Shaping the Information Environment in Afghanistan

Understanding and Addressing Counter-Insurgency Information Challenges through Bottom-up, Collaborative planning in the Future Operations Cross Functional Team, ISAF Joint Command

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The information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars, and insurgents attempt to shape it to their advantage. One way they do this is by carrying out activities, such as suicide attacks, that may have little military value but create fear and uncertainty within the populace and government institutions. These actions are executed to attract high-profile media coverage or local publicity and inflate perceptions of insurgent capabilities. Resulting stories often include insurgent fabrications designed to undermine the government's legitimacy.

US Army Field Manual FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5

"An essential and vital part of providing for growth and development is countering the propaganda of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their affiliates, while also empowering Afghans to challenge the enemy."

LTG David M. Rodriguez, US Army, Commander, ISAF Joint Command

Afghanistan from the perspective of an International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) Joint Command (IJC) communicator or information professional: a multitude of languages, tribes and sub-tribes; a literacy rate of only about 35%, and a generally xenophobic population with a preference for face-to-face engagements with associates they trust. These characteristics significantly challenge coalition forces' effective information and communication activities.

Of course, as is usually the case with indigenous people, the Anti-Afghan Forces (AAF) – which include Taliban fighters, insurgents, criminals and, in some cases corrupt officials – enjoy obvious advantages. They live among the people. They know the terrain. They understand the social dynamics. They communicate their messages quickly and effectively in a way that can

resonate with the audiences they know intimately. These are advantages that ISAF communicators simply do not possess.

In Afghanistan, western airborne television broadcasting capabilities, leaflet dissemination, or glossy media products may do more harm than good if they are not thoroughly planned and carefully tailored. Indeed, they might inadvertently serve as ammunition for the adaptable, flexible and responsive enemy propaganda machine.

That environment, the limitations it represents, and other myriad other factors demanded that the IJC FUOPS CFT information and communications planners re-evaluate and redefine more effective ways to approach information operations (Info Ops), psychological operations (PSYOPS) and public affairs (PA).

This essay attempts to share those lessons. It describes how the ISAF Joint Command Future Operations (FUOPS) Cross-Functional Team (CFT) integrates synchronized communications into planning and guidance in the complex Afghan environment. Additionally, in documenting the challenges the FUOPS CFT information communication planners initially struggled with, the essay, as well, aims to provide insight for IJC-bound Info Ops and communications planners and other interested professionals. Here, we will describe our methodology in planning synchronized communications in the 72 hour – 60 day horizon and discuss the factors that contributed to the positive achievements of the team.

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan – the Complex Human Terrain

Right now, the campaign in Afghanistan enjoys the greatest unity of effort, unity of command, and progress that it has seen in over eight years since Taliban were removed from power in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Members of the ISAF Joint Command quickly learn what it takes to conduct counterinsurgency (COIN) at the operational level of war, and they learn how immensely complex counterinsurgency is in Afghanistan, specifically. Central to the counterinsurgency are close partnerships – most often embedded partnerships – with Afghan counterparts. This partnership extends to our Afghans counterparts working to shape the information environment.

Military and civilian members from forty-six nations partner with Afghans from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) Ministries and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) military and police counterparts. The principle that underlines the mission is the collective effort to protect the Afghan people, while establishing conditions for delivery of effective governance services and responsive development projects at the district

December 2009, General Bismillah Mahammadi (pointing), formerly the Afghan National Army Chief of General Staff (and now the Minister of Interior), Director of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance Jelani Popal (to his left), and Deputy Minister of Interior Munir Mangal plan distribution of Afghan and coalition forces in Operation Omid at the Kabul International Airport, Kabul. (photo by LTC Ed Ledford)

level. In the ISAF Joint Command COIN view, it is at the district level where the Afghan people every day see their government – the district governor, the chief of police and his National Police, line ministers.

Thirty four provinces composed of 366 districts comprise Afghanistan. For the counterinsurgency mission – what our Afghan partners describe as OPERATION OMID (HOPE) – an 81 Key Terrain District[1] construct serves as the organizing principle, promotes unity of effort and efficient prioritization of resources.[2] The eighty-one Key Terrain Districts include eight border crossing points, airports and major highways – in short, they represent the population centers, production centers, and commerce routes in Afghanistan. In 2010, the ISAF Joint Command is helping the Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) focus on bringing good governance and development to 49 of those 81 Key Terrain Districts.

The complexity of Afghan communications is understandable: Afghan written languages are adapted from the Arabic alphabet, yet none are related to Arabic. Both Dari and Pashto, the most prolific Afghan languages, respectively include four and eight additional letters that the Arabic alphabet does not have. And because the Arabic alphabet does not use symbols to represent vowels, letter by letter translation from Dari or Pashto to English is literally impossible.

