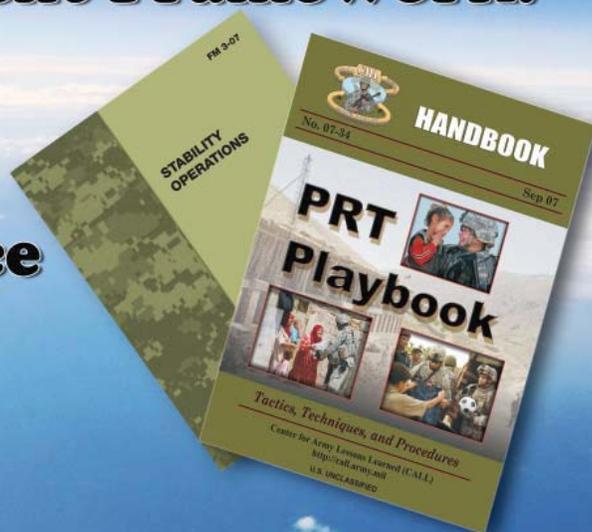


Local Conflict Assessment Framework:

Analyzing Perceptions and Sources of Violence

by John Thorne



The views expressed are those of the author and not those of the U.S. Army, TRADOC, and HTS.

Drivers of Human Conflict are Universal

Three elements can be described as the universal drivers of human conflict: security fears, economic interest, and identity/honor.¹ Assessing local nationals' (LN) perceptions of these elements during expeditionary counterinsurgency (COIN) operations is critical for understanding the propensity of unintended conflicts caused through the use of Civil Affairs (CA). These tactics will inevitably disrupt local systems, and in worst-case scenarios cause unintended instability and violence. As many in Afghanistan have learned, in the use of "money as a weapons system" it is very possible to have collateral damage.² This article seeks to provide a framework for identifying sources of instability and understanding the roots of local level conflicts.

The U.S. military has produced several manuals covering numerous levels of assessment and planning to guide COIN practitioners in the conduct of CA operations. These manuals discuss COIN Lines of Effort and Full Spectrum Operations Stability Tasks as interrelated activities that "aim to stabilize the environment enough so that the host nation can begin to resolve the root causes of conflict and state failure."³ CA is also used to foster short-term cooperation with the LN population. However, the reader of these manuals is left without a clear guide

for assessment if a COIN operation (such as CA or development assistance) could trigger immediate or long-term motivations for violence in the LN population or exacerbate sources of instability.⁴

This article posits that COIN operations can motivate LN violence by causing shifts in perceptions of relative power or well-being, or through perceived threats to identity. However, unintended conflict could be avoided through an assessment of the LN population's frustrations, perceptions of unfairness, and motivations to engage in violence. Analysis of LN perceptions can assist in the planning of effective CA operations to meet the immediate security goals of the counterinsurgent while promoting longer-term stability and sustainable development.⁵

Current Frameworks Only Provide Broad Guidance

The interagency conflict diagnosis framework in FM 3-07 provides a macro level framework, but it is not very specific in providing an analytical framework for assessing specific triggers of violence at the local level. In a discussion of an operation's context, popular grievances, drivers of conflict, and windows of vulnerability and opportunity, the reader is told in a single bullet-point to "describe identity groups who perceive threats to their identity, security, or livelihood."⁶ This is a rather large and important task for which a framework could be useful.

This paper provides a framework, the Local Conflict Assessment Framework (LCAF), for understanding universal motivations for violence during the planning and conduct of expeditionary COIN operations. LCAF examines perceptions of threats to their security, identity, and livelihood that can occur during CA operations. This framework can fit into existing methodologies that seek to understand drivers of instability, including the Tactical Conflict Assessment and Planning Framework (TCAPF) discussed in FM 3-07, the “implementation strategies” discussed in the PRT Playbook, the Operational Environment of COIN assessment criteria discussed in FM 3-24.2 and the District Stability Framework’s third stage: “Identify and address the root causes of instability.”^{7,8}

Perceived Threats to Absolute and Relative Standing

LCAF examines perceived threats to security, identity, and livelihood to provide a framework for an outsider making inquiry into what LN populations find important during COIN operations. These are interrelated factors, many of which are intimately related to perceptions of unfairness that universally can motivate an individual or group to respond with violence. Both absolute and relative changes should be assessed during the impact prediction assessments in CA operational planning.

