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Perspective on the Systems Perspective: How Army Special Forces Can Use Existing Systems within the Operational Environment

Michael Longacre

The purpose of this article is to articulate how Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) can use existing elements of the Operational Environment (OE) to accomplish desired military endstates. SOF assets gain marked advantages by indentifying and making use of pre-existing structures within the EO and ensuring the roles these systems play within the EO support our objectives. As a military, we would not ignore or destroy a country's entire road systems and then create a new road network on which to operate our vehicles. Nor would we attempt to conduct a lodgment without using existing sea and air ports. However, as a nation we attempted to support a fledgling state in Iraq by disbanding its existing security apparatus and the Ba'ath party that had previously ran the daily functioning of the government. In contrast, preserving, influencing, and strengthening the social, political, and economic infrastructure better allows us to achieve our aims and fully embraces the "by, with, and through" approach that has made ARSOF so successful.

In order to discuss how ARSOF may use these pre-existing components of the OE, this article first discusses the nature of these components, then explores some specific ways in which ARSOF and existing elements of the OE may support each other.

Target Systems Analysis

Target systems analysis (TSA) is predicated on the rationale that individual target elements combine to create capabilities that are grouped into larger functional systems. A target's ultimate importance is determined by its relationship to other elements within the larger functional system. Therefore, certain targets are more valuable based on their unique roles within the functional process or activity that defines the target system. The process of target system analysis is designed to make these vulnerabilities apparent.

Target systems are composed of components and components are composed of elements.ⁱ Components are the major entities that support the functioning processes of the larger operational system. Elements are the smaller, more intricate parts that allow the component to perform its role within the larger functional system.

Elements and components within a system are connected by nodes and links. “Nodes are the tangible elements within a system that can be ‘targeted’ for action, such as people, materials, and facilities. Links are the behavioral or functional relationships between nodes, such as the command or supervisory arrangement that connects a superior to a subordinate, the relationship of a vehicle to fuel sources, and the ideology that connects a propagandist to a group of terrorists.”ⁱⁱ

Target elements that have a key role in supporting an overall functional target system are special due to the extraordinary effects created by engaging them. If an entire functional system could not function without a particular element, then that element represents a special type of vulnerability. The less redundancy in, or the greater the reliance on, a specific element the more critical a vulnerability it represents. A vulnerability consisting of a single point of failure could be considered as a decisive point.

The destruction of one node may affect the function of an entire target system. For example, an electrical power system is composed of three components: fuel, generation, and distribution. All three components are vital to the system. If a hypothetical country had several coal burning plants (generation) with a robust system of power stations and substations (distribution), but only one coalmine (fuel) with which to power the entire system, then the fuel system is the weak link due to lack of redundancy. The entire power system with could be crippled with a single act against the single coalmine - this single mine represents a decisive point.

The Systems Perspective

Joint Publication 3-0, *Operations*, outlines how we no longer apply systems analysis to just the enemy, we now apply it to the OE as well using what is termed the “systems perspective.” The publication states that a systems perspective “facilitates understanding the continuous and complex interaction of friendly, adversary, and neutral systems.”ⁱⁱⁱ It also states that “joint operations can benefit by a comprehensive perspective of the systems in the operational environments relevant to the mission and operational at hand. Developing a systems view can promote a commonly shared understanding of the operational environment among members of the joint, interagency, and multinational team, thereby facilitating unified action.”^{iv}

This systems perspective is composed of what are termed “operational variables.” These variables are: political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, the physical environment, and time (or PMESII-PT). Using the TSA framework, we can view the OE as a system composed of components that are called operational variables. These variables are connected by links and nodes. The destruction of one link or node may effect multiple operational variables and therefore affect the entire EO across the spectrum of PMESII-PT.

The enemy exists as an additional component within the environmental system. This enemy component may also share links and nodes with the other components within the larger environmental system. This fact is especially cogent in cases where the enemy is not represented by a military (the M in PMESII-PT). In these cases destruction of the link or node may be more destructive to the larger system than it is to the enemy. In these cases we must take steps to

ensure that we do not affect the entire system in ways that are counterproductive to achieving our desired end-state.

Therefore, we must be able to identify not just the effects and conditions that will create our desired end-state; we must also identify effects and conditions that will move us further away from our desired end-state. Identifying these undesired effects and conditions must be identified in planning so that safeguards can be integrated into operational plans. An example of an undesired effect may be inhibited essential services, or the alienation of a religious group, so the affiliated safeguards may be the use of a protected target list that includes power stations and clergy.