In Afghanistan the population is extremely diversified, both ethnically and demographically. It can be divided into numerous sections by region (to include regional history), tribe, ethnicity, gender, age, education, occupation, urban or agrarian, internally displaced persons, and more. And all these groups are loosely held together by a historically weak central government.

These population segments have a different combination of driving concerns and motivators. Unifying Afghans presents a long-standing challenge, but many of the young, educated professionals and university students with whom the

Light Blue Memories

By Nadia Anjuman (1980-2005)

O exiles of the mountain of oblivion!
O the jewels of your names, slumbering in the mire of silence
O your obliterated memories, your light blue memories
In the silty mind of a wave in the sea of forgetting
Where is the clear, flowing stream of your thoughts?
Which thieving hand plundered the pure golden statue of your dreams?
In this storm which gives birth to oppression
Where has your ship, your serene silver mooncraft gone?
After this bitter cold which gives birth to death –
If the sea should fall calm
If the cloud should release the heart's knotted sorrows
If the maiden of moonlight should bring love, offer a smile
If the mountain should soften its heart, adorn itself with green, become fruitful –
Will one of your names, above the peaks, become bright as the sun?
Will the rise of your memories
Your light blue memories
In the eyes of fishes weary of floodwaters and fearful of the rain of oppression
become a reflection of hope?
O, exiles of the mountain of oblivion!

November/December 2001

Translated by Zuzanna Olszewska and Belgheis Alavi
www.universeofpoetry.org/afghanistan.shtml

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[1] For OPERATION OMID, Key Terrain is the combination of a concentrated population and physical infrastructure that the control of, and support from, provides a marked advantage to either the GIRoA or the insurgents, and includes population centers, production centers, commerce routes, border crossing points, and international airports.

[2] For a more extensive discussion of the ISAF Joint Command combined planning process and the composition of OPERATION OMID, see "The Combined Team: Partnered Operations in Afghanistan" by Colonel Wayne Grigsby and Lieutenant Colonel Dave Pendall, available at http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/442-grigsby.pdf

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team interfaced believed Afghan unity essential, and they think it could eventually happen by helping Afghans focus on things like education and understanding. These young Afghans noted that accepted cultural mores were even more important than religious edicts and certainly more important than the rule of law in many (especially remote) areas of the country.

The many citizens view the Afghan government as corrupt and incapable of providing basic needs. As the government and Afghan National Security Forces slowly build capacity, highlighting their progress is vital in this fight. But managing expectations is equally important.

Afghans have a rich cultural heritage of dancing, art, and music which were oppressed under Taliban rule. Poetry and poets[3] are deeply revered in Afghan culture, and government and community leaders especially prize and respect good oratory skills, sometimes even more than other proven skills. One Herat University professor – who during the Taliban regime organized a clandestine education group for women and portrayed it as a sewing circle – noted that "a line of poetry can put an end to a family problem, even trouble in a village."[4]

Many Afghans have not had the opportunity for much, if any, formal education, yet schools often rank among the top priorities for development, even in the most remote areas: parents generally want something better for their children. One must appreciate and understand these aspects of the Afghan culture in order to develop an effective approach to engage with our Afghan partners.

A New Approach

This counterinsurgency depends on its population-centric strategy. Therefore, information activities primarily focus on the people who can reject the insurgency, not the Taliban or insurgents antagonizing the people. Enabling effective government communications with the people and informing and educating them about achievement, the future, remaining safe, and how to report on AAF are critical aspects of information activities.

Certainly, we plan and conduct conventional synchronized Info Ops targeting AAF in support of operations and counter- improvised explosive device (CIED) efforts, but informing and mobilizing the population to counter AAF are the most important information activities in COIN. Indeed, the Future Operations Cross Functional Team focuses about eighty percent of its effort on the good Afghan people, not on the Taliban or the insurgents. At the tactical level, these percentages may be slightly different depending on the specific situation.

With the vast majority of the information effort focused on informing and mobilizing, the team does not find as useful as one might expect the conventional PSYOPS,[5] Info Ops[6] and PA[7]

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[3] "Light Blue Memories": Nadia Anjuman, a young poet during the Taliban rule (1996 – 2001), who had been gaining a name for herself in Afghan literary circles, died in November of 2005 in the western city of Heart, after being beaten by her husband, according to police officials. See http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/08/international/asia/08afghan.html

[4] Herat University professor Mohammed Ali Rahyab held a "sewing circle" in his home in Herat during Taliban rule, which was really a clandestine school to educate women. See http://www.writing.com/main/view_item/item_id/1654162-Afghan-poet-Nadia-Anjuman-An-elegy

[5] *Psychological Operations:* The primary purpose of Psychological Operations is to influence the perceptions, attitudes and behavior of selected individuals or groups in accordance with NAC approved PSYOPS objectives, to induce or reinforce behaviors favorable to overall alliance. *AJP 3-10*

planning Annexes L, O and X respectively. Instead, the team finds more productive a single Annex that provides all information and communications direction and guidance. Essentially, the team borrows a page from U.S. Joint doctrine, in which the Annex Y provides Strategic Communication direction and guidance for Joint operational plans, and settles on Annex OO (a spare NATO Annex). Annex OO nests well with the direction and guidance our Headquarters at the International Security Assistance Force provides, and it simplifies this command's direction and guidance to subordinate commands. Of course, we remain flexible, and when conventional annexes better support specific operations, we use them.

