The Case for a New Joint Function: Operationalizing the Human Domain through Engagement

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There is no doubt that the United States joint force is the world’s most capable military. From small scale contingencies and crisis response to major combat operations, the joint force provides a broad range of options across the land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace domains to decision makers. However, the joint force has yet to adequately account for the very reason it is applied to solve the nation’s problems – to coerce, deter, assure, and compel populations in the “human domain.” Indeed, influencing populations – peoples, militaries, and governments – is a cornerstone of joint operations; ensuring desired strategic outcomes are long-lasting through enduring changes to human behavior. Introducing a new joint function would significantly improve the ability of the joint force to influence populations.

Joint functions are a means to organize operations to improve force effectiveness. “Joint functions are related capabilities and activities grouped together to help [joint force commanders] integrate, synchronize, and direct joint operations.” Adding another joint function to the current set of six, which is attuned to the human domain, will fill a significant gap in how joint force commanders and their staffs organize and conduct operations. This seventh joint function will consist of those operations which enable transitions between the current doctrinal execution of a theater campaign plan, through any necessary shaping and combat operations, to the “new normal.” Additionally, this function will profess to long-term efforts, like stability operations and building partners’ capacity, which the joint force contributes the preponderance of resources to as part of a whole-of-government approach. To remain capable of full-spectrum superiority in the future, the joint force must operationalize the human domain through a seventh joint function.

The Importance of the Human Aspects of Military Operations: Past to Present

Many theorists recognize the criticality of human aspects of conflict and war. Thucydides posits the causes of war are fear, honor, and interest, all of which speak to irrational, social, and rational aspects of people, militaries, and governments. Sun Tzu identifies human aspects in his discussions on deception, confusion, and spirit. Belligerents can utilize deception, which is the basis of all wars, to confuse and anger each other. Further, skillful warriors avoid attacking troops with high morale. If one takes these ideas to heart, then dismissing the human domain will cause joint force commanders and their staffs to devalue the irrational aspects of adversaries, misread the enemy’s true intent, and ultimately lead to the development of misguided strategy. As Carl von Clausewitz states, war is “composed of primordial
violence, hatred, and enmity … the first of these three aspects mainly concern the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.”[8] Therefore, applying kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities to understand and affect the decisions of people, security forces, and governments are essential to joint operations.

Looking to the past, and conscious of their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. land forces began to formally acknowledge the relevance of the human domain. In March 2012, U.S. Army Special Operations Command published the “Special Operations White Paper,” which defined the human domain as “the totality of the physical, cultural, and social environments that influence human behavior to the extent that success of any military operation or campaign depends on the application of unique capabilities that are designed to fight and win population-centric conflicts.”[9] This white paper also proposed the creation of a seventh warfighting function for the U.S. Army, named “special operations,” to facilitate operations in the human domain and aid capability development efforts. This notion was supported by many of the Army’s senior leaders and they have since advocated for the human domain and the seventh warfighting function, although naming it special operations was viewed by some as too parochial and limiting.

Interestingly, the joint force recently began to identify activities related to a seventh functional area in its future-focused concepts. The Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO) describes how future joint forces, globally postured, combine with each other and other mission partners across the range of military operations.[10] This future operational construct entails specific implications across the six joint functions in addition to a seventh functional area identified as “partnership strategies.” Similarly, the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) describes how future joint forces gain operational access in environments characterized by anti-access and area denial capabilities.[11] While this concept does not acknowledge “engagement” as a joint function, it identifies engagement capabilities, all relating to the human domain, which are essential to the concept’s implementation.[12] For example, the JOAC requires the capability to develop relationships, support regional partners, and improve partners’ capabilities. Since the CCJO and JOAC are intended to drive force development across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P), the next logical and inherent step for the joint force is to include a seventh joint function in doctrine.

In February 2014, the Army Chief of Staff approved the U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement. This groundbreaking concept expands from the Army’s current six functional concepts, all of which closely mirror the joint functions, except for mission command, which generally relates to command and control. The U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement describes how future Army forces “…operate more effectively in the land domain while fully accounting for the human aspects of conflict and war by providing lethal and nonlethal capabilities to assess, shape, deter, and influence the decisions of security forces, governments, and people.”[13] The two broad components of this concept include partnership and special warfare activities. What is important to note is the Army considers its warfighting functions as building blocks of combat power.[14] By definition, combat power includes lethal and nonlethal components, and adding another dimension promises to enhance the Army’s effective application of combat power. To ensure the decisiveness of operations in the future, the joint force must also adopt a seventh function to efficiently project combat power in and through the human domain.

Properly Framing Military Operations: The Imperative for the Seventh Joint Function

Joint functions are applied within the land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace domains to achieve campaign objectives. Each function is applicable to multiple domains. For example, fires capabilities can originate from maritime domain, pass through the air, to create effects on land. However, the one essential element missing from each domain, and from which each arguably derives its importance in military affairs, is the human element. While the human domain is not often explicitly recognized, it
remains the foundational source from which all other domains derive their importance (see Figure 1).
After all, if it were not for humans, the cyberspace domain would not exist, nor would the other domains be relevant. Similarly, although humans live on land, it is they who build and operate the ships which sail and planes that fly. It is within the human domain where joint forces ultimately ensure decisive outcomes. Therefore, joint force commanders and staffs must appreciate that operating effectively in and through the human domain is vital to achieving campaign objectives.

