Intelligence officer from PRT Zabul listens to villagers from Khleqdad Khan, Afghanistan

"Left of Bang"

The Value of Sociocultural Analysis in Today's Environment

BY MICHAEL T. FLYNN, JAMES SISCO, AND DAVID C. ELLIS

Hard lessons learned during counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterterrorist operations across continents, and the Arab Spring all contributed to a growing recognition within the Intelligence Community (IC)[1] of the importance of understanding the "human terrain" of operating environments. The Department of Defense (DOD), its Service branches and combatant commands, and the broader IC responded to the demand for sociocultural analysis (SCA) by creating organizations such as the Defense Intelligence Socio-Cultural Capabilities Council, Human Terrain System, and U.S. Central Command's Human Terrain Analysis Branch, among others. For large bureaucracies, DOD and the IC reacted agilely to the requirement, but the robust SCA capabilities generated across the government over the last decade were largely operationally and tactically organized, resourced, and focused. What remains is for the IC to formulate a strategic understanding of SCA and establish a paradigm for incorporating it into the intelligence process.

Simply stated, the lesson of the last decade is that failing to understand the human dimension of conflict is too costly in lives, resources, and political will for the Nation to bear. Once a conflict commences, it is already too late to begin the process of learning about the population and its politics. The optimal condition is for our leaders to have the ability to influence budding conflicts "left of bang," that is, *before* tensions turn violent. Left of bang, policy options are more numerous, costs of engagement are lower, and information flows more freely to more actors. After bang, options decrease markedly, the policy costs rise rapidly, and information

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becomes scarce and expensive. More than ever, military, intelligence, and diplomatic professionals recognize this reality.

A tremendous opportunity now exists for the Intelligence Community to build upon its world-class analytical foundation. Complex social phenomena such as population growth and demographic change, economic globalization, and the information and communication revolutions demand even greater attention. Unfortunately, the IC struggles to integrate sociocultural analysis into traditional collection and analysis because its structures remain rooted in the state-centric context of the Cold

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War. The evolving nexus of threats among terrorist groups, transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), cyber-criminals, humanitarian crises, and pandemics is merely symptomatic of the need to reconceptualize the way populations, political systems, and geography intersect. A new concept should seek to explain how populations understand their reality, why they choose either to support or resist their governments, how they organize themselves socially and politically, and why and how their beliefs transform over time.

In contrast to the IC's typical state-centric analysis, which seeks to determine how states can or do impose stability, the IC must develop a sensory capability to better detect the precursors to political change, a "social radar" with a level of granularity, understanding, and confidence that enables policy leaders to make informed decisions that maximize national

influence left of bang. As a first step toward building a population-centric social radar, this article explains why integrating SCA remains counterintuitive to the IC, describes how social amplifiers compound the difficulty, offers a framework for inexpensively and proactively capturing sociocultural information, and suggests a paradigm for converting sociocultural information into intelligence production.

Old Structure, New Threats

That we are largely uninformed about populations and ill-prepared to understand them is a natural consequence of the IC being built upon the edifice of Cold War politics. Much of the IC was established to detect, understand, and maneuver against adversaries' actions and intentions by employing all methods of national influence, including military assets, economic strength, and diplomatic skill. Sovereignty as a core principle of international order meant that states would not generally concern themselves with how other governments managed their populations.[2] Yet in many parts of the world, weakening or eroded state sovereignty enables many of the above threats against our national interests to grow. Under conditions of meaningful sovereign state authority, these issues are manageable. However, failed and failing states create circumstances whereby aggrieved populations and nonstate actors can assert themselves in ways that are not easily comprehensible to the IC. To frame the challenge ahead, the Failed States Index asserts that approximately 20 percent of the world's states are now considered to be failed states or are at severe risk of failing.[3]

