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The Taliban's information warfare

A comparative analysis of NATO Information Operations (Info Ops) and Taliban Information Activities.

by Thomas Elkjer Nissen,
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December 2007

Brief

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Abstract

Both the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Taliban strive to win the battle of perceptions in Afghanistan as well as to positively influence the wider world opinion. They both achieve this through the use of information as a tool, but there the similarities end: There are major differences in how this is done, by which means it is done, and with which effect. These differences encompass political, doctrinal, legal, moral and ethical aspects that add up to an asymmetric warfare not only on how physical warfare is waged in Afghanistan, but also on how information "warfare" or Information Operations are conducted. It is inherent that there will be differences in an asymmetric war such as we see in Afghanistan; although ISAF is getting up to speed on the kinetic part of the asymmetry, it has not yet determined how to handle asymmetry in the information war. It is these differences in the information war that this brief will focus on.

"Let me focus on NATO, which is my responsibility. In general, I think we are not doing too badly. But we are fighting with one arm behind our back.

When it comes to video, we are frankly in the stone age. NATO has no ability to gather video from the field, to show people what is happening. We are also barely on the field when it comes to the web. And on the military side, only 5 NATO Allies have public affairs as a military function, with training and a career path for officers. Which means artillery officers are suddenly stuck in front of a microphone.

As I said – one arm tied behind our back. And the other arm is pretty weak too".

NATO General Secretary, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer,
on a Seminar on "Public Diplomacy in NATO-led Operations",
Copenhagen 8 October 2007.

There can be no question that the Taliban conducts "information warfare" in Afghanistan – or indeed, worldwide - as a significant part of its struggle against ISAF and the wider International Community (IC). What is debatable, however, is how the Taliban achieves this, not least in comparison with ISAF Strategic Communications and military Information Operations (Info Ops). So, what terminology should NATO use to describe the Taliban's activities in order to distinguish them form NATO information operations, and how good are the Taliban in executing their information campaigns and what can ISAF do about it?

Defining what the Taliban does!

The Taliban's information warfare activities are often described as "Info Ops"; this is unfortunate as the term "Info Ops" refers to a NATO doctrinal concept covering the coordination of different information effects within the military campaign. The Taliban's information campaign differs from ISAF's strategy, so using NATO terminology to describe the Taliban's activities tends to 'legitimise' what the Taliban does. Direct comparison of ISAF Info Ops and Taliban non-kinetic activity has often lead to the mistaken belief that both sides conduct their information campaign in the same way, leading to a negative view of ISAF activity which hampers or reduces its effect. The most common association made is that ISAF and the Taliban use the same techniques; e.g., the Taliban conduct propaganda, involving lying and misinformation, leading to the belief that ISAF also engages in propaganda. However, ISAF Info Ops are subject to strict legal, political and ethical standards as well as direct regulations which allow ISAF to maintain the moral high ground in regards to its use of information that can influence decision makers and the general public. It is vital that ISAF can conduct Info Ops as an effective tool against, and in response to, Taliban information warfare; if ISAF does not win the battle for the information environment, it will not prevail in Afghanistan. Accordingly, I suggest the adoption of the term *"Information Activities"* to describe the Taliban information campaign.

How does the Taliban conduct its information activities?

There are, however, some similarities between ISAF Info Ops and the "military" activities the Taliban employ to obtain their effects[1]. The Taliban uses propaganda, contact to local leaders, posture and sometimes assistance to the local population as means. In other words PSYOPS, KLE, PPP, and CIMIC-like measures, along with OPSEC and PA, supported by the use of physical destruction. The Taliban does not distinguish between the different activities, and they have specific no policies or doctrines for it. They just use the different measures to create the effects they want.

1 NATO regards Info Ops as a staff function to coordinate and de-conflict a number of military activities that all have an effect on the information environment namely: Psychological Operations (PSYOPS); Key Leader Engagement (KLE); Presence, Posture and Profile (PPP); Electronic Warfare (EW); Computer Network Operations (CNO); Operational Security (OPSEC); physical destruction; and deception operations. These are coordinated with the Public Affairs (PA) Civil–Military Corporation (CIMIC) and wider military activity. Where Info Ops is an influence tool targeted at approved audiences within the Joint Area of Operations (JOA), PA focuses on the media, both nationally and internationally.

