, space and purpose. The diagram below is a macro level depiction of the military planning process at the theatre level and it shows how critical COG identification is to achieving the military end state. The military end state supports the political strategic objective with the final goal being conflict termination. Ideally, conflict termination includes the conditions that lead to a durable peace.

US military doctrine defines a friendly or adversary COG as “the set of characteristics, capabilities, and sources of power from which a system derives its moral or physical strength, freedom of action, and will to act” (JP 5-0 2006, IV-8). Once friendly and adversary COGs are identified they guide objective determination and the entire military planning effort. US joint doctrine further emphasizes the importance of COG determination by stating that “this process cannot be taken lightly, since a faulty conclusion resulting from a poor or hasty analysis can have very serious consequences, such as the inability to achieve strategic and operational objectives at an acceptable cost (JP 5-0 2007, IV-8).” Unfortunately, military planners receive few tools to help in COG determination and the result is that it is done via guesswork, conjecture, and debate. The tools that are available are flawed because they direct military planning to focus on conflict symptoms without understanding or addressing root causes.

A number of military officers have put forth methods for determining center of gravity but all rely on a process that is linear, which implies modest structural complexity vice problems that are interactively complex. This current method is fairly successful for

determining COGs when wars are between states but when “war is amongst the people” the complexity of the problem is significantly increased (CACD 2008, 4). A system composed of people is interactively complex and problem solutions for these conflict scenarios cannot be reduced to linear analysis techniques. The COG concept is still relevant but requires a new look.

APPLYING THE ICAF TO COG IDENTIFICATION

Current military doctrine focuses COG identification on “key actors and means” at both the strategic and operational level when it directs planners to focus on “a military force, an alliance, political or military leaders, a set of critical capabilities or functions...” (JP 5-0 2006, IV-8). This doctrinal direction ensures that military planners focus on symptoms of the conflict and away from root causes or core grievances. Targeting the symptoms will yield a short term result when violent conflict is reduced but it fails to address deep seated, unresolved human needs.

As noted in the Sri Lanka example, there have been a number of political and military leaders since 1976 but this conflict continues unresolved. Identifying political or military leaders as centers of gravity is a faulty premise because it fails to recognize or understand the nature of core grievances in conflicts. For the same reasons, identifying a military force or its capabilities as a center of gravity and then focusing on the destruction of that capability will only provide interim relief to the conflict. If, however, interim relief in the form of security is necessary to focus on resolution of core grievances than security should be its own line of operation and become a supporting requirement. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers have gained and lost a host of military capabilities in their quest for recognition but the conflict continues. When wars are amongst the people then the population is invariably the center of gravity for any military operation that seeks to establish long-term peace.

CONCLUSION

The ICAF is still in its infancy and the products and outputs are still evolving. The outputs to date, while useful and very informative, have been difficult to translate directly into military plans. Most of the ICAFs are written in narrative form and there is no prioritization or particular importance placed on core grievances, identify groups, drivers of conflict, etc. To make the ICAF more useful to the military the ICAF development teams need to provide some sort of evaluative structure on the resulting reports.

Most US military design and planning doctrine was written to support military against military in a nation against nation conflict scenario. Many of the design and planning constructs do not account for the operational challenges facing the military in Iraq and Afghanistan today. There are ongoing efforts to update and make our doctrine relevant to the current operating environment and those efforts should include the ICAF. The ICAF is included as an appendix in the recently released Stability Operations field manual but this is not the best location for it because it becomes a secondary consideration rather than the source from which to begin operational design and planning.

When the US is required to operate in conflict environments where there is no conventional fight military doctrine fails to accommodate or even provide the right tools for success. As long as the military continues to focus its design and planning efforts on treating the symptoms and not the sources of the conflict the results will be less than optimal and short term. Understanding, targeting and resolving the sources of conflict will lead to long term conflict resolution and durable peace.

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