

How to Win a Counterinsurgency Campaign

Effective Integration of Assessments and Information into the Planning of Military Operations

By Michael J. Gurney



U.S. Soldiers participate in closing ceremonies for Iron Sword in 2014 in Pabrade, Lithuania. Such exercises display NATO solidarity to target audiences and provide supporting actions for messaging.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Keith Anderson (Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System).

Modern Day Combat Complexities

Modern military campaigns in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have taught U.S. Commanders that tactical level success does not necessarily correlate to strategic level victory. However, as demonstrated in Grenada, Panama, and the first Desert Storm War in Iraq, U.S. forces have proven they can be victorious in short term conflicts. Perhaps the problem is a combination of inadequate assessments and communications strategies. Both have been shown to be important to long term counterinsurgency operations.

Long duration conflicts, such as Counterinsurgency Campaigns, require comprehensive assessments that help refine organizational activities towards unit objectives. To that point, current doctrine mandates assessments be integrated into the planning of military operations.¹ However, many units merely craft assessments concurrent to operational planning. Effective integration must include the nesting of required actions to assessment indicators. In other words, the actions our organization execute should affect the factors that indicate our success. Furthermore, most short duration operations require limited communication with the local populace and are primarily focused on reducing civilian casualties and collecting information. Yet, longer conflicts (most often with high level strategic implications) require in-depth communication strategies that include long term messaging



plans to multiple target audiences.

Assessments and communication strategies are two areas where technological advancement does not guarantee success. As evidenced by U.S. efforts in Vietnam and Soviet attempts in Afghanistan, despite technological superiority, there is no substitute for communicating and influencing the local populace in counterinsurgency operations. Technology can assist with some of the tasks required (communication methods, metrics collection, etc). However, the influence of people is somewhat of an art that, to this day, cannot be mastered by machines. Besides an overconfidence in technology, a clear understanding of “key terrain” is another area of concern.

Conventional warfare assessments of the past primarily focused on Battle Damage Assessment and attainment of key terrain. Historically, key terrain was geographically focused. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, defines key terrain as “any *locality or area*, the seizure of which affords a marked advantage to either combatant.”² However, in his 2010 Senate Confirmation Hearing, General Petraeus inferred that in counterinsurgency operations the key terrain is the human terrain.³ This shift in practical definition provides a challenge to Commanders and staffs in determining their progress towards success. Physical key terrain is not likely to move. As long as a Commander has physical control of the hill he, or she, can assess it as theirs. Comparitively, a populace group can change their minds and quickly withdraw support for friendly efforts. The equivalent of the hill moving from under the troops as they sleep. This means that counterinsurgencies require consistent assessment to keep accurate situational awareness.

Dr. Stephen Downes-Martin, research professor at the Naval War College, conducted a six week visit to Afghanistan to observe how assessments were being conducted. Although its not likely to represent all of the deployed US forces in Afghanistan, some of his observations were:

Overoptimism: There is an institutional drive to produce “Good News Stories.”

Metrics Collection Overload: Inadequate selection of specific and relevant indicators overloads collection capabilities. Some indicators that were considered too difficult to collect were completely ignored.

Lack of Numbers Based Theory: Among several arithmetic issues, indicators were averaged to determine overall progress towards objectives. As all indicators are not equal in terms of their indication of progress, they should be weighed.

Simplistic Color Coding: Simple Color coded graphics without supporting evidence does not provide an accurate perspective and is counterproductive to determining effective adjustments to current operations and activities.

Logic Failures: No process in place to “roll up” assessments through echelons of command and lack of historic data to make accurate comparisons.

No Compelling Combination of Assessments: No credible process to combine the assessments of objectives across Lines of Operation into an overall assessment.

No Compelling Connection between Objectives and Metrics: Most commands do not appear to have a clear connection between objectives and the indicators they are collecting.⁴

To properly assess counterinsurgency efforts we must recognize that an insurgency is a symptom of problematic conditions. Our focus for operations and their assessments should be on removing conditions that insurgents exploit to foster support for their activities. Our success requires a shift in focus from “enemy attrition” to “condition attrition.” There are three important factors to consider with this shift:

- 1) Most of the conditions are linked to the local populace, either directly or indirectly.
- 2) The local populace is subject to their “perception” of the conditions.
- 3) The insurgent threat typically has insight into the long term narratives that guide the local populace perceptions.



These important considerations point to the criticality of understanding and effectively operating in the Information Environment. Essentially, they shed light on successfully handling the key domain in counterinsurgency efforts.

