
STATUS: Active

OPERATION: Stability Ops -
General

SPONSOR: PKSOI

UNIT / AGENCY: PKSOI Staff -
PKM

Topic:

Strategic Messaging in Information Operations

This record has implications in the following areas:

----- **---STABOPS Sectors** -----

GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION

----- **--P/SO - SPECIAL FACTORS** -----

BUILDING / ENABLING PARTNERSHIPS

CIVIL - MILITARY COOPERATION

----- **-PMESII-PT** -----

POLITICAL

MILITARY

SOCIAL/SOCIETAL

INFORMATION

This record has the following UJTLs associated with it:

ST 5.5 CONDUCT THEATER-WIDE INFORMATION OPERATIONS (IO).

ST 8.2 PROVIDE SUPPORT TO ALLIES, REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS,
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS OR GROUPS.

ST 8.5 COORDINATE AND INTEGRATE REGIONAL INTERAGENCY ACTIVITIES.

This record has no Essential Tasks associated with it.

This record has no files associated with it.

Topic:**Strategic Messaging in Information Operations****Observations:**

Strategic messaging by intervening forces during information operations (IO) is fundamental for their overall success. Peacekeepers/stability operations personnel must use strategic messaging to inform host nation (HN) civilians and the HN government about their intentions/objectives and the improvements being made. Ultimately, this will help intervening forces improve relations, extend reach, and build public support for the HN government.

Discussion:

An analytical review of recent publications on IOs during stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan indicates a critical need for the effective use of strategic messaging during the initial phases of peacekeeping/stability operations. For example, during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), al Qaeda accused the U.S. of waging a war against Islam, and it was important to counter this message. In 2007, the U.S. was able to develop and send palatable strategic messages to influence Sunnis and Shi'a extremists (Ref 1). The new strategic messages helped "win the hearts and minds" of Iraqis (Ref 2).

One of the challenges of IOs is that insurgents tend to have a deeper understanding of the culture and local needs of the HN civilians. Thus, the insurgents can often offer a narrative that might appeal to the interests of the HN civilians. As mentioned in the "Introduction," during OIF, al Qaeda was able to turn elements of the Iraqi population against the U.S. by exploiting fears that the West was at war with Islam (Ref 1). In addition to adding 130,000 more troops to Iraq during the surge, the U.S. refocused the operation's strategic message. The U.S. defined objectives that were aligned with local Iraqi interests. Namely, the U.S. promised not to prosecute low- to mid-level Iraqi insurgents. Also, the U.S. helped the Iraqi government gain legitimacy by training its military forces to police themselves. Additionally, the U.S. sent a strong signal to the Iraqis that the U.S. was committed to Iraq's stability. Iraqis responded, and by late 2007 the country was considerably more stable (Ref 2).

Similar to pre-surge OIF, U.S./coalition force strategic messaging in Afghanistan has struggled to win widespread support among the Afghan population. Two main objectives of the U.S./coalition forces in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have been to: 1) dismantle an al Qaeda stronghold, thereby providing security to Afghans and preventing the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorists to plan future attacks, and 2) to stabilize Afghanistan through bolstering a semi-democratic government and providing economic opportunities, ultimately to improve the Afghans' quality of life. The latter objective is part of a concerted effort to "win the hearts and minds" of Afghans, thus enervating the influence of extremist elements (Ref 1). Unfortunately, the U.S./coalition forces have been unable to persuade many Afghans to side with the U.S.-backed central government (Ref 1 and 3).

In addition to the strategic messaging challenges in Afghanistan, the U.S./coalition forces' strategic messaging in Pakistan has been unable to generate widespread support among the Pakistani population. Pakistanis tend to oppose the U.S./coalition forces use of airstrikes against the Taliban and the use of Pakistani military bases and transit routes for supplying NATO's mission in Afghanistan. Consequently, the approval rating of the U.S./coalition forces in Pakistan is tied for last among all nations. The abysmal approval rating of the U.S. is partially due to coalition forces' strategic messaging conflicting with Pakistan's Islamic values. Thus far, the U.S./coalition forces have not effectively distinguished between what Pakistan considers Pakistani Taliban members vice Taliban extremists (Ref

4). This has hampered the U.S./coalition forces' ability to fight Afghan Taliban members who cross the border to Pakistan.