The Taliban often use "Night Letters" to intimidate and coerce. These are not like ISAF PSYOPS products, as they are not mass-produced newspapers, handbills or leaflets, but rather unique, often handwritten messages, delivered to a specific person with the intent of influencing his behaviour. The Taliban also use Radio broadcasts to influence strategically. However most Taliban information activities involve KLE and PPP, especially face-to-face (F2F) communication with local leaders and elders to 'persuade' them not to support ISAF or the Afghan Government (GIRoA). Taliban PPP is unlike that of ISAF, which seek to send positive signals, whereas the Taliban signal their determination to act violently to intimidate those that do not support them, e.g. by executing locals perceived to have been supporting ISAF or GIRoA. The Taliban also use tapes, CD, videos and DVDs to get their messages across. These products are available across Afghanistan and in the wider area at bazaars and markets. The Taliban target the wider world opinion in general through the international media, including satellite and cable TV and the Internet, although many websites are in Arabic, Urdu and Pashto as opposed to English. They also upload video clips to YouTube.

The Taliban also use CIMIC-like measures to reinforce the message that they are able to "deliver" help to the local population as well as, or even better than ISAF and GIRoA; namely within governance or security, in areas where ISAF or Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are unable to maintain an effective presence. Taliban often guarantee an (often lucrative) livelihood, usually narcotic cultivation. In terms of propaganda, the Taliban are adept at framing and timing their messages and use rhetorical techniques effectively as this resonates well with the local population. Their timing is close to perfect: they exploit ISAF operations and political developments in near real time with great success, often having a spokesman on international media with claims about NATO collateral damage before the operation is even finished or ISAF HQ is aware of the situation, making effective rebuttal difficult. Indeed, where ISAF make mistakes, the Taliban are quick to exploit this for propaganda purposes by stating that ISAF is killing the Afghan people. This message is perhaps one of the most damaging to ISAF credibility as it directly counters the ISAF message that the Taliban are killing innocent Afghans indiscriminately.
The Taliban often refer to themselves as mujahidin, or freedom fighters, a simple and effective technique that plays on the collective memory of the Soviet occupation and expulsion, with the intent of portraying ISAF as the same as the Soviet regime. The Taliban's rhetorical strategy is simple but effective, especially in regards to local audiences in Afghanistan, and in the Muslim population world wide. They use metaphors such as "crusaders" and "infidels" etc. to describe ISAF and this resonates well within the Afghan population; the Taliban understand their local audiences, their culture and their situation much better then ISAF does and they legitimise their actions and propaganda claims with reference to The Koran and Islam in a way that ISAF is precluded from doing. This provides the Taliban with a kind of legitimacy or authority in their messages.

The Taliban's messages are to a large extent enduring. They fit, and support, their objectives, and they are at the same time effective in countering ISAF and GIRoA messages.

- *The Taliban will be here when ISAF is gone* (This has a cognitive effect creating a reluctance on part of the local audiences to support ISAF; they will have to live with the Taliban when ISAF withdraws – either from the area or, eventually, from Afghanistan. In this context it does not matter whether GIRoA governance or security exists; current living conditions mean that Afghans are not long term orientated. The Taliban is a fact today, GIRoAs governance in the future is not perceived as a guarantee).

- *Afghanistan is the graveyard of Empires.* (The Taliban use this theme consistently to support their claim that they will be there after ISAF has gone by using historical analogies as "evidence", such as the British experience in the 1880s, the Soviets in the 1970s and 1980s and linking this to a projection of how the situation will develop for ISAF in the 21st century)

- *The infidels are deliberately killing our women and children* (This is not true, but a *few* cases of Collateral Damage are exploited as evidence of their message; the Taliban can also get away with lying about this to local audiences as it is not being efficiently countered by ISAF.)

- *The Taliban (or mujahidin) are strong, the enemy (ISAF) is not.* (They are able to create a perception that this is true, as ISAF cannot maintain a presence everywhere all the time whereas the Taliban can maintain a presence wherever there is no GIRoA or ISAF presence and are often present covertly during ISAF presence).