Indeed, a 2013 Strategic Landpower Task Force (SLTF), comprised of senior leaders from the Army (to include the Special Operations Command) and Marine Corps, convened to discuss, among other things, the integration of the “Human Domain” into the planning and execution of military operations to set the conditions for decisive outcomes. The result was the white paper, “Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills.” The document highlights the requirement for identifying and achieving human objectives in the formulation and execution of strategy, operational plans, and tactical actions.⁵ In other words, effective communication strategies are required.

The benefits of an effective Communications Strategy will include well-synchronized and deconflicted messaging efforts. Primarily, because we will plan actions that support our communications plan and that target audiences will observe. Friendly forces should strive to beat the threat when it comes to effective message delivery. Preventing an opportunity for the threat to use effective propaganda by planning, producing, and delivering effective friendly messaging quicker than he does is a preferred method. Counterpropaganda is defensive in nature since the threat got their message to the target audience before us. For this reason, planning messaging as part of the operations plan is critical. Equally important, predictive analysis can assist planners in identifying potential messaging opportunities for the threat and friendly forces.

The development of an Information Operations centric theater campaign plan that uses combat operations and other activities to influence threat elements, populace groups, and other applicable audiences may be the way forward. An effective strategy will need to drive activities and messaging towards improving metrics of developed assessment indicators.

Combined complexities that include varying political landscapes, conflicting agendas of Coalition Partners, the global messaging reach of social media, sensitivities and considerations of numerous populace groups, and a flexible and dynamic threat that effectively adjusts Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) may indicate that outright military victory is an overly ambitious endeavor. Managing the problem may be the very best that we can do. If so, effective assessment plans and communication strategies will be critical to making swift and meaningful adjustments to prevent the threat from outpacing us.

Assessment Framework: Foundation of the Communications Strategy

Assessments help us compare conditions of the past with those that currently exist in order to determine necessary adjustments toward making future conditions equivalent to those listed in the operations endstate. The most important factor in maintaining an accurate level of comparison is ensuring the process stays the same from one reporting period to another. Accuracy is also affected when echelons of command use different assessment methods. As noted in Dr. Stephen Downes-Martin’s observations, it is key that echelons of command are able to feed into each others’ assessments.⁶ Well nested assessments ensure organizations at all three levels of war are working toward the same overarching endstate. The contrary is likely to result in misused resources and operational disconnects with higher headquarters.

It is clear the Department of Defense is trying to improve their efforts. In 2011, the Joint Staff, published the *Commander’s Handbook for Assessment Planning and Execution* in an attempt to lay a foundation for assessments across the force. Some headquarters, particularly those at the theater-strategic and operational levels, may include a dedicated group of Operational Research and Systems Analysis (ORSA) experts that specialize in formal assessments and various assessment products.⁷ However, the leadership and staffs of Brigade Combat Teams, battalions, and companies also need a simple, yet reliable, model that can assist decisionmaking and logically feed into higher headquarters assessments. Despite the employment of skilled ORSA personnel and the publication of the handbook, U.S. forces have struggled with assessing their effectiveness.



An equally important problem exists with communication strategies. As Daniel Nasaw writes in *The Guardian*, Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has criticized American efforts in Afghanistan by writing that the gap between promised improvements and actual developments harms credibility of the U.S. message.⁸ In other words, target audiences are not observing what the messages are saying.

In June of 2010, the U.S. Joint Forces Command published *The Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*,⁹ a non-authoritative supplement to limited communication/engagement doctrine. The publication addresses some of the deficiencies that Admiral Mullen points to by providing process that nests within the Joint Operation Planning Process. However, it is tailored for higher level commands with complexities that may frustrate tactical level Commanders and staffs. Nevertheless, the publication may have made a mark on the communication strategy issue.

In 2012, General John Allen, then Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, addressed participants of the 5th North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Conference of Strategic Communication. In his speech General Allen noted that "information must be treated in the same vein as a component of combined arms, indeed as a weapon." He goes on to state that strategic communication must reach multiple target audiences around the world. He emphasizes four primary elements:

Immediacy: Getting the word out first. However, staying truthful. This relies on swift and accurate reporting and a clear plan on what is to be collected.

Proximity: The message must emanate from where it is most impactful. This requires a comprehensive understanding of each target audience and their relevance to the mission.

