Host Nation Information Requirements: Achieving Unity of Understanding in Counterinsurgency

George Franz, David Pendall and Jeffrey Steffen

Introduction

Understanding the complex operational environment in Afghanistan means seeing the local conditions and activities and how they affect people's lives. If the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are truly focused on gaining the support of the people, we must better understand the lens through which the people are watching our efforts play out and we must know what may drive them away from supporting the government. This means understanding not only the nature of the threats to security posed by negative influences, insurgents, and terrorists but also the aspects of Governance and Development that most impact their daily lives. Host Nation Information Requirements (HNIR) is a category of reporting on these critical factors affecting the people in Afghanistan.

More important than the structure of government, the people are most concerned about the extension of governmental services and the ability for their national and local officials to deliver basic necessities and support for a functioning community—to include security. But the operating environment in Afghanistan is much more complex, nuanced and dynamic than answering the question of satisfactory governance- rendering a basic collection of facts, polling data, anecdotal references and statistics insufficient for true understanding within the partnered commands.

The NATO International Security Force- Afghanistan (ISAF) Joint Command (IJC) is instituting a bottom up, inclusive information system to answer key information gaps and assist ISAF and Afghan Partner Commander Critical Information Requirements (CCIR). More than just asking the right questions, the ISAF and Afghan operating forces along with civilian partners in the field, must understand what the answers are that will drive resources and prioritization, providing better insight into the real issues and perceptions at local levels. The IJC has created a reporting system and fusion process to bring this information to the command in a timely, accurate and comprehensive way.

Why now? The Need for HNIR

Things have gotten worse for the Afghan people since 2005. Despite significant financial and security contributions of the international community and from the Afghan people, in terms of dollars, time, and lives, many areas of Afghanistan are now less secure and less governed. The

reasons are likely two-fold: a strategy that embraced COIN concepts but failed to apply it at the operational and local levels, and a near-absence of synchronicity coupled with disunity of effort among ISAF, the International Community and the Government of Afghanistan, to include the Afghan security ministries. These two root problems have been identified by informed and not-so informed observers. The inability to adjust course has been stymied by inertia to change, organizational culture, complacency, in some cases apathy and greed, and perhaps most importantly, an inability to develop, see, share and understand information falling outside traditional information spheres.

The current doctrinal approach to CCIR in a Counterinsurgency (COIN) environment is insufficient to address the key elements that affect the perceptions and support of the population. This information gap hovers directly over the Center of Gravity in a COIN environment—the people's support to the Host Nation Government. With this informational gap, commanders in the past have been served disparate bits of information from across the staff, functional experts, battlefield circulation and special advisors. There was no deliberate mechanism or process to effectively identify, share, analyse, and disseminate the crucially important, population-centric information within the current bounds of CCIR. There must be an expansion or broadening of the definition of *Critical Information*.

The US Army's manual for Counterinsurgency and NATO guidelines emphasize the importance of the support of the local population as both the national government and insurgency vie for power, authority, influence, and active support. With the populace actively supporting the national and local government, the support for the insurgency withers. Careful and deliberate operations further relegate insurgents to the extreme margins of society with no tangible influence over the population. So, if this is the crux of the issue- societal and political competition involving the use of coercive force, then we require a better means to design, collect and assess the critical components of the operating environment that produce a supportive population, and feed that assessment into the COIN operational decision making processes.
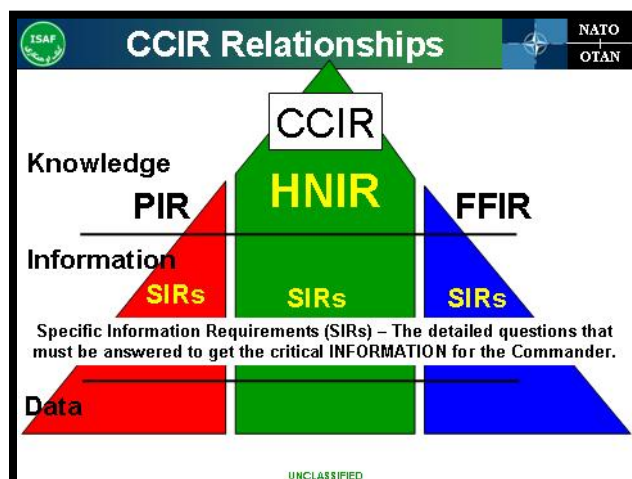
NATO CCIR currently contains three primary components; one is threat-focused, one details the commander's own forces, and the third is oriented on operational security priorities. Closing the information gap between threat forces, commonly understood as *Priority Intelligence Requirements*, or PIR and *Friendly Force Information Requirements,* or FFIR and *Essential Elements of Friendly Information*, or EEFI (NATO but not US Doctrine), is the key to operating effectively in a counterinsurgency. Within this gap lie many answers and the insight to address operational and tactical decisions about where to adjust operations, apply additional resources, engage with key civil leaders, and improve support to essential services. This gap exists because of the many organizational approaches and often stove piped staff processes used to gather information regarding the population and the