Although strategic messaging has largely failed during the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the international community was able to effectively use strategic messaging in a different region/Liberia, to buttress support of the new government after the civil war. The United Nations (UN)/ international forces incorporated development projects – legitimizing the new regime in messaging by emphasizing the importance of the Liberian governments' role in nominating and implementing the projects. Citing “Liberian-led” efforts helped to generate enthusiasm and support for the new government (Ref 6).

Recommendation:

To improve strategic messaging during IOs the U.S./coalition forces should: 1) send clear and consistent messages to the HN, 2) operate with the whole of government, and 3) respect cultural norms (Ref 7).

1. The U.S. must be prepared to counter insurgents' strategic messaging with clear and consistent strategic messaging. For example, the U.S. failed to offer a compelling strategic message to Iraqis before the surge. During the surge, the U.S. was able to align its strategic messaging with the interests of the Iraqi people. The new strategic message helped act as a catalyst for the Sunni Awakening (Ref 1). During future peacekeeping/stability operations, the U.S./coalition forces should try to anticipate enemy combatants' strategic messages and prepare potential responses/counters. The Department of State (DoS) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are best positioned to promote strategic messages that pertain to economic development and governance. The Department of Defense (DoD) should be the primary intermediary with the HN on strategic messaging that pertains to security. Although agencies will focus on the strategic message that most closely aligns with their skill sets, they must still be able to explain the other agencies' intentions/objectives. Moreover, in the event that an agency accidentally undermines the strategic messaging of a different department, it is important to acknowledge the mistake quickly. The political fallout of being caught lying outweighs the fallout of admitting the mistake from the onset.

2. During IOs, the U.S./coalition forces must support the strategic messages with actions. Namely, if the U.S./coalition forces strategic message promises to improve the quality of life for HN civilians, then USAID, private development agencies, the U.S./coalition supported-HN government, and the DoS must be prepared to implement development projects at the local level – even in potentially dangerous areas. If the U.S./coalition forces fail to meet their promises, it undermines HN civilians' confidence in the mission. The IO in Liberia was successful in part because UN/international forces were able to meet the expectations of the local HN population (Ref 6).

3. The U.S./coalition forces must try to work within the culture of the HN. The U.S./coalition forces must tailor some policies to meet the needs and interests of the locals in the district in which they are working. To overcome insurgents' asymmetric information advantages (i.e., insurgents will likely understand the HN culture better than peacekeepers/stability operations personnel), the U.S./coalition forces should partner with the HN government. The HN government can help overcome the cultural information gap between the HN civilians and U.S./coalition forces. For example, strategic messaging in Liberia was more effective because the international community put Liberian government members at the forefront of development projects (Ref 6). They were better suited to address local concerns than foreign stability operations personnel.

Implications:

Comments:

THIS INFORMATION MAY BE OF INTEREST TO:

- Department of Defense – Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy
- Department of Agriculture – Foreign Agricultural Service
- Department of State – Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations
- Department of State – Bureau of Public Affairs
- United States International Development Agency – Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs

Event Description:

This lesson is based on the following REFERENCES:

- (1) “[The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One](#),” David Kilcullen, Oxford University Press, 2009
- (2) “[Political & Military Components of the Surge in Iraq](#),” SOLLIMS Lesson 808
- (3) “[Operation Moshtarak Lessons Learned](#),” SOLLIMS Lesson 644
- (4) “[Observations from COIN Emersion course with Pakistan at Ft Leavenworth 1-10 Nov 2010](#),” SOLLIMS Lesson 692
- (5) “[The man with no plan for Pakistan](#),” Sadanand Dhume, American Enterprise Institute, 28 June 2012
- (6) “[The “Essentials” of Transition](#),” SOLLIMS Lesson 867
- (7) “[Failure of the Top-Down Approach in Afghanistan](#),” SOLLIMS Lesson 775

MEMBER PERSPECTIVES ON THIS OBSERVATION:

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