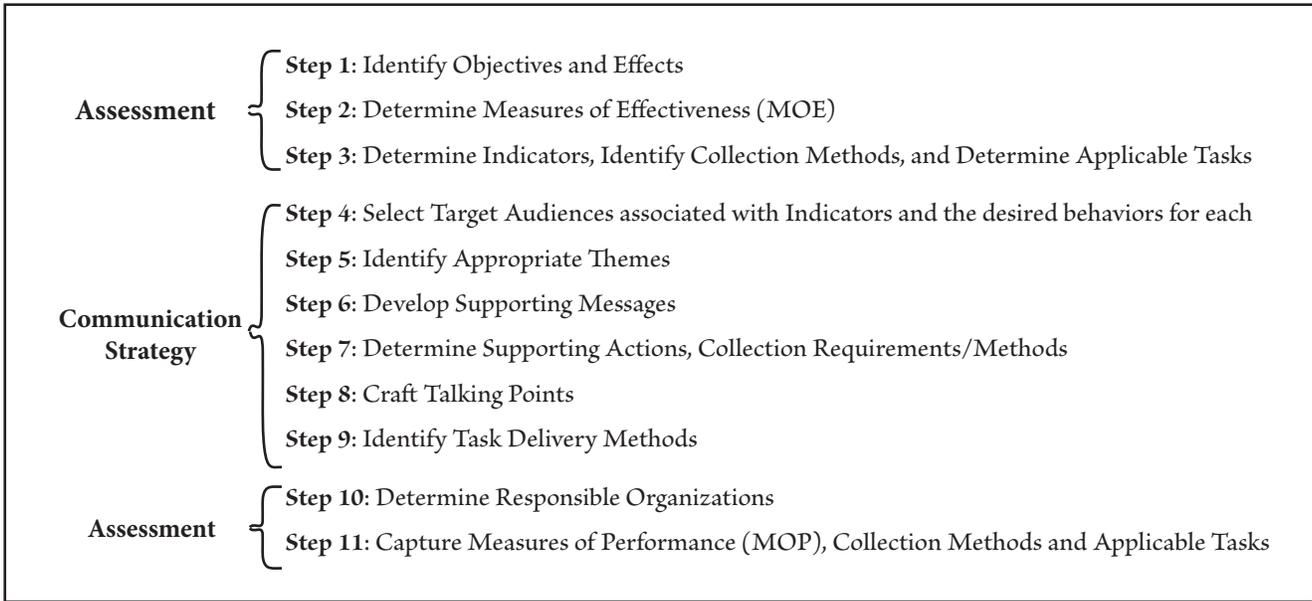
Voice: The message must come from a credible source. Similar to proximity, it relies on a thorough knowledge of each target audience and their relevance to the mission.

Composition: The content of each message must be carefully crafted for each target audience.¹⁰

The content of General Allen's speech indicates that his staff was using a process to develop their messaging. In addition, he notes a level of success through shift of strategic dialogue throughout his time in command.

Certainly, both the *Commander's Handbook for Assessment Planning and Execution* and the *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy* are improvements to U.S. efforts. However, our proposed model differs in that the planning of operations, particularly the development of Courses of Action (COA) and Concept of Operations (CONOPs), relies on the development of an accurate assessment plan and communication strategy. To some extent it is a reverse planning sequence. If we take the time to identify what things will look like when we achieve our objectives (Measures of Effectiveness and indicators), we can focus our actions and messaging on relevant factors.

For our model, the assessment framework will serve as the foundation of our Communications Strategy by connecting our messaging efforts to the established assessment indicators. This will assist planners in developing mutually supporting friendly force tasks and messaging that are likely to positively affect each of the indicators. There are a total of 11 steps in the development of an assessment plan with an accompanying communications strategy.



(Figure 1)

As you read through the steps refer to figures 3 and 4 for realistic examples of threat and populace centric effects for an individual objective. Although one example is provided for each step, real world planning efforts would obviously require multiples. For example, there would normally be more than one indicator for each Measure of Effectiveness (MOE). In Figure 4, MOE 1 is the level of populace support to the District One Government. There are many ways to capture the level of populace support. Indicator 1 lists just one example: the number of local populace participants in District One Shuras.

Step 1: Identify Objectives and Effects: Development of the organization’s assessment plan begins once planners identify unit objectives. In theory, commanders aim to achieve objectives through

Joint doctrine defines an *effect* as the physical or behavioral state of a system that results from an action, a set of actions, or another effect.¹¹

generated effects. Some effects are more important toward the achievement of objectives than others. Therefore, they should be weighed to provide a relative balance during assessments.

By Joint definition, an *objective* is a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable goal toward which every operation is directed.¹²

Planners reduce risks by ensuring Commanders and key staff members have input to the weights and other subjective areas that might present themselves. Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning, The Planner’s Handbook for Operational Design*¹³, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 5-0¹⁴, and

Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*¹⁵ provide additional information on objectives and effects.