In each of the three LCAF categories relative standing has varying reference points which will depend on who the assessment targets (individuals or groups) perceive as their rivals, and in the analysis one must determine the applicable competitors (or out-groups) that are perceived as salient. It should be noted that perceived threats to LN security, identity, or livelihood will not necessarily instigate violence or create a source of instability, and may merely be a frustration. Perceptions of unfairness can be highly subjective and can have varying effect upon LN motivations. Lastly, there can be instances when LN populations find it advantageous to hide their motivations from an outside entity.

Security/Fear. The perception of security is one of the most basic motivations for human action. Changes in relative power can instigate actions taken for self or group preservation which can be violence or threats thereof. The LN power dynamics in an area can shift quite easily with an influx

of cash during COIN operations. A shift in relative power between individuals and groups could create dissonance between the role played in the area and reputation of one’s ability to perform their role, which is discussed in further detail below in conjunction with Identity/Honor. With regards to security and fear, LCAF asks the following questions, with several possible realms for inquiry:

How will the assessment target’s relative security be affected by the operation?⁹

Do they perceive themselves as weaker or stronger as a result?

Will they be driven to violence by the change?

1. Instruments of Violence

- ◆ How will the change in income distribution affect local relative power levels?
- ◆ Can weapons be readily purchased?
- ◆ Are development projects or grants changing perceptions of security? (For example, trucks or buildings can act as possible weapons platforms.)
- ◆ Have geographic barriers been altered, changing perceptions of physical security? (For example, a four-season road or new bridge that intended to encourage trade might make it easier for rivals to violently engage each other.)

2. Internal Social Dynamics and Politics

- ◆ Will the operation affect group cohesiveness or how the group’s political decisions are formed?
- ◆ Have new individuals been empowered, altering or weakening group internal dynamics?
- ◆ Will outsiders view the individual or group as stronger or weaker as a result of the operation? If stronger, will retaliatory actions be taken? If weaker, will the individual or group lose independence?

3. External Alliances

- ◆ How will the operation affect an individual or group’s perceived alliances?
- ◆ Has the operation created, destroyed, strengthened or weakened alliances?

Identity/Honor. Threats to identity or honor can be caused from perceived challenges to one’s reputation to secure their role in society. Honor and self-

worth can derive from one's reputation to protect economic and security interests (discussed above), as well as one's role within the ASCOPE categories, relative to competitors.¹⁰ Perceptions of unfairness can exacerbate frustrations relating to Identity and Honor, especially if the unfairness was caused by an outside actor such as an expeditionary counter-insurgent. LCAF asks the following questions, with several possible realms for inquiry:

How will the assessment target's roles and reputation be affected by the operation?

Will perceptions of unfairness become a source of instability?

Will they be driven to violence by the change?

1. What is the target's reputation and what is at stake in order to protect **economic** interests, and how could this reputation change as a result of the operation?
2. What is the target's reputation and what is at stake in order to protect **Security** interests, and how could this reputation change as a result of the operation?
3. How could the target's role change within the **ASCOPE** categories? Here are some examples:
 - ◆ **Area:** Farming a particular territory, traveling in geographic areas.
 - ◆ **Structures:** Accessing places of worship, government buildings, farms.
 - ◆ **Capabilities:** Use of infrastructure, accessing health facilities, markets.
 - ◆ **Organizations:** Participation in religious, political, or criminal groups.
 - ◆ **People:** Access to key leaders and family members, media, business partners.
 - ◆ **Events:** Participation in holidays, harvests, religious events, funerals, weddings.

