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First with the Truth: Synchronized Communications in the Counterinsurgency Fight

by

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The 82d Airborne Division's 2009–2010 rotation as the core headquarters for Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) 82 and Regional Command(East)—RC(E)—in Afghanistan marked an innovative break with the past in evolving counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and practice.¹ In the critical area of synchronized communications, CJTF82 implemented new approaches at the CJTF level. Both structural and conceptual, these changes marked a clear departure from past practices, refined existing procedures and suggested new doctrinal concepts and approaches.²

For many years, influencing audiences in support of the Afghanistan enterprise has been poorly coordinated and synchronized. Recognizing the critical importance of information, CJTF82 made it the centerpiece of the campaign plan.³ Traditionally, the different “messaging” entities found in the division headquarters—the public affairs (PA) and information operations (IO) sections as well as a newly created Key Leader Engagement (KLE) cell—reported to different heads, thus complicating coherent messaging. To enhance synchronized messaging, CJTF82 created the Communications Action Group (CAG), a small but powerful command and control (C2) node chartered to integrate and coordinate the information line of operation in support of the campaign plan. Headed by a colonel (O-6) former brigade commander, the CAG included a senior Department of the Army public affairs civilian, two Army Reserve former battalion commanders and a master sergeant (E-8).

The mission of the CAG was to “develop, synchronize and execute the RC(E) Communications Strategy to gain and maintain the initiative against the enemy and maintain the public support necessary to achieve success in Afghanistan.”⁴ Its work was principally carried out through recurring “battle-rhythm” events: daily Commander’s Update Assessment (CUA) briefs with the CJTF commanding general, followed by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command CUA; weekly internal CAG synchronization meetings with PA, IO and KLE chiefs, as well as the Psychological Operations (PSYOP) supporting company commander; weekly communications strategy working groups; and participation in all other major staff events. Led by experienced and senior operators with direct access to the command group and enabled by subject matter experts in each of the messaging specialties, the CAG concept provided a powerful engine in support of the campaign plan.

A key point is that the CAG concept, while intended to synchronize communications across the entire regional command, did not actually fuse separate and distinct staff functions. For example, the PA section continued to perform its traditional command information and media support functions, interacting only with local, national and international media outlets; it did not participate in IO or PSYOP planning or activities.

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Similarly, IO and PSYOP leaders did not participate in crafting press releases or other traditional PA activities. Of note, many key communications players, such as the division IO chief, the combat camera detachment commander and the mobile PA detachment commander, were reservists who brought vital civilian skills to this complex fight.

In *The Quranic Concept of War*, Pakistani General S.K. Malik identified the human heart and will as the primary object, inferring the primacy of the informational or psychological domain.⁵ This view, which is foreign to traditional Western perspectives, is inherent in virtually all insurgent warfare. The enemy in Afghanistan rarely fights to take or hold ground; every operation is conducted with an information objective in mind. The information gained through insurgent warfare may be used to convince the population that the government is incapable of providing security or basic services. It may be used to highlight ethnic tensions and rivalries. For example, the insurgency in Afghanistan is a Pashtun-driven phenomenon, propelled by fears of domination by a minority, Tajik-controlled military or state structure and by historic Pashtun nationalist aspirations. In Afghanistan, the insurgent message characterized the NATO coalition as “infidel occupiers”—a powerful, emotive theme difficult to refute. To counter this approach, RC(E) moved the information fight to center stage, guided by the following precepts:

- Information is the commander’s business.
- The Afghan population is the center of gravity and key target audience.
- It must provide messaging by, with and through Afghans.
- Public support requires visible, tangible progress.
- Deeds must precede words—actions ultimately count most.
- Speed matters, but truth comes first; credibility is everything.
- Units must message within the commander’s intent: power down and accept risk.