Step 2: Determine Measures of Effectiveness (MOE): MOEs are categories in which we will organize our indicators. Planners should understand that not all MOE are equally indicative of the associated desired effect. For instance, an example desired effect might be:

Increase populace confidence in local government

Two appropriate MOEs might be:

- 1) Level of populace requests for government security assistance
- 2) Level of populace participation in government sponsored community events

Although both are indicative of populace confidence in the government, requests for security assistance likely displays a higher level of confidence than participating in community events. The difference would be indicated

FM 6.0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, describes *Measures of Effectiveness* as a criterion used to *assess changes in system behavior* (note the relationship to the “Effect” definition: A physical or behavioral state of a system...), capability or operational environment that is tied to measuring the attainment of an end state, achievement of an objective, or creation of an effect.¹⁶



in the weight of each MOE. The Joint Staff J-7 *Commander's Handbook for Assessment Planning and Execution* and Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations* provide additional information on weighing Measures of Effectiveness and Indicators.

Step 3: Determine Indicators, Identify Collection Methods, and Determine Applicable Tasks:

MOE Indicators are the things we actually count (objective data), with one exception. We will want to include subjective data into our assessment plan to fill in objective data gaps and to reinforce analysis. This would include Ground Force Commander Assessments, opinions of Subject Matter Experts, etc. Planners coordinate with other organizations to share collection results and minimize the burden on their organization.

The Army's FM 6.0 defines *indicators* as items of information that provide insight into Measures of Effectiveness or Measures of Performance (defined later).¹⁷

Planners work to identify friendly force tasks that have potential to influence the indicator values towards success. By weighing the indicators, MOE, and desired effects, staff members can analyze and make recommendations to the Commander based on relative task value towards the achievement of unit objectives. Moreover, these weights provide us with another important consideration to ensure resources are focused on informed decision making and mission success. Some form of Commander's Critical Information Requirements (CCIR) can be established from our indicators. For example, what questions would we need answered to facilitate the Commander's decision to employ capabilities to affect the number of IED attacks on security force convoys in a particular geographic area? An example might be: How does the threat transport IED materials into the area?

Step 4: Select Target Audiences associated with Indicators and the desired behaviors for each

Planners identify specific target audiences that can affect the indicators. Several target audiences may be aligned with a single indicator. It is important to consider that a comprehensive review of target audiences includes threat groups and 3rd party organizations (State Actors, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), etc.). Additionally, planners should identify what the desired action, or inaction, of each target audience will be with respect to the indicator.

Step 5: Identify Appropriate Themes

The next step in the process is identifying themes associated with each of the target audiences and the desired actions/inactions. Themes are an important tool to help planners organize messages. In the same manner that Lines of Operation (LOO) link decisive points to operational objectives, themes provide a critical linkage between objectives, effects, desired target audience behaviors, and the corresponding messages. Ideally, choose 1-4 words that identify the general category for which your team will develop your messaging. Appropriate themes could include "Regional Security Cooperation, Community Development, etc." Since themes are general categories, they also assist planners with understanding which of their developed messages may support higher headquarter messaging. The goal is to identify the basic categories of messaging that are associated with each target audience and will affect each of the identified indicators.

Themes allow planners to organize and relate general categories of messaging with target audiences and the indicators we expect them to affect.

Step 6: Develop Supporting Messages

Developing effective messages across a multitude of target audiences can be a complicated task. Different target audiences may need to hear different messages in support of a common theme. Enabled by social media, the internet, and telecommunications, most target audiences have access to messages delivered to the others. This significantly increases the chances of conflicting messages if adequate deconfliction is not conducted.

As a simple example, looking at a desired effect of:

Increased Coalition Force Support in Afghanistan.



There are multiple target audiences associated with this desired effect. Among other possibilities, there are the international populace, local Afghan leaders, current Coalition Partners, and potential Coalition Partners. Understanding the messages and supporting actions that each target audience needs to hear and observe can greatly increase chances of success. In addition to obvious target audiences, it is important that Coalition Commanders and staffs develop efforts to sustain Coalition partners. Below are two examples of the complex messaging strategy that must be in place in order to sustain long term Coalition efforts.

Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronization*, defines **message** as a narrowly focused communication directed at a specific audience to support a specific theme.

In 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair sold the War in Afghanistan as an opportunity for the UK to solve its drug problem. More than 90% of heroin finding its way to the UK starts its journey in Afghanistan. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise that the responsibility for Regional Command-South was given to the UK, which included the areas of Afghanistan where most of the opium is cultivated.¹⁸ What the UK needed to see and hear in terms of supporting messages to increase support to the Coalition may have had less to do with the number of Taliban fighters killed in action and more to do with the availability of heroin within the UK.

