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The Gray Zone and Intelligence Preparation of the Battle Space

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“As cities grow, many governments fail to provide adequate security, employment, infrastructure, and services... For Army leaders to thrive in these uncertain and chaotic conditions they must be able to understand the cognitive, informational, social, cultural, political, and physical influences that affect human behavior”

- - LTG H.R. McMaster

Gray is used for things that are gloomy, cloudy, dark and grim. It is an ambiguous space. Not easy to visualize, it is cloaked making things beneath not always what they seem. Competitive actions between nations and actors are not always clear. They can be misread, misunderstood, and misleading. There is no denying that a missile hit a target, however, offensive rhetoric, cyber infiltration or a malicious messaging may be interpreted differently by those who send it and those who receive it. Thus, it is often problematic to interpret the meaning of a non-lethal act by friend and adversary alike. In pre and post war, or what is now being categorized as *The Gray Zone*, military intelligence teams struggle to define how to interpret such actions and categorize them as friendly, neutral or threat.

The United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) defines *gray zone* challenges as competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.^[i] The U.S. Army War College combines this definition with “purposeful, high-stakes employment of aggressive statecraft-employing all available coercive instruments-in a deliberate campaign-like persistent pressure and intimidation that achieves war-like ends through ways and means short of open conflict. Grey zone competition is not war by a classical definition but via miscalculation and unintended escalation threatens to transition to open conflict.”^[ii] In this vein, experts often refer to China’s maneuvers to reinforce its claim to a larger part of the South China Sea or Russians blatant annexation of Crimea and its continued military intimidation in Ukraine as Grey Zone competitions. Each trying to justify, legally or ethically why their actions do not constitute a declaration of traditional war.

Gray zone definitions align well with the types of operating environments envisioned in TRADOC Pamphlet (TP) 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept (AOC): Win in a Complex World*. The AOC was written to guide future force development. It “describes how future Army forces, as part of joint, inter-

organizational, and multinational efforts, operate to accomplish campaign objectives and protect U.S. national interests”. It also defines complex as, “an environment that is not only unknown, but unknowable and constantly changing. The Army cannot predict who it will fight, where it will fight, and with what coalition it will fight.” Gray zone environments provide such conditions.

How then, do we visualize, interpret and respond to an action that is not necessarily categorized by war, but may give the impression that an action, such as a cyber-attack, is war without firing a shot. To date, the Army is exploring ways to deter, coerce and influence both State and non-state actors that look to be taking adversarial actions that mimic *gray* actions or the space between war and peace.

War is often interpreted differently. Some nations and peoples do not see it as solely being a time of battle. War for them is the continued competition for place and power regardless of the instruments used to get there. The U.S. perceives these two environments separately. However, as weapons fall silent, it would behoove planners, strategists and intelligence professionals to broaden the understanding of the operational environment.

LTG (then MG) Michael Flynn (retired), articulated the need for the military to build its capacity in the human domain in his 2010 paper, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*:

“Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers – whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers – U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency.”

Although LTG Flynn pointed this out as a failure of the intelligence community, Army leaders now recognize that intelligence alone cannot describe the complex *and ambiguous* operational environment (OE); it requires a full staff effort to conduct joint intelligence preparation of the operating environment (JIPOE). If staffs would implement JIPOE as described in the 2014 joint doctrine, most or all of the frustrations that LTG Flynn described would be mitigated.

To many, this may mean creating a Soldier that reads minds, can easily connect the proverbial dots and get the bad guy. Unfortunately human behavior is not that easy to discern. The human terrain and its cognitive space forces the soldier to concentrate on possibilities beyond lethal engagement.

I remember my first assignment in Afghanistan on a capacity building project. As our team drove into Kabul in our armored SUV, our driver took us on a quick tour, gave us a terrifying security brief and dropped us off at a fortified building where we found ourselves on lockdown. I could not help thinking there was no way to win a war on lock down you need to get out and deal with the people. Living in isolation from the Afghan people was not going to cut it. I needed to make change or go home. In less than a week, my team was on its way up North to work with the Governor’s office in Balkh. We went

straight to the governor and he helped facilitate our work to improve provincial linkages to Kabul and strengthen governance. That trip was followed by ones to Herat and Bamyan, we spent our time building relationships with the governors, met the populations, listened and were clear about what we could or could not deliver to them. Mostly we could not deliver, but our relationships outweighed our limited abilities to influence change. We learned about them. In Iraq, one trip and a long lunch at a chicken farm helped clear the way for our team to hear the reality of Sunni and Shi'ite fears. To date, those relationships continue in trust and friendship.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the forces learned that preparing for the physical domain is not the only answer. After spending millions on primarily physical needs and protections, the "capture or kill" mission merged into one of engagement. Meaning there was a need to understand more in the information environment about what influenced people's thoughts and actions. US Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, employed social science experts to help them figure out the powerbrokers, economics, and collective systems of the adversary.

The OE is not heterogeneous, it is an ambiguous friendly, neutral and threat milieu. As stated in the AOC, winning in complex environment, "involves more than just firepower. It involves the application of all elements of National Power." Implied in this statement, is the requirement for the U.S. Army to become more capable of shaping OEs by engaging and influencing selected groups of people to achieve desired effects.