ISAF Joint Command Organization – the Cross Functional Teams

In typical CJ35 constructs, subject matter experts (SME) work in their functional directorates, primarily focused on functional requirements and supporting operational planning tasks when required, often after initial planning has already begun.

The IJC, designed specifically around the requirements for this counterinsurgency fight, consists of four permanent Cross Functional Teams: the Information Dominance Center

(IDC), Current Operations (CUOPS), Future Operations (FUOPS) and Future Plans (FUPLANS). The CUOPS focuses on the 0 – 96 hours horizon; FUOPS CFT's planning horizon is 72 hours – 60 days, and FUPLANS focuses beyond 60 days. The Information Dominance Center encompasses all these time horizons so that all teams are saturated in knowledge and a situational understanding. The four CFTs promote a significantly higher degree of continuous collaboration and information exchange to plan, execute and assess operational events than would temporary teams, working groups, and operational planning teams typical of two-, three- and four-star level headquarters.

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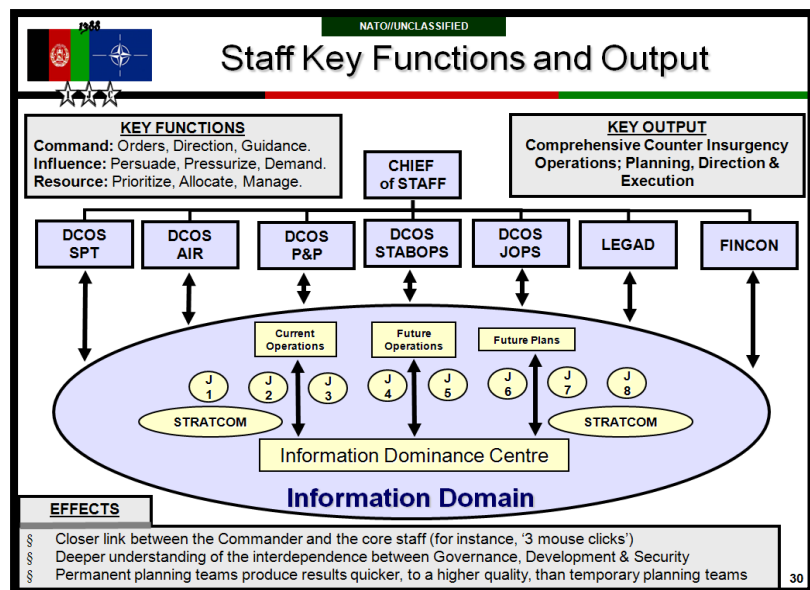
[6] *Information Operations:* Info Ops is a military function to provide advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and other NAC approved parties in support of Alliance mission objectives. *AJP 3-10*

[7] *Public Affairs:* Public Affairs. The aim of public affairs is to protect the credibility of NATO and promote widespread understanding, thereby gaining support for military operations while not compromising EEFI. NATO military PA is the function responsible for promoting NATO's military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance. This includes planning and conducting media relations, internal communications and community relations. Although PA is primarily focused on the need to inform and educate audiences, which results in maintaining NATO public support and hence freedom of action, its impact is much wider. *AJP 3-10*

Functional area SME, or "embeds," are assigned permanently from their functional directorates to the CFTs. For instance, from the Logistics Functional Team, Intelligence Functional Team, or the PA section come permanent team members, or embeds. This embedding focuses the efforts of the subject matter experts in support of operational planning tasks while providing continuous operational situational awareness and understanding and maximizing collaboration in support of the Commander's Objectives.

The challenge with embedding Info Ops and communications personnel directly into the CFTs is that they must have prior planning and functional area experience to be truly effective. The operational tempo at IJC, the wide variety of information capabilities and activities dispersed throughout the Combined Joint Operations Area (CJOA) and the need to work as closely as possible with our Afghan partners, present no time for on-the-job training. Thus it is important to consider the benefits of the traditional structure. First, it provides a better venue for training personnel new to the "graduate level" discipline of Info Ops in the counterinsurgency. Second, the traditional functional team may, if properly staffed, provide concentrated reach-back capabilities for staff detailed planning and synchronization of the various information capabilities in support of operational level planning, execution and assessment.