- *The entire Muslim world is behind us* (An oft-repeated message, but it is mostly targeted at western audiences to give other messages legitimacy.)

- *ISAF soldiers are foreigners and GIRoA are their puppets.* (A message that resonates with the general Afghan resentment of all foreigners and undermines the legitimacy of GIRoA).

What is the difference to NATO then, and so what?

ISAF still mainly conducts kinetic manoeuvre operations, even though they strive to shift to Effect Based Approach to Operations (EBAO). ISAF operations and actions are supported by Info Ops and PSYOPS but the primary means are still the kinetic actions. Some ISAF planners and targeteers are unfamiliar with non-kinetic or influence operations and the effects that they can achieve. On the other hand, the Taliban target the information environment through small, but significant, kinetic actions, which they then exploit for propaganda purposes. Sometimes they have not even conducted the operation themselves but simply take credit for them for propaganda purposes. When US vice-President Dick Cheney visited Bagram Airbase in February 2007, with a high level of security, a coincident suicide attack was exploited by the Taliban because the vice- President's presence ensured that the attack was headline news on all international media. While US officials tried to play it down, the Taliban quickly claimed that they had planned the attack, por-

traying the Taliban, to local audiences, as more capable and dangerous than they really were. The Taliban often articulate their messages though Face-to-Face communication, reinforcing their messages with violence, such as random or targeted killings and bombings, and subsequently exploit this to influence other audiences though rumours about their actions. The Taliban are much more effects orientated, reinforcing their message with coercion; ISAF can not, and should not, try to influence civilian audiences in a similar way, but they should start thinking a little more about effects and use PSYOPS products better in order to get their message across.

Doctrinally, the Taliban does not distinguish between the strategic, operational and tactical levels; they do not restrict their information activities to the operational and tactical level, as ISAF does with Info Ops. Neither do they separate their information activities from what ISAF calls PA activities, i.e., the Taliban does not separate the 'informing' part from the 'influencing' piece; all Taliban actions are aimed at influencing national and international audiences, through national and international media.

There are major differences in the narratives. In regards to themes and messages as well as to the legal, political and ethical restrictions on their content. ISAF's major narratives must espouse democracy and be politically driven, whereas the Taliban's are fanatical, using culture and religious drivers. Although culturally attuned, ISAF's master narrative does not exploit cultural differences as the Taliban do. Among these differences is the perception of life. Osama bin Laden has been quoted as saying "we will win - the Americans love life, we love death". This weakens ISAF's "surrender or die" messages at the tactical level, unless it can be linked to another choice such as a better future, humane treatment or family security, in regards to low level Taliban fighters. ISAF should move away from the "body count mentality", and focus on the Taliban fear of being captured instead. Another reason for moving away from the body count mentality is that it resonates with another cornerstone of the Taliban's narrative, namely that NATO is killing the Afghan population, not helping it. ISAF's narrative has to address both Afghan and global audiences, whereas the Taliban's narrative really only has to resonate with local or Afghan audiences – a major challenge for ISAF.

The perception and effect of time is also a key issue that influences the information environment. In the more classical sense it is about timing; the Taliban are often on international media with their messages within 60 minutes of a major event, considerably faster than ISAF can counter the Taliban's messages, due to the requirement to investigate, confirm and gain approval through the chain of command before it can release a press statement to rebut or counter Taliban's claims. Time also has another role to play in regard to another of the Taliban messages, as they can simply say that "ISAF have got the watch – but the Taliban have got the time" and they are, probably, right. ISAF are working under the pressure of an "instant result culture" from its home audiences and political expectations of visible progress in Afghanistan. Both sides are aware that ISAF, and the wider International Community, has to produce visible results quickly whilst the Taliban

have the luxury of time on their side, conducting "delaying actions" through asymmetric warfare in the hope that ISAF and the IC will run out of "political time". The Taliban exploit this time by stating that they will still be there when ISAF and the IC pull out, causing a reluctance amongst local audiences to commit to GIRoA, ISAF and IC political projects. This strategy makes sense; ISAF have an "exit strategy", whilst the Taliban have a "staying strategy". The Taliban must keep local audiences on their side, or at the very least keep them neutral, until IC runs out of political time. In the end it comes down to who can win the support of the local population, which makes the population the centre of gravity for both sides.