How do joint force commanders and their staffs plan to conduct operations in and through the human domain? Considering the current six joint functions, they attempt to account for those capabilities and activities intended to coerce, deter, assure, and compel enemy and friendly populations. Certainly, cells or “tiger teams” may form ad hoc to address the human aspects of conflict and war, but formally instituting a series of systems and tasks is in order to accurately account for operations in the human domain. These activities will provide an overarching purpose to the application of all other joint functions and thereby enable the joint force to remain dominant in land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace operations.

The future joint force must operationalize the human domain through an “engagement” function. This new function should include those lethal and non-lethal capabilities and activities related to conducting security cooperation, influencing enemies and actors of concern, and ensuring a lasting peace if conflict occurs. Adding this engagement function enhances joint operations by aiding commanders and staffs to integrate, synchronize, and direct operations more holistically. The engagement function applies across the joint campaign phases and across the range of military operations, but it has significance in certain phases and operations and in the transitions between them. A visual depiction of how the future joint force applies power in and through all domains, including the human domain, by means of the seven joint functions is shown in Figure 2. Accounting for all the “steady state” activities and those that take place during the “stabilize” and “enable civil authorities” phases of joint operations within the current six joint functions is nearly impossible, as they are largely focused on the physical components of combat operations. Operationalizing the engagement function will provide the focus the joint force needs to
remain effective across the phases of joint operations far into the future.

Figure 2: Joint Application of Combat Power

Implications of Adopting the Engagement Joint Function

The decision to add engagement to the family of joint functions must not be made lightly. Instead, the joint force must assess the benefits of the engagement function in light of the costs involved. Overall, the engagement function is expected to foster DOTMLPF-P changes, with doctrinal changes coming first. Determining how the engagement function is institutionalized may require years, as intellectual efforts often do in learning organizations as large as the joint force, but the results will pay dividends.

Several significant implications will result from adopting the engagement function. For example, joint force commanders must decide how best to put theory into practice and ensure the engagement tasks are not planned in a stovepipe. Additionally, the joint force must reconcile any existing recommendations to make niches like information operations a joint function. Likewise, capabilities and activities organized under the current six functions, such as civil-military operations, can be realigned to better fit under the engagement function, since doing so will improve the joint force’s ability to plan for, execute, and achieve decisive outcomes. Finally, the joint force must consider defining a new combat power model that captures how the joint force achieves decisive results by means of the seven joint functions. Through a series of joint wargames, experiments, and seminars, these and many other DOTMLPF-P gaps and solutions will become evident. A thorough understanding of all the implications of adopting the engagement function certainly deserves further exploration.

A Seventh Joint Function

The human domain is just as important as those possessing physical and virtual qualities and after 13 years of continuous conflict, most services have begun to conceptualize about how to account for the human aspects of military operations. Indeed, the joint force does more than fight and win the nation’s
wars through physical means. Every day, in every region of the world, the joint force is conducting operations and protecting the homeland by, with, and through allies and partners. When called upon to fight, the joint force is ultimately aiming to physically and psychologically affect people, militaries, and governments. Since the human domain is essential to all operations, the joint force must operationalize it through the engagement function.

Operationalizing the engagement function will better enable joint force commanders and their staffs to apply combat power and integrate, synchronize, and direct the range of military operations across the phases of a joint campaign. Adding a seventh function to the current set requires further study to understand the implications, but ignoring the need all together risks the success of military operations by relegating those capabilities and activities as afterthoughts. Applying the systems and tasks associated with the engagement function will improve how the joint force deters adversaries, compels and coerces enemies, and assures allies and partners. Adoption of the engagement function is vital for the continued dominance of the joint force and its ability to achieve full spectrum superiority in the future.

End Notes

[1] In a military context, and for the purpose of this paper, domains are those physical and virtual environments in which human activity occurs.

[2] The U.S. Army recently defined the human domain as “the cultural, psychological and social environments that influence human behavior to the extent that the success of any military operation or campaign depends on the application of unique capabilities that are designed to influence, fight, and win in population-centric conflicts.” Department of the Army, The U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement, http://www.tradoc.army.mil/tpubs/pams/tp525-8-5.pdf, 36.


[5] Full spectrum superiority is defined as “the cumulative effect of dominance in the air, land, maritime, and space domains and information environment (which includes cyberspace) that permits the conduct of joint operations without effective opposition or prohibitive interference.” Joint Operations, GL-10.


Anti-access is defined as “those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area.” Area denial is defined as “those actions and capabilities, usually of shorter range, designed not to keep an opposing force out, but to limit its freedom of action within the operational area.” Department of Defense, Joint Operational Access Concept, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf, i.

Ibid, 33-34.

The U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement, 11.

Combat power is “the total means of destructive, constructive, and information capabilities that a military unit or formation can apply at a given time.” Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, Unified Land Operations, http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pub...pdf, 3-1 – 3-2.

Security cooperation is defined as “all Department of Defense interactions with foreign defense establishments to build defense relationships that promote specific U.S. security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.” Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf, 235.

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