CJTF82 Communications Strategy

- Communicate visual, tangible and recognizable progress
- Demonstrate Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s (GIRoA) increasing competence, capacity and credibility
- Highlight, magnify and reiterate enemy failure—“The Enemy Cannot Succeed”
- Ensure timely, truthful transparent and proactive communications

Security	Governance	Development
<i>Protect the Populace By, With and Through Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)</i>	<i>Connect the People to an Accountable Government</i>	<i>Enable Sustainable Development through Economic Growth</i>
One unified effort to build and reinforce GIRoA legitimacy at all levels: Coherence across security, governance and development actions		
The ANSF are a competent and professional force who are providing security for the Afghan people. With the support of the populace and the coalition, the ANSF will defeat the enemies of Afghanistan and provide enduring security for the nation. The enemies of Afghanistan target innocent Afghan men, women and children with their criminal activity and senseless violence and seek to destroy Afghanistan. They are not winning and will not win.	GIRoA is accountable to the people and their elders and is working to enable local and district representatives to deliver health care, education and essential services. Exercise your rights—be a part of the process. GIRoA is working to reduce corruption and provide a fair and expeditious justice system with the help of the coalition and the international community. Help your leaders with your support, patience and counsel.	The Afghan government, security forces and people are working together to create better opportunities and a brighter future for Afghanistan. “We build. . . . They only destroy.” With the support of the people, GIRoA and the international community will bring progress to the villages, districts and provinces.

The CJTF82 communications strategy was published in a single slide, organized along the four lines of operation (information, security, governance and development). It provided basic messaging guidance to subordinate units and was amplified for specific operations in the communications annex in CJTF orders. Operating within this general framework, units tailored broadcast and print products for their local areas and specific requirements. Of note, all CJTF messaging was firmly grounded in the truth, regardless of implications or results. This communications strategy proved exceptionally useful in focusing different organizations, namely PA, IO, PSYOPs and KLE, along broad themes—security, governance and development—that supported the campaign concept and allowed flexible and rapid approaches to fast-moving, local situations.

CJTF82 and its subordinate units communicated in three primary ways. The first and perhaps most important was by radio or television broadcast. Roughly 60 percent of the RC(E) population (mostly in the more urban areas such as Jalalabad, Ghazni, Gardez and Khowst) has access to television. The rest of the population relies on radio for much of their information and entertainment outlets. Accordingly, CJTF82 handed out hundreds of thousands of hand-cranked AM/FM radios, mostly in rural areas where access to television and even radio was rare. Building on an existing network of 26 low-power radio stations, CJTF82 expanded to more than fifty 300-watt systems and added four 1000-watt AM systems as well, greatly extending the reach of its messaging.⁶ These commercial systems, called RIABs (“Radio in a Box”), employed locally recruited Afghan DJs and operated from NATO coalition bases throughout RC(E). Using Afghan programming obtained through commercial contracts, the systems enabled coalition forces to reach into all but the most mountainous areas with local news, poetry, music and religious content, as well as with public service announcements crafted in accordance with the CJTF82 communications strategy. Units also purchased airtime from commercial radio stations to augment their broadcasts. While higher headquarters conducted broadcast messaging nationwide, CJTF82 focused on regional themes that were of more immediate interest to each specific local population.

CJTF82 units supplemented broadcast messaging with print products such as posters, handbills, billboards and leaflets, which were designed to communicate visually to a largely illiterate population. As with radio and television spots, print products employed local Afghan staff to ensure coherent and culturally authentic messages. The Afghan staff also promoted pre-testing on the messaging techniques and strategy throughout the local community. Prepared by the supporting PSYOP company, print products were vetted at the CJTF level during weekly PSYOP-product approval boards (which included legal and cultural advisors as well as human terrain staff) and were then approved by the CAG director. In August 2009, in the weeks preceding the national elections, CJTF82 disseminated a million “get-out-the-vote” print products every week—more than the Afghan government distributed across the entire country.