While the UK's purpose was to lower the availability of drugs, Estonia's may have been security related. Estonia is a relatively small country, whose history includes being forcefully incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. In fact, Estonia didn't regain its independence until after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹⁹ What was Estonia's purpose for joining the Coalition in Afghanistan? It is likely that Estonia demonstrated its commitment to NATO in hopes that NATO would return the favor should the Russians threaten Estonia's sovereignty. What did the Estonians need to see and hear in order to increase support to the Coalition in Afghanistan? Based on their history, messaging that highlights domestic security successes as the result of shared intelligence by Coalition partners may have been one effective path.

Examining these examples exposes the reality that maintaining a Coalition is an operation in and of itself and reveal the fact that such messaging needs to be incorporated into the Command's Communications Strategy.

Aside from Coalition Partner considerations, the local Afghan leaders may need to hear and see community projects that improve quality of life for Afghans and reinforce the leader's legitimacy with their respective populace groups.

To add to an already complex situation, the global reach of social media gives each target audience access to the messaging of the others. Thereby exposing any potential conflict in friendly force messaging. This is the reason message deconfliction at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war is so critical.



An Afghanistan national army doctor (left) volunteers his time to treat locals in the yet to be opened clinic. Military participation in humanitarian efforts builds populace confidence in the government.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Jennifer Cohen (Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System)

Step 7: Determine Supporting Actions and Collection requirements/methods

Nearly all effective messaging includes supporting actions that each target audience can observe. This includes both populace groups and threat organizations. Supporting actions are not solely associated with Information Operations Related Capabilities. For example, if our target audience was a threat group and our message was “Your Network is Disloyal,” the target audience may need to see increased successful kinetic operations in order to believe that message. Furthermore, supporting actions can be executed by friendly forces, threat forces, or third party organizations. Friendly forces will want to collect objective data on supporting actions. Later in the process, we will use this objective data to craft talking points for dissemination.



A seizure team from the USS Gettysburg and U.S. Coast Tactical Law Enforcement Team South Detachment 409 capture suspected pirates after responding to a merchant vessel distress signal. These actions deter threat groups, build populace confidence in counter-piracy operations, and justify U.S. actions to the international community. Navy Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Eric Beauregard (Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System)

Collection efforts with regard to supporting actions can support long term exploitation opportunities. For example, let's say last year 70 village members died of Cholera that they contracted through contaminated drinking water. After a friendly force sponsored well project provides fresh water, we could go back after a determined period and find the new metric related to Cholera casualties. Let's say the new metric was 7 village member deaths. This gives us a fresh piece of objective data to exploit. Using this technique, some supporting actions could be exploited well past their normal life expectancies.

Step 8: Craft Talking Points

Talking points prove messages by including objective data that reinforces the supported message. Each message may have several supporting talking points. Talking Points are the portion of the Communications Strategy that is disseminated to each respective target audience. Planners obtain the objective data from reporting/collection methods associated with the supporting actions. Examples could include the number of inoculated villagers during a medical outreach event (friendly), the number of civilian casualties as the result of an IED attack (threat), or the number of villagers receiving medical care by a local government hosted NGO (3rd Party Organization).

Army FM 3-61, *Public Affairs Operations*, describes **Talking Points** as “brief, concise statements of relevant fact that **provide proof of messaging.**”²⁰

The development of talking points offers organizations the opportunity to provide up-to-date “Unit Communication Aids” that ensure all conduits engage target audiences with appropriate talking points. These conduits include patrols, leaders conducting KLEs, Civil Affairs engagements with local populace, etc.



Step 9: Identify and Task Delivery Methods

In addition to developing proper message content, it is important that planners determine the most effective methods to communicate with the target audiences. Target Audience Analysis (TAA) is one of the seven phases of the Joint Military Information Support Operations (MISO) process and helps planners determine effective message content and flow. TAA provides insights on how best to persuade the target audience to change its behavior to one more favorable to US interests. Several documents provide information on TAA including Joint Publication 3-13.2, *Military Information Support Operations*²¹ and Steve Tatham’s Strategic Studies Institute publication, “Using Target Audience Analysis to aid Strategic level Decisionmaking.”²² Planners coordinate the tasking of capabilities to disseminate the talking points based on these methods. Due to the comprehensive nature of the Communications Strategy, Public Affairs is included. However, full compliance with Public Affairs policy is crucial to maintain the capabilities credibility.

Step 10: Determine Responsible Organizations:

Some capabilities and methods exist within different organizations or parts of organizations. For instance, tribal leaders can be engaged through KLEs conducted by unit senior leadership and/or Civil Affairs Detachments. Selecting organizations to perform certain actions prevents redundant efforts and reduces the chances of information fratricide. Planners should identify the different types of organizations that can deliver talking points and their respective target audiences. Furthermore, consider Joint, Inter-agency, Inter-governmental, and Multi-national organizations (JIIM) that can contribute to the effort.