While our current intelligence architecture proved successful in the context of the Cold War, it has been much less successful in

the world of weak and failed states unleashed by the collapse of governments whose survival was, ironically, predicated upon the largesse provided by the United States and Soviet Union. In a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report, Anthony Cordesman and Nicholas Yarosh reinforce this point:

> *countries, intelligence experts, members of international institutions, NGOs* [nongovernmental organizations], *and area experts need to do a far better job of developing basic data on the causes of instability. . . . Far better data are needed in key areas like unemployment and underemployment, income distribution, the efficiency of the state sector, barriers to growth and economic development, the size and function* [of] *security forces and police, and quality of governance.*[4]

Equating sovereign authority with stability is no longer analytically appropriate. As Cordesman and Yarosh indicate, today's conflicts are more about ideas and governance than they are about invasion by a foreign government.

The state-centric "order" the West enjoyed during the Cold War is in today's world assessed by many populations to be illegitimate and worth their sacrifice to change. Many states formed after World War II and during the 1960s era of decolonization are dissolving or losing functional sovereignty because their regimes have been unwilling or unable to govern legitimately on behalf of many—or even most—of their people. Their populations are organizing in social movements or around insurgencies to change their circumstances.[5] Even worse, narco-traffickers and other resource warlords are now taking advantage of popular discontent with governments and asserting military dominance over valuable tracts of territory, often at the expense of the population itself.[6] When amplified by social tensions (discussed below), populations as subnational actors can have greater political influence than in the past, with many of them threatening or raising the costs of maintaining the international political and economic order.

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Amplifiers and Accelerators

Population Growth. Global population has doubled since the early 1950s, predominantly in parts of the world where institutions of state are least able to create the conditions for social order and stability. Despite a trend toward slower rates of population growth on the global scale, through 2050 more than 95 percent of future world population growth will occur in developing nations. By 2050, the populations in some of the world's least developed countries—many of which are experiencing or recently emerging from conflict—will be at least double their current size including Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Liberia, Niger, Somalia, and Uganda. These countries are also home to some of the world's poorest and youngest populations, where continued high rates of population growth have created a large youth bulge.[7]

These disenfranchised youths struggle for limited resources, employment opportunities,

sense of belonging, and upward mobility in their communities, tribes, and villages. In many cases, the very states of which they are "citizens" proactively deny them opportunity.[8] With limited options, the allure of quick wealth associated with illicit activities and the sense of purpose preached by radical movements are sufficient to mobilize enough of them to threaten many states' integrity.

Even important demographic changes within allied nations should be of interest to the IC. For example, significant aging in Europe in concert with growing Muslim populations could alter the economic capacity or political calculus of governments to support the United States in foreign affairs. On the other hand, corresponding aging trends in China might prohibit future military adventurism due to the high costs associated with an expansive welfare state.[9] Whether driven by youth bulges, deprivation, or aging, demographic changes now matter more analytically than they have in the past.

Economic Globalization. Globalization entails the qualitative and quantitative increase in the scope and intensity of "interactions and interdependencies among peoples and countries of the world."[10] The progressive erosion of barriers to trade—whether based on policy, geography, or transportation—has enabled a rapid expansion of trade and contact among previously distant populations. Economic globalization has resulted in an incredible degree of prosperity and rising incomes at an unprecedented rate for those able to participate.[11] The BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) demonstrate the amazing advances that accrue with freer markets, substantive technology transfers, and low policy barriers to trade.

However, economic globalization also amplifies vexing challenges such as income inequality within nations, environmental degradation, the income gap between developed and developing nations, and fears of cultural decay. The increasingly competitive and interconnected world raises the potential for conflicts and crises to escalate in multiple domains.[12] Ethnic, racial, and religious stratifications correlated with differences in opportunity and wealth often reinforce existing tensions within countries, creating fertile ground for exploitation by nonstate actors such as TCOs and extremist groups. Individuals no longer accept the status quo from their governments and are demanding a better way of life for themselves, their families, and communities, especially when they know alternatives exist.