civil environment. Said another way- the gap is not there because the information is not available, the gap is there because the information is not viewed as operationally critical information and is not systematically shared, processed and analyzed as part of the CCIR.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) diligently report information about projects, key district leaders, status of infrastructure and "atmospherics." Within the same operational space, US Army Corps of Engineers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Combat Forces, Host Nation partners, and the media all report similar or widely dissimilar information within an alphabet soup of reporting channels and independent information sharing processes. And in the end, the commander and senior staff are left to sort out the answers to some of the most important questions in the COIN environment. Expanding the CCIR to include information gathered on the influencers of the population from within the area of operations and establishing an effective data sharing and reporting system would close this information gap.

The key to enabling the military commanders at the local level in the districts and provinces of Afghanistan is accurately representing their requirements as they *Shape*, *Clear*, *Hold*, and *Build* within their battlespace. These decisions of military but more importantly, civilian capacity-building resource allocation is discussed, prioritized, integrated, and funded in the national- and sub-national working groups. HNIR provides that holistic view of the local operating environment and will empower key leaders with the necessary assessments to negotiate within authoritative working groups that make district-level decisions. Indeed, the IJC must advocate the local commander's district-level awareness across the spectrum of operations into the decision-making processes of military, governmental, non-governmental, and civilian organizations. Only then will the Regional Commands and subordinate elements benefit from the unity of effort across all levels of command and government.

What are HNIRs?

What are they? HNIR represent a commander driven cultural change within the ISAF Joint Command. They are more than just questions— they are tailored and the "right questions" to drive effective population based COIN. HNIR enable the commander to make informed decisions – allow him to more effectively conduct the full spectrum of military and civilian activities that will achieve popular support for government. Information at local levels is systematically collected by organizations across the command, fused, and analyzed to produce knowledge and understanding.

Host Nation Information Requirements is information the commander needs about *friendly nation* institutions or organizations in order to partner effectively, develop plans, make decisions, and to integrate with civilian activities. Depending on the circumstances, information may include the status of provincial, district or local governance, economic development, infrastructure, or security forces. Other examples include:

> ➢ Popular Support – Sympathizers and Active Supporters
> ➢ Population Conditions, Beliefs & Structures
> ➢ Infrastructure, Services & Economy

➢ Governance Development, Capacity & Tactics – Central Government, Engagement / Empowerment of Traditional Governmental Structures, Overall Governance, Power Brokers
➢ Host Nation Security Force Development, Capacity & Impacts – Tactical and Institutional

The scope of HNIR is designed to be comprehensive. These information requirements are far broader than "intelligence", rely on functional experts and integrated processing, and every organization is a potential contributor and "sensor" in the field. The challenge is to harness the staff expertise and information flow to inform the commander and staff so that the context, subtleties and biases inherently important in a counterinsurgency are surfaced and understood.

The intelligence function is an important component in answering the HNIR but the preponderance of information will come from unclassified contributors. The information is available in a variety of reporting processes or can be readily obtained by overt means, and often from non-military sources. Whereas intelligence is usually related to data and specific information an enemy is deliberately trying to conceal or keep secret, the information on the friendly nation characteristics and local circumstances are visible and collectable in the normal course of operations and trust based interaction among partners in a COIN environment. Certainly, there is a place for intelligence collection to provide certain details and discern the existence of deception or bias within the HNIR, but the vast majority of the information is openly exchanged.