Step 11: Capture Measures of Performance (MOP):

FM 6-0 defines *Measures of Performance* as the criteria used to assess friendly actions that are tied to measuring task accomplishment.

A MOP confirms or denies that a task has been properly performed. When planners find assessment indicator metrics falling below acceptable thresholds, reviewing MOP can help them determine if tasks are being executed correctly. One way to capture MOP is to look at all tasks with respect to:

Location: Is the location of the task the most effective for communicating with the target audience?

Frequency/Amount: Are we communicating often enough to be effective?

Language/Dialect: Are we using the correct language and dialect for the target audience?

Date/Time: Are we communicating at the most effective time of the day or night?

Method: Is this the most effective way to reach the target audience? Is it consistent with how they normally receive information?

Number of Target Audience Engaged: How many members of the target audience actually received our message?

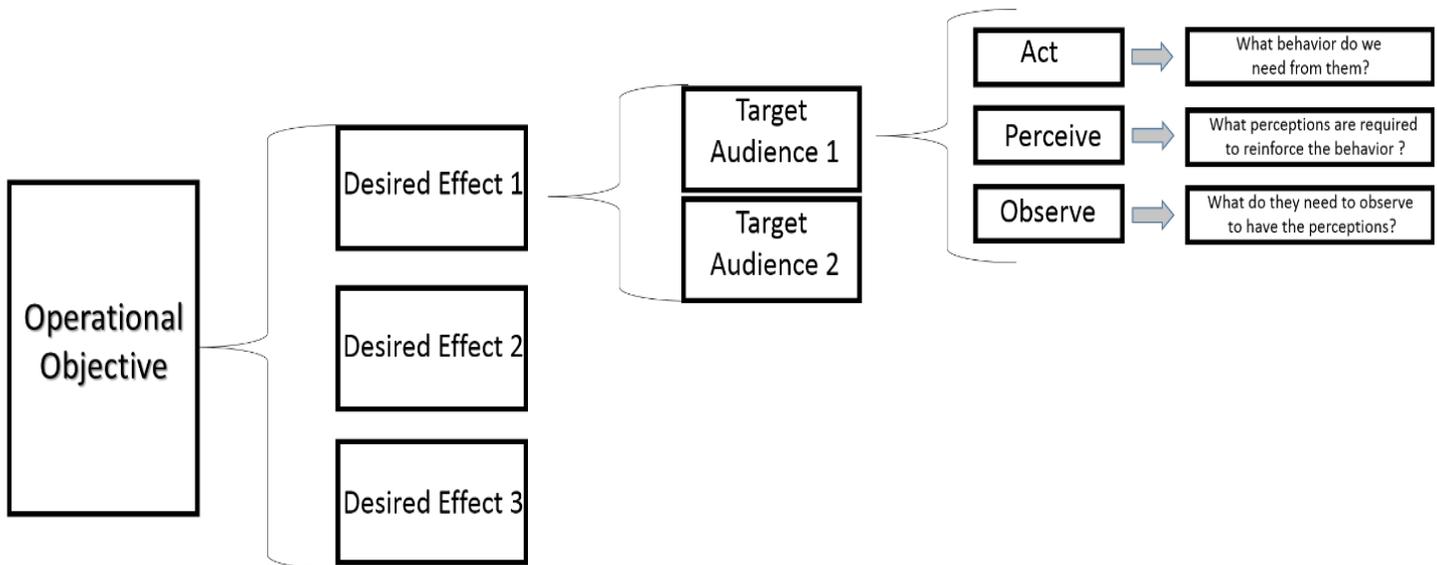
The Way Ahead: Developing an Effective Commander’s Narrative

Military doctrine is beginning to embrace the concept of a Commander’s Mission Narrative that can focus efforts and synchronize messaging. The Commander’s *Communication Synchronization* Joint Doctrine Note 2-13 makes use of the term “mission narrative” once but fails to define it.²⁴ Doctrine provides little guidance on the development of such narratives, the components of a well written one, or the overall suggested structure, etc. The mission narrative should facilitate the orchestration of the subordinate/supporting organization’s actions towards the desired end state. Therefore, there should be a clear standard for developing the Commander’s mission narrative and it should be included somewhere in the base order, or plan, of an operation.