The Communication Revolution. The explosion in communications technology, social media in particular, has dramatically increased a population's ability to organize and communicate. Whereas state governments could effectively limit association and information exchange in the past, the modern Internet and cell phone coverage make this objective more difficult. For example, as of December 2011, there were over 2.1 billion Internet users with 3 billion email addresses, 152 million blog sites, and 276 million Web sites with 45 percent of users under the age of 25. Facebook has more than 800 million active users who log in 175 million times every 24 hours, 65 million through mobile devices, sharing over 30 billion pieces of content each month. Traditional closed societies around the world are also beginning to use these media to rapidly disseminate information. In China, Wiebo—a micro-blogging Web site equivalent to Twitter—has more than 250 million users, most of whom are educated and white collar, and it is becoming a major influence in

Chinese society. Grassroots social movements, as evidenced during the Arab Spring, are using these capabilities to organize demonstrations, spread messages to large audiences, and even overthrow governments.

While the sociocultural and research community has been interested in social media and how to leverage it for intelligence purposes for years, the Iranian Green Revolution and Arab Spring have given rise to a new fascination with it. However, the use of social media was incidental, not causal, to these popular uprisings. Discontent existed before the explosion of social media and was identifiable and measureable even in social media's absence. What social media do provide populations is a virtual organizing capability in the face of physical repression by regimes. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to view the geospatial depiction of Facebook and Twitter feeds or ethno-religious human terrain maps to be the sum total of sociocultural analysis. In fact, this is but a

small part of the type of sociocultural analysis available to the IC, but it can be an insightful component if properly utilized.

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Integrating SCA within the Conflict Continuum

To proactively build a social radar capable of sensing important impacts on populations and political systems like the ones above, it is first necessary to conceptualize how the IC can come to know them, particularly in the coming era of constrained budgets. Unlike state-centric analysis that is often reduced to quantitative metrics, such as gross domestic product or mechanized infantry battalions, SCA requires deep, qualitative understanding

U.S. Marine Forces Africa

Members of Royal Moroccan Army conduct terrain analysis during intelligence staff training as part of exercise African Lion 2010

about populations. Though such a task seems daunting at first, the conflict continuum in the figure illustrates how the IC can inexpensively and proactively integrate SCA with traditional collection and analysis.

Prior to conflict, or left of bang, the IC has a great deal of access to various information sources. The universe of information sources includes partner nations, academia, private-sector companies, and social media, all of which often enjoy unfettered access to the population and generate information about it as a normal activity. These information sources can provide a wealth of information, enabling analysts to develop baseline assessments of populations, cultures, behaviors, and social narratives.

When SCA methodologies and techniques are applied, strategic indications and warning can be derived from deviations in the baseline. These deviations can inform military and political decisionmakers of possible uprisings or conflicts so they can avoid them. At this stage in the conflict continuum, deeper sociocultural understanding results in a broader range of policy options available to the nation and its allies to prevent conflict.

As tensions rise and move toward conflict, the potential for violence increases the risk and cost of available responses while constraining policy options and access to information. By conducting SCA in Phase 0 and having a baseline, the IC will be able to inform military planners of potential threats and recommend sound policy options consistent with the population's worldview and attitudes. Such an approach puts policy and national interests more in line with the needs of the population to generate common achievable outcomes. This can prevent poor decisions based on a lack of information and understanding of social dynamics.
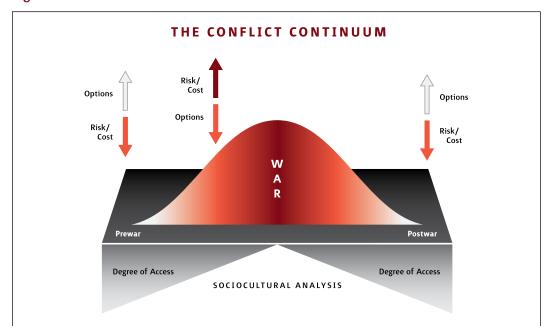
Figure. The Conflict Continuum