Malign Influences within the Operational Environment

FM 3-07 *Stability Operation* defines “drivers of conflict” as “sources of instability that push parties toward open conflict.” They include “religious fanaticism, global competition for resources, climate change, residual territorial claims, ideology, ethnic tension, elitism, greed, and the desire for power.”^v

For example, drivers of conflict in an insurgency may exploit problematic socio-political conditions to further magnify regime liabilities by manipulating the following systems: 1) Public Services, 2) Political Process, 3) Security Forces, 4) Economic Apparatus, 5) Information Systems, and 6) Social Norms. The actors who negatively influence the environment therefore generally fall into the following categories: 1) Public Service Inhibitors, those who disrupt services such as power, water, healthcare, etc. 2) Political Process Inhibitors, those who use actions outside the legal process of government (ie run political goon-squads to intimidate and murder opponents), as well as, those who form parallel hierarchies and shadow governments that administer extra-governmental application of traditionally “governmental” functions. 3) Security Inhibitors, those who derail the security apparatus, such as corrupt police or those who attack police. Those who conduct serious breaches of public security, such as murder, also fall into this category. 4) Economic Stability Inhibitors, those who undermine economic stability through corruption, actions causing un-due inflation, sabotage industrial production, etc., 5) Information System Inhibitors, those who seek to degrade the government’s ability to disseminate information or otherwise degrade faith in government by amplifying regime liabilities and insurgent strengths. And 6) Social Stability Inhibitors, those who seek to upset the standing social norms that reinforce the regime’s rule. The insurgent will attempt to disrupt the above-mentioned governmental functional systems while simultaneously attempting to control the application of these same functions. This goal can be accomplished through disrupting or destroying the government’s system while constructing parallel systems administered by an insurgent parallel hierarchy. However, their approach in many cases will not be the disruption of the above-mentioned systems, but rather manipulating or co-opting them for the benefit of the insurgency. Think of this insurgent approach as the enemy using its own forms of stability mechanisms (as described later in this article).

Specific SOF Contributions

ARSOF, to include Special Forces (SF), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), and Civil Affairs (CA) forces all have unique skill sets that make the use of existing structures from across the full range of PMESII more attractive to ARSOF than to conventional forces. By winning over, or otherwise co-opting, elements that are pre-built within the EO ARSOF make unique contributions to achieving the military endstate. This approach creates a symbiotic relationship between ARSOF and the OE; both benefit from each other.

Existing social structures (the S in PMESII-PT) can act as pre-made parallel hierarchies that exist in addition to a nation's government and that have powerful influence over the environment. Social mechanisms such as religious groups, tribes, political parties, gangs, organized crime, academic elites/ intelligentsia, *etc.* have the leadership, organizational skills, and resources that allow their leaders to galvanize opinions and mobilize resources. These organizations may also provide services that result in great potential to stabilize an environment, or conversely, to threaten a government's legitimacy. The rank and file of these organizations are likely to adopt similar stances as the groups' leaders. Likewise larger society is likely to be influenced in ways that coalesce opinions along similar lines as the social groups'. This proclivity makes the leaders of large social groups "opinion leaders" with larger social influence, in turn, making the minds of such leaders "key terrain" that we would be wise to secure. These leaders are also likely to represent "critical links" in the operational environment. SOF elements have unique analytical tools that may be applied to identify these powerful sociological forces and the individuals who control them.

Key communicators have special significance for ARSOF. Key communicators may be individual persons or may also mechanisms such as print media, and radio or television broadcast networks. The PSYOP programs that meet with the most success communicate with their target audience using the modes of communication on which the target population most depend for information. By identifying these pre-existing systems that represent the I in PMESII-PT, then we can use them to most effectively influence the OE to our advantage.

Military and police systems are also key systems within the OE. SF soldiers conduct Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCETs) with militaries in allied countries and may work with foreign law enforcement apparatuses under certain situations in order to, in part, strengthen our foreign partners. During the Vietnam war, SF units worked with the Montenyard tribesmen to organize their resistance to communist influence in the contested highlands of Vietnam. This example from Vietnam illustrates that an existing socio-military segment within the Montenyard society, and then the larger Montenyard society as a whole became aligned with SF soldiers trained and organized to work with groups such as the Montenyards.

In the case of Unconventional Warfare (UW), SF operates with pre-existing para-military organizations to overthrow an incumbent governmental regime. What is more, in UW, existing illicit organizations such as smuggling networks may be used to help conduct an unconventional infiltration, or assist in unconventional personnel recovery networks. These mechanisms are essential for SF units to operate in enemy controlled territory without logistical support from other US forces.

Choosing What and How to Engage

If a particular target has special significance in multiple areas of PMESII-PT, then targeting it for destruction may be counterproductive in accomplishing the objectives that achieve the desired end-state. This is true even if destroying that target accomplishes certain desired effects. For example, destroying a power station controlled by insurgents may contribute to destroying the insurgent cell that works there. However, if that power station is also important as part of the legitimate economic infrastructure of the country, then destruction of the station will do more harm than good. Another example may be arresting dissident religious leaders. This may achieve some particular desired effects, but also have many undesirable effects that may not set the conditions for achieving the desired end-state due to adverse reactions from the public. In such cases other means are required to reach the desired ends.

In cases where the destruction of a target is counterproductive due to the targets multiple roles within the OE, the concepts of defeat and stability mechanisms may hold the key to unlocking this dilemma.