Broadcast and print media proved to be powerful tools, but in an oral, narrative culture like Afghanistan’s, nothing can replace traditional, face-to-face communications. Commanders and leaders at all levels routinely conducted KLEs, which are now widely viewed as indispensable opportunities to communicate effectively in real time with Afghan counterparts and local communities. While KLEs have been used for several years in Afghanistan, their deliberate use as a messaging tool in support of a coherent communications strategy—synchronized and in concert with other complementary means—was an innovation that has consistently produced great results.

Evolving communications doctrine stresses the importance of metrics in assessing both performance (i.e., outputs) and effects (results). Given the limited resources in Afghanistan, establishing Measures of Performance (MoPs) and Measures of Effectiveness (MoEs) proved critical to focusing CJTF units for the information fight. Without metrics, gauging both output and results is virtually impossible.

To be useful, MoPs must specify a desired quantity, the medium (for example, leaflets), a method of delivery and a target audience. One example of a helpful MoP might determine that there were “1000 focused radio messages per day across RC(E) in support of [Operation] Jeaza.”⁷ Other examples include data calculating the numbers of KLEs, media engagements, tipline calls or commercial, radio or television spots aired. Specific MoPs were tracked weekly and reported to the command group to identify emerging trends or areas requiring additional effort or resources.

MoEs operate almost as an art form: effects showing in the battlespace can be the result of kinetic operations, development and governance efforts, non-coalition actions, effective messaging or a combination of each. Still, a deliberate thought process that identifies a desired effect and a way to achieve it is essential to assessing MoE. A sample MoE might reveal an “increase [in] female RIAB listenership in the [Area of Responsibility] by 25 percent compared to last year’s numbers.” This simple statement establishes a baseline and an objective and drives IO leaders to consider a range of factors, such as radio range and propagation, programming and content, the extent to which the population has (or needs) radios to receive the message and the broadcast times (which are targeted to daytime listeners, when Afghan males are away from the home and females can control the dial). Because Afghan women exercise a powerful but hidden influence over families and communities, identifying them as a target audience and working to build that audience can pay important dividends.

Early on, CJTF82 recognized that many of the skills associated with successful synchronized communications lie outside traditional military career fields. Using funds provided by the Department of the Army, the task force entered into a partnership with The Moby Group, a large multimedia commercial firm based in Kabul. Together they created a holistic media campaign to promote Afghan Security Forces and build stronger ties between the Afghan people in RC(E) and the local and national government. The result was a successful print and broadcast campaign that leveraged commercial marketing, concept development and production capabilities. Tailored to local ethnic differences, the campaign featured posters, billboards and television and radio spots in both Dari and Pashto (the two national Afghan languages) and included imagery geared to Pashtun, Tajik or Hazara audiences, where appropriate. The campaign proved strikingly successful throughout RC(E), because it was correctly perceived as an Afghan creation, created by Afghans for Afghans.