THE CONFLICT CONTINUUM

As conflict concludes, reconstituting a sustainable, legitimate polity becomes more likely if the new institutions of state reflect the values, norms, and organizing principles of the population. In addition, reduced violence results in greater access to the population through NGOs and humanitarian efforts. This will allow the IC to reestablish baseline understandings of the population in the new context. This reestablished baseline allows the IC to develop realistic recommendations informing actions to include forming a government, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction efforts, infrastructure development, reintegration and reconciliation programs, and establishing military and police forces. These initiatives are extraordinarily complex, so the more data and knowledge that are available before a conflict, the more likely the right questions and interests will be addressed after it.

U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Commander Admiral William H. McRaven, whose forces must be culturally attuned in the fight against extremists, recently stated, "Clearly, we need to continue to improve our understanding and respect for other cultures, improve our language capability and cultivate our ability to build relationships."[13] Hard lessons over the past decade demonstrate the costs associated with building government institutions that fail to coincide with and take into account the population's ontology (worldview, identity, norms, and narratives). As Admiral McRaven notes, "Enduring success is achieved by proper application of indirect operations, with an emphasis in building partner-nation capacity and mitigating the conditions that make populations susceptible to extremist ideologies."[14] But discovering when, where, how, and why to apply that influence cannot occur in the midst of conflict without

resulting in significant errors. The IC can organize its resources and processes to ingest SCA into intelligence with the right framework.

Integrating SCA through RSI

The Intelligence Community has the opportunity to meet growing demands for sociocultural analysis, but requires a paradigm describing how to resource this capability and explaining its value to foreign and military policy. This article asserts that today's threat environment, in which subnational actors and complex social trends persistently undermine the state system, requires addressing budding conflicts before they turn violent. Doing so will allow the United States to better respond with a wider range of policy options at lower cost. The conflict continuum is offered to conceptualize the value of conducting SCA before

knowledge about populations has a long shelf life given that cultures, norms, and values change only gradually

crises manifest. Additionally, the reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence (RSI) framework is suggested to integrate whole of nation resources for understanding threats to populations, their states, and national interests.[15] RSI is a paradigm codeveloped by USSOCOM's Matthew Puls and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2's Dr. Kira Hutchinson for incorporating existing sociocultural analysis resources into the intelligence process.[16] In contrast to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), which is generally perishable (find, fix, finish), RSI suggests that a long-term research perspective is necessary for learning about populations (understand, analyze, engage). Populations

are, under normal conditions, easily discoverable and available, so national, international, allied, and private-sector resources can come to know them at relatively low cost. Moreover, knowledge about populations has a long shelf life given that cultures, norms, and values change only gradually.

In the notional RSI process, the reconnaissance phase is dedicated to understanding the world as seen, experienced, valued, and practiced by the population. Long-term reconnaissance allows a sense of what is "normal" to be assessed for a population. During the surveillance phase, changes in the baseline can be detected through a multitude of social science methods. When the changes are determined to merit further attention, intelligence activity can begin to clarify what the changes indicate, determine whether a threat appears likely, and suggest how national assets might shape events.

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As the conflict continuum illustrates, the lowest costs and greatest opportunities associated with generating knowledge about populations occur well before conflict or tensions rise. The reconnaissance phase fits perfectly with this perspective, but it requires integrating professional population researchers into the information-collection process. Using nontraditional collections and analysis avenues such as academia, polling, census data, and international marketing firms, it is possible to generate the baseline understanding of a population, especially in Phase

0 environments. Social scientists will be particularly important given their innate desire and skill sets. The IC will have to employ its own professionals in order to ask the right questions and translate the professional jargon into digestible intelligence.