Top-down guidance and bottom-up refinement collaborative planning in response to Commander IJC (COMIJC) objectives and intent drives the IJC FUOPS CFT. The CFT coordinates with GIRoA and other organizations to develop and refine plans and concepts and to operationalize, coordinate, and synchronize comprehensive counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan. Regionally focused teams focus on – and maintain continuity of understanding of – their specific Regional Command.

The 60-member FUOPS CFT also "owns" the IJC activities synchronization processes, focused on staff and subordinate Regional Commands (RC) Capital, East, North, South, Southwest and West to support Key Terrain District development. The activities synchronization process receives inputs from across the staff, from the RCs directly or through liaison officers, and prioritizes and synchronizes all development -related activities, Key Leader Engagements, battlefield circulation events, and other high visibility engagements. These engagements play a significant role in shaping the information environment and are used almost exclusively as enablers to partnering that helps link the government to the Afghan people.

ISAF Joint Command Information Capabilities

The familiar proverb argues that knowledge is power, and the truth of that proposition endures in Afghanistan. So we generally accept that coalition forces must do a better job of coordinating information activities than the AAF if we are to successfully shape the information environment and influence the behavior of the target audiences in support of military operations.

As in the United States military, other NATO nations employ similar organizations that plan, execute and assess information activities, and they have their own associated policies, doctrines, and tactics, techniques, and procedures. These organizations include Info Ops, PSYOPS, PA, Civil-military Cooperation (CIMIC), Defense Support to Public Diplomacy (DSPD) and Public Information (PI).

In NATO doctrine, Info Ops capabilities include information security, operations security, deception, electronic warfare, physical destruction, Key Leader Engagement (KLE), Computer Network Operations (CNO), CIMIC, PSYOPS and Presence, Posture and Profile

(PPP). Since the ISAF Joint Command represents a coalition that far exceeds the twenty-eight NATO nations, Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3-10 provides direction for our information activities. AJP 3-10 defines information activities as actions designed to affect information and or information systems. According to AJP 3-10, any actor can perform these actions, which include protective measures.

To ensure messages are coordinated and de-conflicted, a variety of teams and working groups, boards and cells that focus on synchronizing the myriad communications activities of PA, PSYOPS, KLE, and others have emerged in NATO militaries over the past few years. These organizations or functions – for example, synchronized communications or strategic communication working groups and coordination boards – often draw on existing staff resources to create new elements to produce guidance, validate, coordinate and prioritize communication and engagement activities, and advise the commander.

The IJC leadership exercises a synchronized information activities process that leverages the existing staff structure instead of creating another new organization. A staff lead is designated as the single point of contact for synchronization of the staff information activities outside the Cross Functional Teams. Inside the Cross Functional Teams, embedded information activities subject matter experts support the information synchronization processes resident in the CFTs.

Establishing IJC Future Operations Synchronized Communications

At the direction of the IJC FUOPS CFT Chief Colonel Wayne Grigsby, the FUOPS Info Ops lead planner established the FUOPS synchronized communications team. The team is comprised of five embedded information and communications SMEs (three Info Ops, one PA and one PSYOPS). The individual team members represent complimentary qualities that enhance the collective capability of the group: for instance, prior to his deployment the PA SME was assigned to an Info Ops organization as a PA planner, and he had been deployed to Iraq twice before being arriving in Afghanistan. One of the Info Ops officers has CIMIC experience and a wealth of tactical expertise, while the two other Info Ops officers and the PSYOPS officer have Joint and Allied operational staff planning experience. Both the PA and lead Info Ops planner have previously conducted strategic communication planning, while three members of the team had information and communications-related assessment experience.

The FUOPS CFT's situational awareness room (SAR) open floor design, with Regional Command and functional teams sitting together, and the inevitable continuous information sharing represents an excellent

Afghan elders in Darqad village of Kunduz Province engage with Afghan National Army Chief of General Staff, General Bismillah Mahammadi, June 2010 (photo by LTC Matt Sult)

environment for devising strategies and developing integrated information activities. Additionally, each RC team has a stability operations (STAB OPS) planner in addition to the DDP STAB OPS SMEs. With a significant number of IJC personnel conducting embedded partnering at various GIRoA Ministries and at the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) headquarters,[8] the synchronized communications team continuously leverages this CIMIC-related expertise and Afghan insight in order to truly integrate governance, development, security and synchronized communications.

The FUOPS CFT is involved in every planning effort, so synchronized communications is part of every planning effort, reaching back quickly to functional team experts for detailed information or guidance, and coordinating with higher headquarters or subordinate counterparts in the regional commands to promote consolidated information activities integration early in the processes.