Defeat mechanisms are applied mainly against an active enemy in combat operations. The four defeat mechanisms are destroy, dislocate, disintegrate, and isolate. Destruction involves directly eliminating enemy capability. Dislocation involves compelling the enemy to react in ways that expose him to other defeat mechanisms. Disintegration involves exploiting effects of destruction of dislocation to eliminate enemy coherence. Isolation involves marginalizing the enemy's critical capabilities or limiting the enemy's ability to influence relevant events.^{vi}

Stability mechanisms are applied mainly to effect civilians in order to attain a lasting stable peace. The four stability mechanisms are compel, control, influence, and support. Compelling involves using the threat of force to impose behavioral change. Controlling involves establishing public order through physical presence. Influencing involves altering opinions and attitudes through non-lethal means. Support involves creating and maintaining conditions in which the other, non-military, instruments of national power may be applied.^{vii}

Stability mechanisms are not "silver bullet" panaceas that can be applied in a vacuum and still deliver the desired effects. Stability and defeat mechanisms are most effectively when they are deliberately employed in a complimentary fashion.

Let's return to the power supply example. Suppose that in a similar case we are counterinsurgents and that the power system in question has sufficient fuel and generation capacity, however, the distribution component is inadequate. The system employs robust diversity in generation plants distributed throughout the country that rely on a diverse array of fuels with multiple sources of each type of fuel creating a ready supply of generated power. However, as determined through public polling, the population isn't receiving the electricity. An analysis of power distribution mapping is compared to economic sectors, or portions of the population that are not receiving power. The analysis shows that the areas not receiving a steady supply of power typically share common stations. Digging a little deeper, further collection and analysis reveals the following: 1) the directors of most of these stations have been threatened,

attacked, or otherwise intimidated by insurgents 2) key station workers have close ties to insurgents, or are believed to be insurgents themselves 3) and that due to tribal affiliations station directors do not follow the orders of the centralized power committee in that they distribute more energy than allocated, or denying power when they should not. In all of these cases, influence over those who control the stations is critical. In terms of PMESII-PT, the power station represents a link between the enemy, economic, and infrastructure systems.

Target Support

The target system that we call the insurgency shares links and nodes with the system that we call the Operational Environment (think PMESII-PT). In other words, the adversarial system exists as part of a non-adversarial system. Links and nodes on which the whole system relies (such as power stations) should be targeted with stability tasks. Whereas, links and nodes that are insurgent system specific should be targeted with offensive natured defeat mechanisms.

The individual targets will have target packets and other end-user products made to support their engagement. Target packs for these complex targets should facilitate the application of stability mechanisms as well as defeat mechanisms. For example, these target packs may illustrate their targets with more traditional targeting products, such as analyzed imagery, link analysis diagrams, points of aim, pictures of the subject of a planned police raid, etc. However, the target packs also include less traditional forms such as the target audience analysis studies prepared by the PSYOP community, or personal dossiers that inform representatives conducting Key Leader Engagement (KLE) of the back ground and motivations of those who they are meeting.

In the case of the power distribution example each individual problematic sub-station is “targeted.” The sub-station managers and workers are engaged through both PSYOP and partnership with advisors, as well as held accountable by a higher head-quarters with the authority to enforce compliance and to punish (tied to the stability mechanism of compel). Some directors are removed from their jobs for their failure to follow instructions; in some cases through administrative actions, in other cases through police or military raids (an offensive task tied to the defeat mechanisms of destroy and dislocate). Military or police forces are sent to both secure the stations from attack (a defensive task tied to the stability mechanism of control) and ensure the directors comply with centralized instructions. Those who hold influence over the workers must also be influenced so that either: they no longer exercise control over them, or decide to influence the workers in a way that benefits the regime (tied to the stability mechanism of influence). Those who attack or threaten energy workers are captured or killed when appropriate (defeat mechanism of destroy), or when kinetic activity is not prescribed, they are engaged through PSYOP. The population is informed through PSYOP about who is really disrupting the power supply. This way, the workers are inclined through honor, pride, implicit threats of loosing face, or confrontation by an angry population to do right by the people.

Conclusion

ARSOF forces have unique capabilities that allow them to utilize existing systems within the environment in ways that other forces cannot. Existing social, political, and economic infrastructure is every bit as important as existing physical infrastructure and therefore must be

preserved, influenced, and strengthened to our advantage. When ARSOF forces apply their unique set of skills to co-opt these elements and apply them to our desired ends, we vastly improve our chances of ultimate success.

Michael Longacre is a Major in the U.S. Army Special Forces with a degree in Insurgency from University of California, Berkeley. He has served three combat tours in Iraq.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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ⁱ Joint Publication 3-60 [Joint Targeting](#), 13 April 2007, p D-1 - D-2

ⁱⁱ Joint Publication 3-0 [Joint Operations](#), 17 September 2006, Incorporating Change 1, 13 February 2008, p IV-4

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p II-23.

^{iv} Ibid, p II-22.

^v Ibid, p I-2.

^{vi} Field Manual 3-07, [Stability Operations](#), October 2008, p 4-8

^{vii} Ibid. p 4-7