The RSI paradigm provides the IC with a means of conceptualizing how to efficiently integrate population-centric information into the intelligence process. It also suggests the types of personnel and relationships that will need to be cultivated to address new threats. With a deeper understanding about populations, the IC will be able during the surveillance and intelligence phases to more accurately analyze how contemporary threats will likely impact populations and identify means for counteracting them when they are potentially harmful. But the process begins with a robust reconnaissance capability before threats manifest themselves.

Conclusion

Sociocultural analysis is now an indispensable component of intelligence, and the Intelligence Community can improve upon its already impressive gains. The qualified character of sovereignty in many countries is rendering the IC's traditional mechanisms and processes for developing information on populations and nonstate actors inadequate. The task ahead, therefore, is to develop the social radar to warn policymakers of and inform them how to keep potential crises left of bang.

Due to looming budget constraints, some in the IC believe it is time to focus on core competencies, while others believe it is time for a paradigm shift to effectively address the complexities of globalization. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, the objective is to integrate those scholarly and

investigative assets with the right expertise and skill sets into the overall intelligence process in order to understand cultures and populations. An intelligence enterprise that fails to adapt to the qualified nature of state sovereignty cannot generate the personnel, expertise, and processes to comprehend the problems ahead.

The Intelligence Community must develop and mature innovative capabilities that address the challenges of this new threat environment to provide nonlinear, holistic intelligence to decisionmakers and advance its analytic tradecraft. The social sciences, international marketing companies, polling firms, and others possess the data, knowledge, and expertise on foreign populations that the Intelligence Community lacks. By harnessing these assets more effectively and leveraging the capabilities of allies, the IC can in a relatively short period come to understand the key sociocultural constructs of relevant populations. By delving into critical questions, pathways, and indicators for those major and minor countries relevant to U.S. national security, the Intelligence Community can advance its own analytic transformation, deliver more powerful insights to customers, and better avoid strategic surprise. This will enable more effective diplomacy and better focused military activity to keep many budding conflicts left of bang or to more adeptly navigate the reconstitution of societies torn by conflict or natural disaster. PRISM

Notes

[1] For purposes of brevity, the Intelligence Community (IC) also encompasses the Defense Intelligence Enterprise in this article.

[2] Charles W. Kegley, Jr., and Gregory A. Raymond, *Exorcising the Ghost of Westphalia: Building World Order in the New Millennium* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 131–136.

[3] "The Failed States Index 2011," *Foreign Policy*, available at <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/17/2011_failed_states_index_interactive_map_and_rankings>.

[4] Anthony H. Cordesman and Nicholas S. Yarosh, *The Underlying Causes of Stability and Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: An Analytic Survey* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 20, 2012), 2.

[5] Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict and Its International Dimensions, 1946–2004," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 5 (September 2005), 623–635.

[6] Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), chapter 8.

[7] United Nations (UN), *State of the World Population 2011* (New York: UN Population Fund, 2011), 3–6.

[8] UN, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in Arab Countries* (New York: UN Development Programme, 2009), 2–7.

[9] Mark L. Haas, "A Geriatric Peace? The Future of U.S. Power in a World of Aging Populations," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007), 112–147.

[10] Theodore H. Cohn, *Global Political Economy: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 10–11.

[11] Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[12] Mission Command White Paper 3, April 2012; Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011).

[13] "Q&A with Admiral William H. McRaven," *Special Warfare* 25, no. 2 (April–May 2012), 11, available at <www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/archive/SW2502/SW2502QAAdmiralWilliamMcRaven.html>.

[14] Ibid., 10.

[15] Matthew Puls and David C. Ellis, "Socio-Cultural ISR for Counterinsurgency and Stability Operations," USSOCOM JICSOC: SCA Section Concept Paper, July 21, 2011.

[16] Ibid.; Kira Hutchinson and Matthew Puls, "Mobile Computing Devices for Socio-Cultural Intelligence in Urban and Unconventional Environments," USSOCOM JICSOC: SCA Section Concept Paper, February 21, 2012.