Joint Doctrine describes the narrative as the overarching expression of the context and desired results.²³

Commanders and their staffs can use the proposed Communication Strategy framework to build an effective mission narrative that captures the nature of friendly force activities and explains their application towards success (Figure 2). This, in turn, assists subordinates with planning engagements, increases the chances that communications with target audiences will be effective, and reduces the odds of contradicting friendly force messaging. The narrative describes the target audiences that are associated with each Desired Effect and uses an “ACT-PERCEIVE-OBSERVE” approach for each target audience. First, with respect to generating each Desired Effect: What do we want each target audience to do? Second, what does each target audience need to perceive to cause them to do the behavior? Third, what does each target audience need to observe to support each perception? It is important for planners to consider that not all of the required observations need be non-kinetic. For example, some target audiences may need to see successful kill/capture operations.

Lastly, the narrative describes the friendly force actions that will provide the observables each target audience needs to see. Most of the information needed for the mission narrative can be collected from the Communications Strategy (Figures 3 and 4).



Commanders Narrative Construct (Figure 2)

The Assessment Plan and Communications Strategy

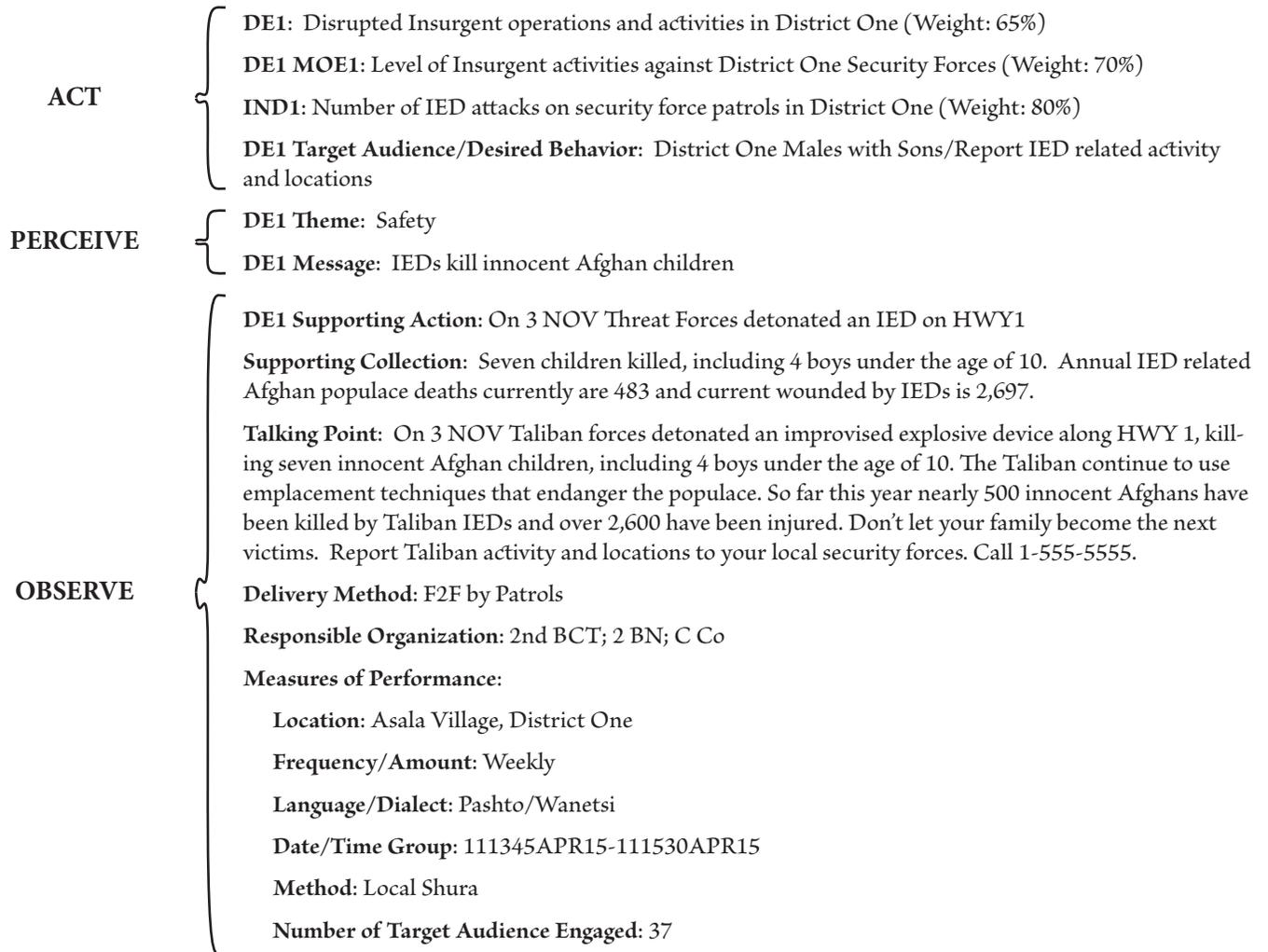
One of the key benefits of the proposed Communications Strategy is that it puts organizations in the offense with regard to the Information Environment. For example, Commanders should not have to pull talking points from their staffs for engagements. Rather, staffs must identify and plan required engagements and talking points based on the developed Communications Strategy.