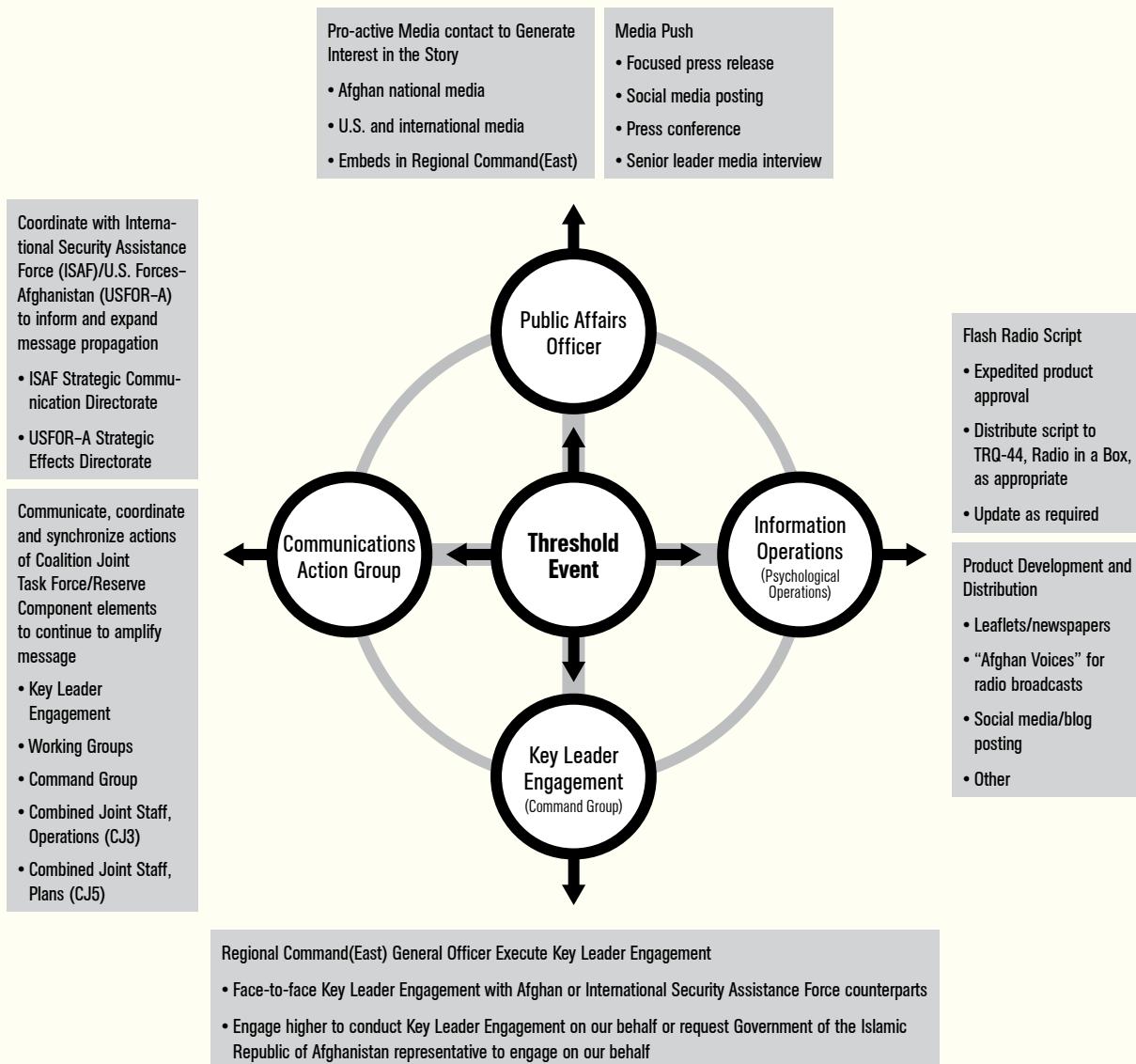
CJTF82 also employed a sophisticated range of assessment tools to provide constant feedback on its communications effort. In addition to quarterly polls conducted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), RC(E) conducted monthly polling using Afghan contract pollsters in each of its 158 districts, with an average sample size of 150,000 residents (far more than other assessment tools). Although sometimes limited by terrain, weather or the security situation in remote areas, these polls provided more comprehensive and localized information to complement and supplement other assessment efforts. Battlespace owners (BSOs) supported by Tactical PSYOP Teams (TPTs) also conducted detailed regular “atmospheric” assessments—specific local observations—forwarded daily through information channels, to augment other tools and paint a more complete picture of the information domain.