There is no straightforward way to influence change, every situation is different. Today the challenges in the OE are not solely kinetic, they include narratives,^[iii] beliefs and perceptions. Additionally, it is necessary to know how people might respond to their ideas being challenged by outsiders. It is not important for one to argue as to whether these ideas are true or false, but rather to fully, understand these dogmas, how they fit into a person's very being, and how deeds and actions are prejudiced by them.

The Army and joint forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were not fully prepared for, nor did they fully understand, the *ambiguous social human dimension* of these complex operational environments. They were prepared for combat. One example is the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP). The MRAP protected many of our forces from improvised explosive devices. However, I cannot help but envision how about \$2 billion of the MRAP's \$50 billion price tag could have given our troops the advantage, as LtG Flynn stated, to influence the people they must be persuaded to engage, shape, and win.

Studying history, culture, and language is only part of that whole, it is imperative to also know what drives peoples. To be effective out in the OE, with people, warriors must learn about others, leave biases at the door, and file opinions. Know your argument, but remember it does not matter. What matters is the OE you are in, not the one you want to be in, and then preparing for it comprehensively. Soldiers need to know the people and understand what makes them tick; otherwise any message, deed or kind act you perform will be for naught.

Currently the Army has small elements that are trying to do this. Both the military information-support operations (MISO) units and the Asymmetrical Warfare Group (AWG) are part of this effort. The mission of the Military Information Support Operations Command is to provide fully capable Military Information Support (MIS) forces to Combatant Commanders, U.S. Ambassadors, and other agencies to synchronize plans and execute inform and influence activities (IIA) across the range of military operations.^[iv] A massive responsibility that needs a well-oiled machine, not ad hoc reactionary group who is put at a disadvantage because they weren't given the resources to develop what commanders need.

To support these efforts, the TRADOC G2 partnered with The U.S. Military Academy at West Point and Carnegie Mellon University to develop an advanced way to analyze social networks in order to identify

critical nodes and maximize a particular effect on the network. This methodology, known as Advanced Network Analysis and Targeting (ANAT) is a critical component of the Attack the Network (AtN) training program provided by the TRADOC G27 Operational Environment Training Support Center (OE TSC). In today's increasingly ambiguous environment, targets are not actually clear. Thus, it is important to analyze networks in a new way to neutralize threats and also determine those neutral and friendly actors that can be influenced to act in alternative ways. Further, TRADOC G2 uses a software tool called Athena which is a simulation that computationally informs users of potential long-term consequences from engagements, including all instruments of national power – Diplomatic-Informational-Military-Economic. Together these tools can identify the informational intelligence space by determining who is in it, then, testing how different actions may or may not impact populations. These tools are available to help the soldier when the OE is gray, now it is time to reach out and use **them**.

Enhancing these and other reasoning tools for the JIPOE (or intelligence preparation for the battlefield (IPB)) is paramount. In order to engage one must do more than shoot, move and communicate, one must “*synchronize* (italicized for emphasis) lethal and nonlethal capabilities to assess, shape, deter, and influence the decisions and behavior of a nation's security forces, government, and people.” (TP 525-3-7), This necessitates that Soldiers are socio-culturally astute about the information they are receiving, think critically, and know when to adaptively consider immediate and pressing non-lethal alternatives to achieve mission success.

Operating in the social space takes patience. The gray zone is abstruse and must be mastered in order to operate in the “informational environment where cognitive, informational, and physical intersect. (IO-JP3-13 2014).^[v] This space, where messages, thoughts and narratives reign, requires a greater focus on knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. In essence, if war is ultimately a clash of human wills (Strategic Land power Task Force White Paper), one must be clear on what drives the will.

In a complex and ambiguous OE, commanders and staffs should be spending at least as much time learning the about peoples knowledge, ideas and beliefs as they spend on employing combat power – probably a lot more time. The AOC informs us that “Army forces provide combatant commanders with the ability to compel outcomes without the cooperation of the enemy. It is for these reasons that this concept emphasizes the Army's ability to impose our nation's will on an enemy by force as essential to deterring war and preserving options short of war.” But in general, Army commanders and staffs aren't going in that direction. There is still much greater emphasis on lethal action and little value in the advantage of socially capable Army, even though, Iraq, Afghanistan and now Syria, tells us otherwise. The next big thought for improved human engagement may far outweigh the advantages, and costs, of enhanced vehicular maneuverability in future operating environments.

The Army, and the military as a whole, is at a cross roads. It is looking for less costly initiatives to increase overmatch. Investing in cognitive, information and physical engagement collectively in order to win in complex environments will give the Army that overmatch. It is not the time for the Army to economize on intelligence training and other required non-material solutions for Soldiers, it is time to enhance them. Investment in people is less expensive than acquiring new hardware and in many environments it will provide a priceless advantage to commands in the OE, especially now that it is so gray.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not represent the positions of the United States Army, Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

End Notes

[i] United States Special Operations Command, White Paper, The Gray Zone, 9 September 2015.

[ii] United States Army War College, The Defense and Grand Force Implication of Hybrid and Gray Zone Threats, integrated Research Project Brief, February 2015.

[iii] Formal definition: a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious.

[iv] Fact Sheet, U.S. Army Special Operations Command Public Affairs Office Fort Bragg, NC
<http://www.soc.mil>

[v] The Secretary of Defense now characterizes IO as the integrated employment, during military operations, of information related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.

About the Author



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