Specific examples of HNIR may include:

➢ What influences are inhibiting the extension of governance in district X? (Governance)
➢ Who are the key influencers and community leaders that will determine the right projects for economic development? (Development)
➢ What partnership activities should we take to ensure sustainable freedom of movement for the population? (Security)
➢ What resources are required to facilitate the access to justice for the district Y? (Justice)
➢ What grievances are present and are inhibiting trust between the local tribal elders and the district administrators? (Governance)
➢ Where and when can we enhance the growth of government capacity to serve the population? (Governance)

Understanding with Context

We approached the development of HNIR with a key related question at the forefront of the process design: How can we contextualize the HNIR questions to help our experts identify collectable data and information that will lead to an informed assessment supporting the commander's decisions?

***Examples*:** The number of sitting judges (data point) doesn't matter to the Rule of Law if they see no cases nor make judgments (harder to measure). What would indicate change in the Rule of Law? How about and tribally accepted Informal Justice? In fact, thinking through the judicial question leads to another─ How to assess satisfaction with the judicial system─ formal or otherwise? For instance, while a district may have a full complement of three judges and supporting administrative staff, the population may not assess the judicial system as effectively rendering justice if the judges don't see many cases, are viewed as corrupt, or do not make timely rulings. If a project is being considered for a local community, has that project been approved by local elders and village leadership or is it being pushed from a higher level official without consultation in the community for actual need or support? Are the funds flowing through the province to the district and then to the community contractor? Is the contracted price fair or is the price a reflection of corruption and graft?

While these examples can seem like simple "metrics," and it is true they may serve that purpose, they also provide answers to the fundamental and contextually important questions required to assess the operational environment in terms of seeing the terrain and understanding the perspectives of the population.

The commander must be served with answers to real and complex issues without losing context as data is brought forward and presented as "truth." If the commander is served only with threat informational (PIR) and friendly force information (FFIR), decisions can (and often do) skew toward security operations and leave civil considerations and capacity questions unresolved. If we go too fast in the security line of operations we may outpace efforts in governance and development, leading to unmet expectations and worse yet, failure, in the eyes of the population and we have a net loss in popular support and trust─ creating new conditions for the insurgents to exploit.

With HNIR in place, we can better assess and understand the whole environment and Host Nation capability, thus synchronizing all efforts through HNIR information sharing and ground up, local refinement. The GIRoA governance and security partners, non-governmental partners, provincial reconstruction teams, and ISAF forces that have the boots and "shoes" on the ground will gather and share this information. ISAF Joint Command forces and partners will support and enable a common situational awareness through coordinated and synchronized reporting and sharing of information with Host nation, International Organizations, National Embassy staffs and UN representatives.

> **Why is this different? It is about maneuvering information to the commander. It is about achieving more effective partnership through shared "unity of understanding."**
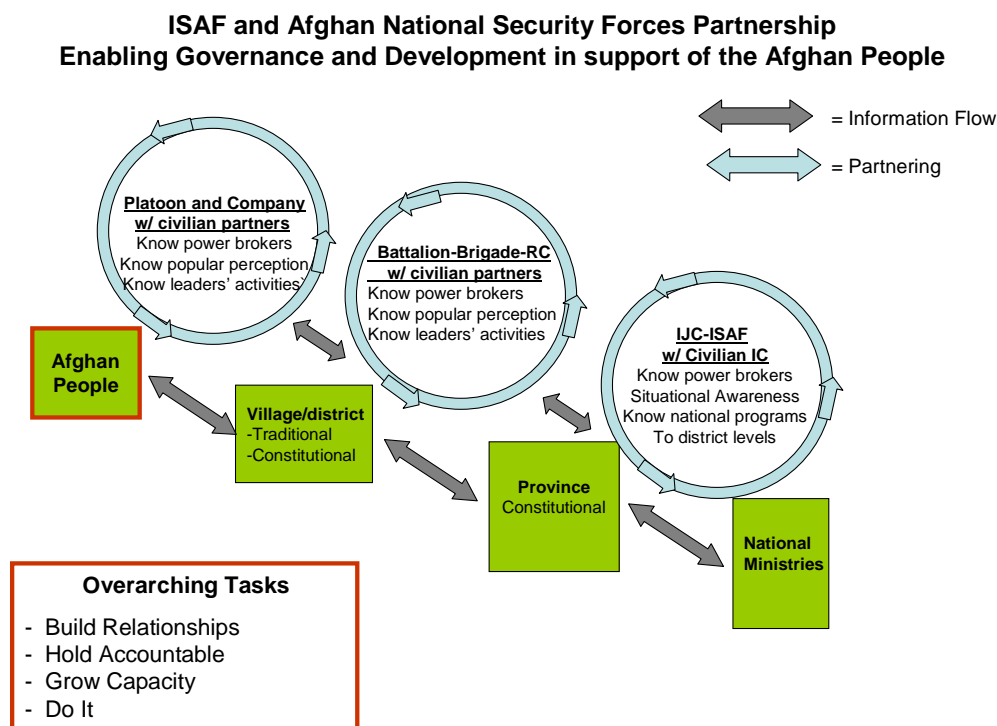
Enabling and synchronizing HNIR integration is a cross-organization, multi-functional, and unity of effort driven task. Full-time and thematic analysis will coalesce at a single location with tethers from the information integration center reaching back to each staff specialty and their experts. This center will rely upon central databases ingesting classified and unclassified information from multiple sources and agencies providing data and assessment at all levels of operations, in and outside the area of operations. This brings challenges of size and composition