Are the Taliban effective in their information activities?
The short answer is yes. The differences between ISAF and the Taliban in information war lead to a tactical and normative asymmetry that works well for the Taliban, at least in the communication sphere. This advantage makes them effective in influencing local audiences and international public opinion; the Taliban's strategy is to wage a war of attrition to wear down the public will to take casualties and support ISAF's mission in Afghanistan. The Taliban seem to be more effective in its information activities than its tactical combat activities so, arguably, they do not strive to win tactical battles. They rather seek to inflict as much damage as possible to undermine both ISAF credibility and the commitment of the wider International Community in Afghanistan. They strive to win by dominating the information sphere, through whatever means are available, the 'end justifying the means'. In a western context it is easy to dismiss this, by clamming the moral high ground; in the Muslim world, though, some believe that the Taliban have their moral right to do as they do. If ISAF are to win in Afghanistan, and reach its desired end state, it must win the information war and a precondition for this is that it must win the support of local audiences.

How to handle it?
To achieve this, it must be recognised at all levels within NATO and ISAF that the information war, or the battle of perceptions, is just as important, if not more so, as the physical battle. It is winning the local population, and not the physical destruction of the Taliban, that will win this battle, even though the destruction of pockets of resistance is necessary.

This requires a re-prioritisation of resources to the creation of, and a commitment to, a common ISAF master narrative and information strategy that will guide all information activities from strategic communications and public diplomacy conducted by NATO HQ and individual NATO countries, to ISAF strategic, operational and tactical HQ information operations. It implies the allocation of the necessary resources to allow tactical Information Operations, especially PSYOPS, to engage with, and to influence, the local population, alongside security operations as well as reconstruction efforts.

This narrative must address the time aspect and the "body count" mentality, whilst demonstrating ISAF ability and credibility through a range of predominately non-kinetic ef-

fects. The challenge is for ISAF to identify ways to influence that do not conflict with its legal, political and ethical foundation, whilst mitigating the Taliban's asymmetric advantage in the information arena.

At the strategic level, ISAF's master narrative must encompass ISAF's legitimacy and its *raison d'être* and build on coherent and sound policies that resonate with the Afghan population, delivered through a comprehensive information strategy. Policymakers must talk about "end states", not "end dates", allowing time and space for the information campaign to deliver results.

Messages and actions must complement each other to undermine the Taliban information activities and this can best be achieved by the careful synchronisation and coordination of all military activities with those provided by civil agencies. CIMIC, Reconstruction and Development can be important means of influence which can be exploited by ISAF through media, PSYOPS and wider Info Ops activity.

The use of interlocutors, or proxy communicators, can be a powerful conduit for getting ISAF messages across, encouraging Afghan 'ownership' by empowering local opinion leaders to distribute ISAF messages, and enable the Afghans to act, kinetically and non-kinetically. Plugging into traditional ways of communication, through imams and shuras, should be complemented by messages from GIRoA too, and GIRoA must play, and be seen to play, a much more prominent role in the Country's progress. ISAF must shift from promoting itself to a more credible promotion of GIRoA and the ANSF through credible, truthful and attributable PSYOPS and through the development of an indigenous Info Ops capability for the future.