Well-executed information activities represent a significant force multiplier by helping shape the environment, but they are extremely difficult to plan and to implement while the operational plan is still in development. At the IJC, FUOPS CFT planners work across the staff to support RC requirements for focused COIN operations and KTD governance and development, but they must also prioritize limited capabilities across the entire theater. This reality generates extremely dynamic staff processes as operations and events get close to the FUOPS - CUOPS handoff. Strong relationships with subordinate planners and across the staff, and especially with RC liaison officers, are critical to ensuring specific RC requirements are factored in with the multitude of competing requirements. The Key Terrain District construct helps to prioritize efforts and resources in support of the operation.

Challenges to planning Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA in Afghanistan

A number of challenges to planning and conducting information and communications activities in support of COIN in Afghanistan complicate the effort. First, in comparison to other areas where coalition forces have conducted recent campaigns such as Iraq and Bosnia, there is much less commercial and electronic communication infrastructure in Afghanistan. Therefore, we have to grow capacity across many areas. While we are making noteworthy progress with radio and telephone networks, much work remains. Battlespace owners have to be creative – and we have to help them be creative – generating broadcast capability: sometimes they rig their own antennas and radio equipment just to keep communication lines open in spite of insurgent intimidation of people desiring to communicate with government officials or police. Radio, particularly, is a vital means of reaching audiences, especially outside of urban areas that characteristically have low literacy rates.

In addition to lack of infrastructure capability, there are fewer coalition Info Ops capabilities available in Afghanistan than there have been in other recent campaigns. In some cases, the rugged terrain limits the reach of Info Ops capabilities that might have had significantly greater capacity elsewhere. Airborne broadcast assets – which overcome terrain restrictions – are limited in theater, for example, and since message delivery is not their primary

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[8] For a complete discussion of the origins of Embedded Partnership in Afghanistan, see "Inception and Early Evolution of a Partnership Doctrine: Building Afghan Army Capacity While Fighting a Counterinsurgency" By Lieutenant Colonel Ed Ledford, *Small Wars Journal*, 13 August 2009, available at http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/281-ledford.pdf .

mission, there are also significant challenges to employing them as broadcast platforms. PA and PSYOPS resources provided by some nations mitigate the shortage of Afghan electronic communications capabilities and provide important capacity for helping GIRoA and local community leaders convey messages through radio, television, print and billboards.

Voices of community or village elders and religious leaders at the local level are critical in COIN, and enabling them to inform and mobilize the population is vital to making progress in Afghanistan with COIN. So another significant challenge is the limited number of good Afghan communicators, critical for communicating effectively to the Afghan people. Coalition voices – no matter how well-versed in Afghan culture and issues – simply cannot generate the credibility or influence that Afghan voices do. But even among the Afghan voices, tribal, religious and regional attachments, position, political ties and suspected corruption may impact credibility.

Every region and district in Afghanistan is different, which presents a critical planning consideration and demands detailed information and intelligence concerning the political, social and communications situation. Some areas still suffer the effects of the systematic removal of decision-makers and key communicators who supported the people and the government and contradicted insurgent Taliban philosophy and edicts. Insurgents continue to threaten and intimidate: they intimidate those who will communicate with government officials, the police, and government employees or those working within the communications capability and infrastructure.

Communication capabilities are targeted to deny people the ability to provide tips related to insurgent activity or support to local authorities. We also know from feedback at the tactical level that out of hundreds of daily tip-lines calls, more than half are requests for information that falls into the category of community engagement; less than half are actual tips on insurgent activity: the people yearn for accurate information, and they seem to believe that accurate information does not come from the insurgents but, rather, the Afghan National Security Forces and International Security Assistance Force. These statistics also demonstrate the criticality of the information environment to the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. We need to not only keep working to generate and enable the dialog between the government and the people, but also keep fighting to help provide critical communication infrastructure in place and functioning.

Finally, in any top-down-guidance and bottom-up-refinement collaborative planning environment, paramount is the necessity for the higher headquarters staff to maintain great situational awareness of subordinate planning efforts as they evolve. IJC planners, as well, must anticipate higher headquarters requirements so they can most effectively support the subordinate staff once the plan is finalized.

Information Activities in support of COIN in Afghanistan

The conventional approach to Info Ops at the operational level of war has traditionally been to synchronize the elements of Info Ops activities against enemy leadership, the command, control and communications infrastructure, and critical information capabilities in order to achieve Effects in the information environment. While Info Ops efforts also include reaching "the population" – a population that may very well represent multiple sub-groups – conventional efforts usually remain primarily aimed at enemy decision-makers and capabilities, and, then, secondarily at the population.

In COIN, the Info Ops effort must be primarily focused on the population, and secondarily on the insurgents for specific operations. So, we do not employ many of the Info Ops capabilities available to NATO in traditional and conventional ways, and the overwhelming focus of Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA is on linking the Afghan government to the Afghan people.