smallwarsjournal.com

of the analysis cell and the access to the central databases for all organizations who have traditionally have provided limited horizontal dissemination of data.

The commander, through HNIR, will drive the process which will provide continuous friendly nation analysis essential to effectively executing the operations process. To develop initial requirements and to answer the overarching questions that would best support the commander and decision making process, command intent documents, doctrinal references, interagency studies and ISAF headquarters sources were available, all addressing key aspects of COIN.

Developing an approach to organize, prioritize, and synchronize the development, sharing, analysis, and dissemination of the HNIR started with leveraging the Intelligence Process and following the six adapted Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Synchronization activities: Develop Requirements, Develop HNIR Synchronization Plan, Support HNIR Integration, Disseminate, Assess HNIR Operations, and Update HNIR Operations.

The horizontal integration of HNIR analysis is the key to ensuring current understanding of the nuances and subtleties in the operational environment throughout the staff and the staff integration and synchronization events at the headquarters. Leveraging web based tools for full and open access to assessments and specific integrated staff products will be the basis of effective sharing. A complementary dissemination process will be deliberate dissemination to all organizations, internal and external to the command, based on specific informational requirements.

**ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces Partnership
Enabling Governance and Development in support of the Afghan People**

© 2009, Small Wars Foundation

Enabling the Command: Building the Process, the Team, and Making this Work

Assessing and updating HNIR operations will fall on a cross functional center and working group that reviews the quality, quantity, analysis, and production cycle to ensure the HNIR are answered appropriately for the commander.

Expertise and Partnership. It became clear that each staff element would be able to provide only a portion of the information required leaving the challenge to assign and qualify staff advocacy for each HNIR. This responsibility would require the staff section to validate the HNIR including developing indicators and specific information requirements, ensure collection, ensure data is ingested into common databases for easy access and analysis, and provide subject matter experts to work in and with an analytical cell designed to integrate HNIR assessments across the headquarters.

STEP 1: *Identify Advocacy and Expertise*

- ➢ Within the IJC and ISAF Staff functions
- ➢ Within Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations from both International community and Afghanistan.
- ➢ Within IJC subordinate commands and the ANSF
- ➢ Within professional specialties from both International Community and Afghanistan

Endstate: A fully developed contact network along organizational and professional authorities and expertise to refine HNIR and assist with the development of reporting criteria.

Developing the "Right Questions." Further analysis of the HNIR was required to identify or refine indicators or information requirements across the staff. The first step was to determine which staff element would take the lead at developing and refining indicators based on staff functions and expertise. Experts in the fields may have additional or different indicators that help answer the HNIR. Identifying indicators and developing *Specific Information Requirements* (SIR) became the task of the staff proponent. These indicators and information requirements are analytical tools and describe the information required including both the location where, when, and how the information can be collected and disseminated, outline specific observables that support the HNIR, and establish what must be collected, in what format, and how it is integrated into the information environment. Developing requirements in this complex operational environment, integrating feedback from staff functions and experts across the military and civilian community paints a powerful mosaic across all levels of command and leadership.