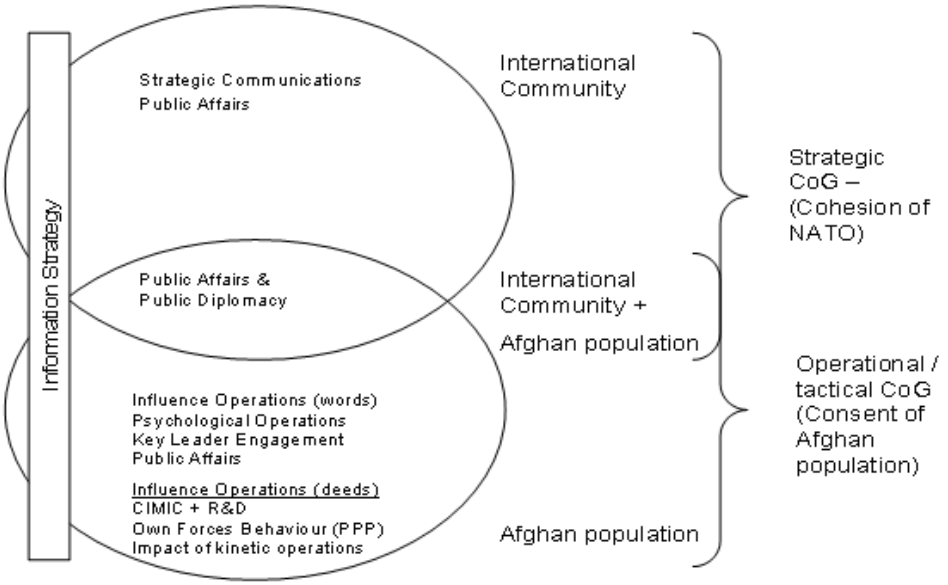
GIRoA must be supported in building its own communication capability, especially strategic communications, together with an Afghan National Army (ANA) Info Ops capability that will, over time, enable GIRoA and the ANA to fight effectively in the information sphere. Meanwhile, NATO should improve its communication ability at all levels, not least the upper strategic and lower tactical levels.

Conclusion

The Taliban conduct information warfare effectively; this is poorly matched by ISAF, undermining NATO's effort in Afghanistan. This is partly due to the asymmetric nature of the information battle, characterised principally by the difference between how the Taliban conduct its information activities in comparison with ISAF Info Ops. While ISAF conduct kinetic operations supported by Info Ops, the Taliban conduct information activities supported by its kinetic operations; ISAF seek to demonstrate its capability and use Info Ops and PSYOPS to persuade its audiences, the Taliban use intimidation and coercion to get its messages across. ISAF also interact differently with the media and are constrained by legal, political and ethical considerations in getting its messages across which often means that it is unable to effectively rebut or counter Taliban propaganda.

The Taliban's messaging and approaches to Information Activities are effective, especially with regard to local Afghan audiences. The Taliban is effective in gaining quick media access to influence local audiences, but lacks credibility and has therefore limited effect on strategic audiences.

ISAF Info Ops must be based on coherent policies, leading to agreed master narratives to guide a mission specific information strategy, supported by ISAF troop contributing nations and the wider IC. The challenge for ISAF is how to determine a master narrative that resonates with Afghan and western audiences and supports GIRoA and ISAF strategic policy objectives.



This master narrative should therefore form the basis of an information strategy encompassing Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and the wider Info Ops arena as a basis for planning and it should consider the following factors.

- Allocation of the necessary resources to Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, military Info Ops and PSYOPS, to include high level endorsement and recognition of their importance. And to include development of a credible and capable Afghan strategic communication capability.

- Creation of an Information Strategy for Afghanistan that encompasses all levels and all information activities.

- Increased focus on following "words" up with "deeds" to reinforce effects and thereby giving ISAF messages greater credibility.

- Inclusion of civilian actors, especially NGO and other actors within the R&D sphere, in order to "deliver" instant visual changes in peoples lives. Include the Afghans in the R&D work in order to improve their ability rebuild their own infrastructure and take ownership of the projects.

- Recognition that the local population's support for, and feeling of ownership of, the project is the information Centre of Gravity.

- Communications through interlocutors with Afghan attribution of the message will most likely help getting the local support and increase Afghan "ownership".

- Decrease the focus on promoting NATO (ISAF), and increase the focus on promotion GIRoA and ANSF. A precondition for this though is that the Afghan population perceives the GIRoA and ANSF, and its policies, as credible.

Kinetic operations are still very necessary in Afghanistan, but ISAF must shift its emphasis towards Info Ops, especially in regards to winning the support of the Afghan populace. The Taliban understand this centre of gravity very well and they put considerable effort in trying to discredit ISAF and the wider IC, and maintaining the support of the Afghans to threaten the cohesion of the Alliance; ISAF must step up "its game" in the information sphere if it is to make a tangible and lasting difference and meet its desired End State in Afghanistan.