The FUOPS CFT synchronized communications team has learned that to support one of the fundamental objectives of our counterinsurgency – connecting the government to its people at all levels – the people have to be aware of GIRoA and ANSF successes. In fact publicizing too widely ISAF successes might be, but is not always, counter-productive. Indeed, to increase their faith in their government, the people have to see and hear about their forces leading, about their government leadership responding to the needs of the people. Sometimes, the last thing we want is for the Afghan people to think that ISAF is in the lead, or even there. On other occasions it is very important for the Afghan people see the long-term commitment of ISAF.

The team has also learned that Afghan-led development and improvement in Afghan capacity are great catalysts to mobilize the people. Afghans want their police to be strong, to be heroes, and over the months since the fall of 2009, as the police professionalism and capability has gradually improved in Kabul, people are beginning to take note of the indications of change they observe. Of course, this positive perception will increase recruiting and retention, though those are second-order, but very important, effects.

In the immediate aftermath of an attack on a shopping center in January of 2010, the police and ANA soldiers arrived on the scene, and while the site was chaotic and disorganized, the television images and radio reports described only the Afghan response efforts – no ISAF forces were mentioned or seen. Kabul residents saw Afghan police rescuing people and keeping people safe – this was a significant message.

In February 2010, immediately after insurgents attacked an Indian Guest house in the Shere Now area of Kabul, the police arrived at the scene, coordinated with other emergency responders, and organized and maintained control of the effort. Slowly, local merchants and residents came out to help with the clean up, which, according to local Afghans, represents a large step toward popular trust in a force the people have historically mistrusted due to police corruption and inexperience.

Expectation management is an important aspect of communication activities, as well. ISAF troops are embedded, are partnering and helping build Afghan capacity every day. While signs of progress are subtle – and while we know that progress will take place before we see the manifestations of that progress, as is the case with any counterinsurgency – those of us working the operation day in and day out recognize that the effort is taking hold, from the tactical level to the strategic, and we are slowly gaining momentum.

Unity of Command, and Unity of Effort

The synchronized communications team recognizes that if we are to achieve the Commander's Objectives in the Afghan information environment, we must completely combine our efforts during planning. Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA have always worked toward the same commander's objectives, but with a different focus. Operational level Info Ops planners generally concentrate their efforts on operational Effects and measures of effectiveness and (supporting) indicators (MOEI), while PA planners traditionally focus on communication engagement activities and measures of performance (MOP). PSYOPS planners routinely focus

on changing behavior through communication. But Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA do not normally work through every planning effort with a unified approach, synchronizing capability employment from the outset.

Some will argue that there are good reasons for the conventional, separate approach to planning and execution – for example, different audiences, different purposes, and the need for PA to maintain credibility with media by providing accurate and truthful information. And, indeed, those are valid and important considerations. But the FUOPS cross functional synchronized communications team recognizes that to optimize information capabilities in this particular environment executing this particular counterinsurgency while achieving synchronized and disciplined messaging, Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA had to be merged together for planning.

The Info Ops planners focus on synchronizing capabilities to achieve Effects and change behavior in support of the CDR's objectives. The PSYOPS planner focuses on conducting National-level PSYOPS to reinforce tactical PSYOPS messaging and achieve Effects in support of the CDR's objectives. And the PA planner focuses on actions and events designed to inform and educate audiences. These efforts are coordinated with engagement efforts at every level, gradually increasing and expanding the synchronization, breadth, depth and effects of information activities. Engagement activities at the regional and local levels – which include embedded partnering, professional partnering, Key Leader Engagements, battlefield circulation and community engagement through security shuras and various jirga events – prove invaluable in building that critical link between Afghan government and their people.

Planning and Coordinating Synchronized Communications – a practical example

The team's first step of establishing FUOPS synchronized information activities was mission analysis against the combined ANSF-IJC operations order (OPORD), titled OPERATION OMID.[9] Effects, MOEI, Target Audiences, Themes, Key Tasks and MOP were developed with a team of FUOPS and IJC experts and approved by the command. This provided the framework for consistent planning and assessment for each regional planning effort that the team supported. Figure 1, below, provides a glimpse at the framework plan, as an example. The information planning effort resulted in six Effects with associated MOEI, 14 Target Audiences (and many more sub-audiences) with associated messages, and 37 key

Figure 1. Framework for FUOPS Synchronized Communications Example

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[9] OPERATION OMID (*omid* Dari for *hope*) was conceived and planned with Afghan planners in the lead over the course of some fifty days at the Ministry of Defense National Military Coordination Center (NMCC), briefed by Afghan planners to Afghan National Security Force leadership, in Dari. Likewise, the Key Terrain District construct central to OP OMID is an Afghan concept, planning with our coalition planners.

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Tasks with associated MOP.