STEP 2: Develop and Refine HNIR with Expert and Partnered Input to Produce Specific Information Requirements (SIRs)

- ➢ Develop indicators and SIRs–key analytical tools
- ➢ Describe the information required and may include both the location where and the time during which the information can be collected
- ➢ Outline specific observables that support the HNIR

➤ Establish what must be shared, in what format, and integration into the information architecture

Endstate: A comprehensive list of SIR that drives sharing of data and information that will facilitate greater understanding of the operational environment and support unity of effort with all mission partners.

The parallel effort to develop a coordinated approach to assemble HNIR information started with identifying all the elements that currently or potentially could have access to the required information across the command and staff but more importantly, identifying what other agencies and organizations were potential sources of HNIR-supporting information. This led to a multi-dimensional knowledge management matrix that included Regional Commands (RC), IJC staff elements, higher headquarters, Afghan security and governmental organizations, international governmental organizations (i.e. United Nations), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and all the associated Boards, Bureaus, Centers, Cells, and Working Groups (B2C2WG) developed to support organizational and strategic awareness and operations. Each contributes information at all echelons of command and across all levels of government.

Synchronization and Collection of Information. **T**he IJC developed a HNIR sharing strategy and tasking process that recognizes the need to "ask" rather than "task" for much of the information. This is why unity of effort and senior leadership engaging in peer leadership – beside, below and behind partnered organizations is so important.

Step 3: Link SIR to the Source of the Information

- Identify the organization, element, team or individual who can provide the information, through direction or cooperation.
- Providing access to the information sharing and dissemination architecture to facilitate full integration of information to all mission partners.

*Endstate***:** A synchronized sharing environment that integrates all sources and expertise available to support unity of effort through shared understanding of the environment.

Synthesis and Dissemination. The last step is to ensure synthesis and dissemination of the data, information, and assessments. We must make this HNIR knowledge available across the information environment: this means sharing horizontally across the command, vertically within the command, and externally to other key governmental and non-governmental actors in the operational environment will contribute directly to the unity of effort.

Step 4: Synthesize and Disseminate

➤ Develop a multi-functional environment, enabled by an analytic center, to synthesize available HNIR information across all specialties
➤ Identify and fill information gaps
➤ Share extensively across the information environment to facilitate common understanding of critical "atmospherics"

> ➤ Integrate into staff planning and information sharing events within and without the command

*Endstate***:** Understanding of the Afghanistan operational environment, with district-level awareness, across the spectrum of operations. Sharing the knowledge with all mission partners to enable effective decision-making processes for military, governmental, non-governmental, and civilian organizations.

Conclusion.

As with most processes executed during COIN operations, this HNIR effort will never be complete. The intended outcome of creating an HNIR information sharing system is to increase the understanding of a complex operating environment and to present a coherent, comprehensive common operational picture- not piecemealed and reported as independent packets of data or information.

Based on analysis of eight years of operations in Afghanistan, a new category of critical information has emerged as the central driving force for the IJC commander. The design of the HNIR process is to bring Host nation and population centric information to the forefront of command decision making. The development of an Afghanistan Information Environment will enable a more open and holistic information sharing process ─ recognized across the command and by our partners as critical to developing a shared understanding of the environment, and enabling all partners to cooperate more effectively to achieve positive results. The IJC and its mission partners, in support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, are involved in a complex argument between an elected government and negative influences for the support of the population. As we do those things that most benefit the people of this country, understanding the environment in which they live will be the most critical knowledge we will all need to be successful. HNIR is just one step, albeit an important one for the IJC Commander and staff, in the right direction.

The opinions contained are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of NATO, the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Army.

Colonel George Franz is the Chief, Combined Joint Analysis and Control Element for the ISAF Joint Command, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Lieutenant Colonel David Pendall is the Chief CJ2 Planner for the ISAF Joint Command Future Operations Planning Team in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffery Steffen is Senior Analytic Fusion Chief, within the Combined Joint Analysis and Control Element, in Kabul, Afghanistan.

© 2009, Small Wars Foundation