On today’s modern battlefield, our success will depend on how fast we can make changes to our operations and activities. After all, war is a battle of TTPs. The most adaptive organization is likely to win.²⁵ To this point, U.S. Forces need clearly understood assessment practices that help focus resources, messaging and applicable adjustments towards our objectives.



Threat Centric Example:

OBJ: Stabilize District One

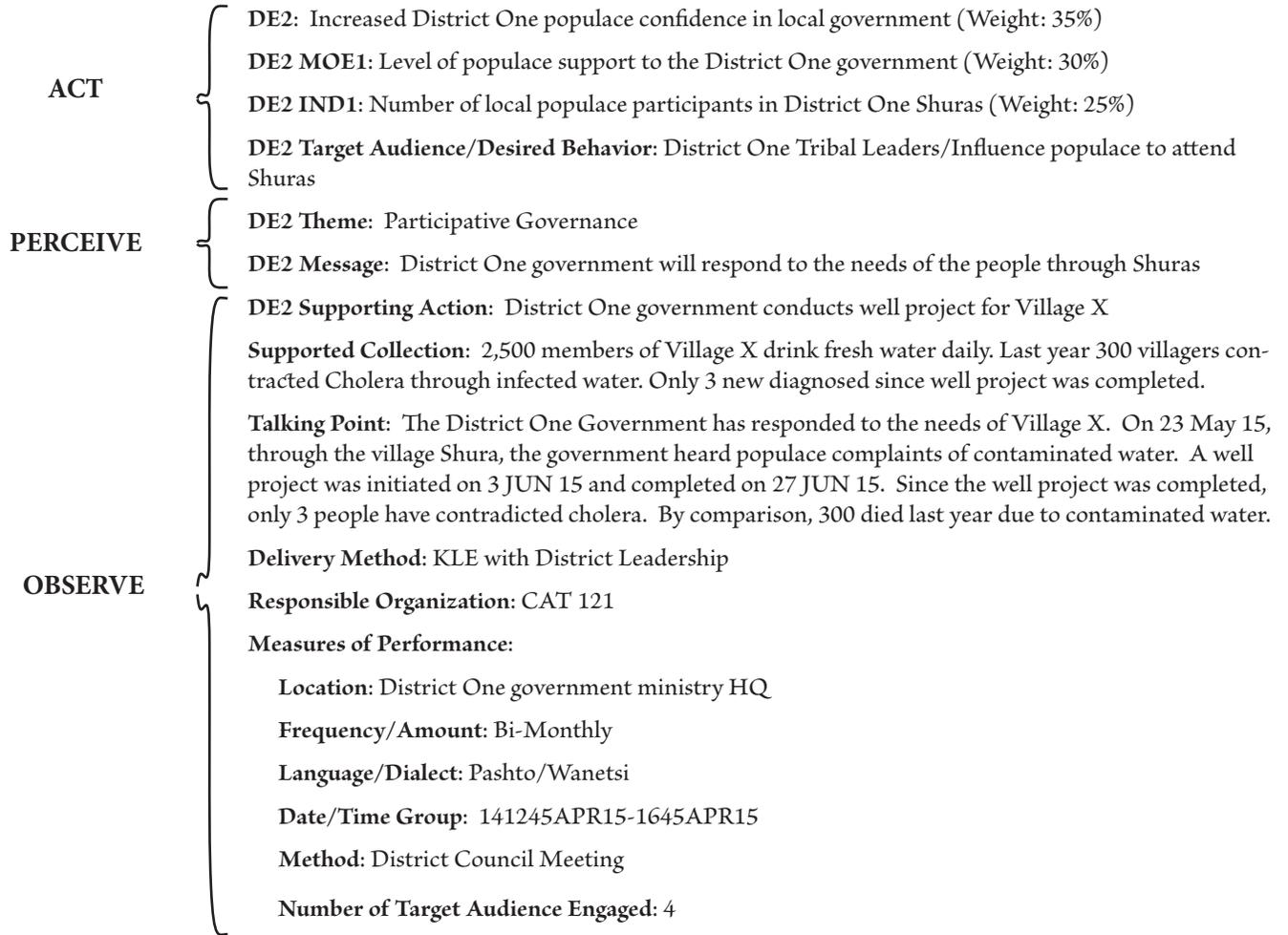


(Figure 3)



Populace Centric Example:

OBJ: Stabilize District One



(Figure 4)

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