To gather the detailed information required to support synchronized information planning, the team reached back to the Information Dominance Cell through the FUOPS embedded intelligence SMEs, and the PSYOPS officer reached back to his Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (CJPOTF) target analysis and assessment sources at ISAF Headquarters for detailed information on the opinions and concerns of Afghans across the CJOA. While specific PA, PSYOPS or Info Ops tasks and guidance were managed by the appropriate SME reaching back to the appropriate functional directorate, the team as a rule worked together, sharing information and synchronizing the overarching plan.

Over the course of three weeks, the FUOPS synchronized communications team conducted all planning efforts as a group in order to develop cohesiveness and establish an approved framework. The team then began to split up to more effectively participate in the growing number of planning events and key briefings. The team incorporated several weekly synchronized communications planning sessions into the battle rhythm in order to maintain product and approach consistency. This method also ensured coordinated individual functional area or specific Info Ops element input – such as PA, PSYOPS, OPSEC – in support of 15 diverse planning efforts spanning five different regions[10] from February – June 2010. The PA planner, for example, would identify appropriate PA activities to support the specific effort or event, such as an Afghan-led ISAF supported press conference. Then the PA planner coordinated with his functional directorate (PA) and Afghan counterparts to implement the plan. The team members achieved a degree of information and idea sharing that none had previously experienced across Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA.

The Info Ops, PA and PSYOPS planners physically sat together in an area of the FUOPS CFT SAR, continuously exchanging raw data and incoming products from their particular functional areas. The continuous interaction and group approach to planning led to PA and Info Ops planners gaining a dedicated PSYOPS perspective, and vice versa. It also led to each of the SMEs being able to cover for the others in planning sessions, and all being equally accessible for answers to functional area questions of fellow FUOPS operational planners. Eventually the cross-pollination led to functional leaders from PA, PSYOPS and Info Ops discussing functional issues with anyone on the team or with the team as a whole.

Clearly, this sort of information sharing and situational understanding vastly accelerates the ability of the Cross Functional Team to develop effective plans.

The team coordinated closely with IDLG and Regional Command counterparts and across those staffs to develop a product detailing the information environment, the ongoing information activities, and IJC information Tasks for each district or municipality as it was nominated, approved, and briefed to IJC leadership district-level development.

Each presentation was nested with the synchronized communications plan and linked directly to the unique local community and local area requirements through the bottom-up, collaborative planning with RC staff counterparts and the IDLG. As the IDLG developed and approved its communications plan with international embassies, aid organizations and ISAF support, the team ensured bottom-up, collaborative synchronization through RC strategic communicators, PA, Info Ops and PSYOPS staff elements.

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[10] As of the 15 June 2010, there are six regional commands, with the addition of Regional Command Southwest.

In some cases the biggest challenge was coordinating with the Regional Command (RC). Each RC is structured differently, and some have limited staff capacity in Info Ops, PA and PSYOPS; they may have assets in their battlespace, but not necessarily have a functional planning representative on their staff. FUOPS synchronized communications team members visited all the RCs during February to June 2010, and had visits from several of the RC Info Ops, PA and PSYOPS SMEs. Even through the team knew these exchanges would be beneficial, the actual value was much greater than anticipated. Everything in Afghanistan has to do with relationships. Appreciating the challenges at the RC level, while helping the RC staff understand how the bottom-up, collaborative process can gain significant resourcing support in support of key operations or events from IJC was the first step to communication and building trust. These visits were followed up with continuous communication and exchange through email, telephone, video-teleconference and Adobe-connect sessions.

Conducting Partnered Synchronized Information Activities

In November 2009, when COMIJC directed operational ISAF forces to partner at all levels and to support from behind, from beside, and from below – but not from the front – Info Ops planners knew that would be challenge.[11] Given the difficulties with conducting Info Ops in their own nations, let alone with then 44 other ISAF nations, many doubters asserted that Info Ops partnering would not be possible any time soon: "There is no ANSF counterpart to work with on Info Ops. How do we explain it? Who do we explain it to? With whom do we engage and partner?"

Necessity being the mother of invention, the FUOPS team determined the requirement to produce Info Ops counterparts in the Afghan structures. Afghan government civilian and military PA and media relations counterparts provided the initial entry point for the team to begin discussing Info Ops related topics. The team met with as many Afghans as possible, to include one fairly consistent group of young Afghan media professionals, to gain insight and perspective for planning information activities in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the group developed Info Ops guidance and coordinated with Afghan military counterparts in the Afghan National Security Forces. The FUOPS synchronized communications team realized that priorities in initial information sharing meetings had to make sense for the Afghan information environment – while not all Info Ops activities were topics for exchange with our counterparts, there were a multitude that could be shared and, what is more, effects were vastly enhanced when we incorporated recommendations, guidance and insights of our Afghan counterparts. The most rewarding aspect of partnering is the shared understanding that builds as a relationship of mutual trust takes form.