Livelihood/Interest. Perceived changes in LN livelihoods and well-being relative to out-groups can cause frustrations and jealousies and possible motivations for violent recompense. CA operations will directly and indirectly affect income levels in numerous ways, and a relative shift in well-being might only become obvious in the long term when differential growth rates show disparities in income. LCAF asks the following questions, with several possible realms for inquiry:

How will the assessment target's economic interests, relative to their economic rivals, be affected by the operation?

Will they be driven to violence by the change?

1. Goods and Services

- ◆ Will the operation affect the prices and wages received for goods and services?
- ◆ Will it affect the quantity of goods sold or hours worked?

2. External Costs and Economic Threats

- ◆ Will the operation affect business competitors?
- ◆ Will the operation affect related or complementary industries necessary for survival?
- ◆ Will the operation affect the costs of inputs?
- ◆ Will there be a change in taxation or regulatory oversight? (For example, an increase in government capacity can change corruption levels, both for the better or the worse.)

3. Wealth

- ◆ Will others perceive relative economic gains or losses as unfair?
- ◆ How will the operation affect the value of liquid assets?
- ◆ How will the operation affect the value of non-liquid assets?

4. Economic Goals

- ◆ What are the LN business strategies and tactics that could be affected by the operation?
- ◆ Who are they providing for?
- ◆ Have family members, friends, associates experienced a change in relative well-being?

Conclusion

LCAF examines frustrations and possible motivations for violence.

Navigating the human terrain is challenging for a deployed military; LCAF seeks to provide a framework for examining universal drivers of human conflict and sources of frustration. Human motivations are universal: Fear, honor, and economic interest have been the interrelated sources of conflict in all of human discord's recorded history. Identifying how COIN, CA, and development assistance operations affect perceptions of security, identity, and livelihood is a challenge. LCAF aims to assist in the analysis of the human terrain to prevent inadvertent creation of sources of instability. 

Endnotes

1. These concepts were originally discussed in the 5th century BC by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* and continue to provide a useful framework for analysis.

2. *Money as a Weapon System-Afghanistan*, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan Publication 1-06, Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) SOP, February 2011.

3. These include FM 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency, Chapter 3. COIN LOEs are conceptual categories which the COIN force and HN government can use in developing operations: establishing civil security and civil control; supporting HN security forces; supporting to governance; restoration of essential services; support to economic and infrastructure development; and conducting information engagement. See also FM 3-0, Chapter 4 and FM 3-07 Stability Operations, Chapter 3, paragraph 3-6.

4. *The PRT Playbook: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (Center for Army Lessons Learned, September 2007) advises the reader to use FM 3-07 for assessment tools.

5. The U.S. Agency for International Development's "*Principles of Project Selection*" is discussed in FM 3-07 and FM 3-24.2. These guiding principles are supportive of COIN LOEs: Host Nation Ownership, Capacity Building, Sustainability, Selectivity, Assessment, Results, Partnership, Flexibility, and Accountability.

6. FM 3-07, Appendix D, paragraph D-21, bullet 1.

7. FM 3-07, Appendix D, paragraphs D-34 to 62.

8. In the DSF methodology identifying the root causes of instability is the process of understanding local issues that: 1. Decrease support for Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; 2. Increase support for Anti-Government Elements, and 3. Disrupt the normal functioning of society.

9. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). This portion of the framework intentionally mirrors Van Evera's Offense-Defense Theory. He presents the hypothesis that violence between states could be more likely if offensive actions are perceived as easier than defensive actions. The four realms discussed here are adopted from Van Evera's International Relations theory, and altered to be applicable at a micro level of analysis.

10. For a further discussion of ASCOPE see FM 3-24.2, Chapter 1, Section 3.

John Thorne received an MA from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and deployed as a Social Scientist on HTT AF-21 in Spin Boldak District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.

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