The synchronized communications team incorporated information activities in the planning, guidance and war gaming for Kabul Security, as the initial effort to develop Afghan military counterparts. During weekly FUOPS leadership meetings with Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of Interior (MOI) planners, FUOPS synchronized communications team members briefed synchronized information concepts of operations, activities and detailed

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[11] One of COMIJC's most fundamental and critical principles is that through tactical embedded partnering and operational-level partnering, the ISAF Joint Command and subordinate organizations help the Afghans lead, with coalition support, rather than have the coalition take the lead. In this way, we help Afghan leadership build capacity more quickly. This principle has proven true again and again, in both the security and governance lines of operation.

guidance (NATO Annex O). Initially, because of language and cultural differences, explaining the Info Ops concepts to ANSF counter-parts was difficult, often producing little productive response. While Kabul security planning efforts were conducted with a growing and increasingly coordinated ANA, ANP and National Directorate of Security (NDS) team, information activities continued to generate little response during discussions and in response to information requests.

For four months, the FUOPS team worked in with the Info Ops Division of RC Capital to staff ANNEX O (Info Ops) to the Kabul Security OPORD (13 JAN 10) through the ANA (MOD) and ANP (MOI) approval process. The same week that the ANNEX O was finally published (11 May 2010), the lead planner for MOD began the weekly planning meeting with the FUOPS leadership by discussing how we needed to use Info Ops to counter negative messages and potential exploitation by insurgents. This presented the first reference to Info Ops and how it contributes to the fight by our Afghan partners, and represented a significant step for the combined team.

Kunduz Afghan National Army Police and a village elder listen to General Bismillah Mahammadi (formerly the Afghan National Army Chief of General Staff and now the Minister of Interior) discuss leadership principles, accountability and responsibility, and encourage them in protecting the Afghan people and fighting the insurgents, June 2010 (photo by LTC Matt Sult)

A Conclusion

While the ANSF planners may not have fully comprehended all the Info Ops concepts and capabilities we initially discussed – which is understandable considering western definitions translated into Dari – they have proven indispensable to the work of the combined ANSF-IJC team to effectively shape the information environment. Indeed, they are the only true experts when it comes to identifying ways to reach the Afghan people, frustrate and impede the enemy, get inside the insurgent decision-cycle, and determine when our efforts have been successful.

As described, everything in Afghanistan has to do with relationships. Building a relationship with an Afghan counterpart, which is incidentally the only way to develop a professional exchange, represents a long-term effort and investment, but it will pay significant dividends. A year is barely enough time to build productive partnership, and it takes deep commitment and great patience – for the Afghans, as well. But it is worthwhile in ways that go far beyond the job that needs to be accomplished.

And, simply, it is a requirement for durable success.[12]

Over a period of seven months almost anything can be achieved, especially by a partnered collaborative team. In October 2009, IJC was a completely new organization

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[12] Fortunately, programs like the US Department of Defense AF-PAK Hands serve to establish relationships that will continue for years to come in what President Obama described as an enduring strategic partnership.

employing a new strategy for counterinsurgency organized around protecting the Afghan people and synchronized against the Key Terrain District construct. Cross Functional Teams were foreign to the AOR, and so ISAF Joint Command was by definition a prototype organization.

We recognize now that the Cross Functional Team concept has achieved a degree of partnered synchronized communications capability not previously possible. The IJC FUOPS CFT synchronized communications team approached Info Ops, PSYOPS and PA differently than they had done in previous assignments – we had to if we were to be successful.

A growing understanding the Afghan information environment informed by our Afghan partners, the physical proximity of the team members in the situational awareness room layout that forced information sharing and collaboration from among a diverse international group with widely varying experiences, the group planning focus, the commitment to relationship building, the top-down-guidance and bottom-up-refinement collaborative process, and reference to Annex OO were prominent elements leading to the team's success.

As IJC continues to embed, engage and expand partnering, synchronized information efforts will only become more effective in shaping the environment and ensuring credible information gets to the right audiences.

The FUOPS Cross Functional Team improvements more fully integrating information activities to help advance governance, development and security have been noteworthy. But much work remains. We have to more fully and completely develop partnered, combined, synchronized communications in Afghanistan.

And we have to continue to help evolve the operational culture to more actively seek and readily embrace the unconventional approaches to Info Ops in the unconventional situations that define counterinsurgency.

The FUOPS Synchronized Communications Team during the time of this article:
Lieutenant Colonel Tomasz Grudzinski, Polish Army, (Info Ops Planner)
Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gowan, U.S. Army (PA Planner)
Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Manos, U.S. Army (Info Ops Planner)
Major Niels Vistisen, Danish Army (PSYOPS Planner)
Commander Ingrid Rader, U.S. Navy (Info Ops Team Lead)