These principles and concepts drove the CJTF82 information effort—a battleground every bit as real and consequential as any kinetic operation. Some operations were phased, long-duration efforts, like OP Jaeza (meaning “reward”), an integrated, synchronized campaign to establish community safety tiplines. Battlespace-owning units used their RIABs, face-to-face engagements and hundreds of thousands of print products to inform the population about the tiplines. Virtually every item handed out in villages and towns—school backpacks, flags, humanitarian supplies, even emergency food and water—was accompanied by counter-improvised explosive device (IED) literature and tipline numbers. As awareness grew, increasing numbers of local Afghans began to call in the location of IEDs and caches, often receiving cash payments for making these calls under the DoD Rewards Program. Units also handed out cell phones to trusted local leaders and personalities to facilitate call-ins. Actionable calls increased dramatically. Each call was viewed as contributing to the prevention of a rocket, mortar or IED attack. By tracking the number and results of the incoming calls, the program could quickly present evidence pointing to the power of information in COIN.

Often the information fight was fluid and immediate, as the CJTF raced to respond to unforeseen events that happened almost daily. For those events judged to have high potential impact in the information domain (which were referred to as “threshold events”), the CJTF82 CAG executed a formal battle drill to generate a fast but thoughtful response. With PA and IO representatives in the Joint Operations Center 24/7, the CAG operated with full situational awareness and in step with the operations and intelligence sections to react to sudden events with high media interest or immediate IO impact. In these scenarios, speed matters, but credibility, truthfulness and accuracy matter as much, if not more.

CJTF82 Threshold Event Battle Drill

- Any communication actor can identify and nominate an event. The Communications Action Group (CAG) will confirm and energize all actors to amplify the message.
- Each key information actor has a list of options to amplify and repeat the message in their respective areas.
- Communication actors will continue to amplify and repeat message until loss of traction or higher priority event intervenes.
- Each communication has a different timeline for action (Public Affairs Officer has the shortest window and Psychological Operations has the longest).



The CJTF's response to a quickly developing IO event in the Sar Hawza district of western Paktika province on 26 August 2009, serves as an example of the importance of these principles in the information fight. On that date, an infantry battalion from 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (a subordinate element of CJTF82) received word from local Afghan sources that a wounded Taliban commander had taken refuge in a local clinic and was seeking treatment for serious wounds. The battalion immediately notified its parent brigade and launched a platoon to the scene.

Upon arrival, the platoon leader coordinated with the local Afghan Army, Afghan Police leaders and the clinic director. Meanwhile the battalion had also contacted the local subdistrict governor and chief of police.

Units recorded each of these engagements to document the concurrence of Afghan officials using audio and video gear provided by the CJTF and pushed down to platoon level. Once informed that all civilians had been removed from the clinic grounds, and accompanied by Afghan security forces, the lieutenant conducted a cordon and search of the clinic. In the ensuing firefight, AH64 Apache attack helicopters launched several Hellfire missiles, resulting in the death or capture of all insurgents inside.

In the immediate aftermath, unit leaders conducted a KLE at the scene to inform village elders of the circumstances. Civilian development experts quickly arrived to assure local citizens that the clinic would be repaired. At the unit's request, local provincial and subdistrict governors made public statements in support of the coalition; the statements were broadcast on local television and radio stations. Brigade and CJTF82 PAOs quickly informed local and international media of the facts. The next day, instead of highlighting a coalition attack on a hospital, the *New York Times* published a front-page story with the headline "Afghan Commander is Captured in Raid."⁸

This situation could easily have ended in disaster, handing a major information victory to the enemy. Instead, close cooperation with local authorities, good tactical decisionmaking, prompt and truthful messaging and rapid sharing of information with the media and higher headquarters resulted in a strongly positive outcome, with Afghans taking the lead in communicating the news to the population. Like most success stories in COIN, it incorporated actions across all lines of operation, not just one. Actions on the ground, not "spin," guided the public's reception of the story. Among many, this event stands out as a best practice—a dramatic illustration of "what right looks like" for synchronized communications in the information fight.

Commanders at all levels now recognize that successful COIN must incorporate a strong and effective information component to ensure success. However, a decade into this fight, the U.S. Army is still not optimized to fight in the information domain. Shifting doctrine, inadequate force structure and unfocused professional military education (PME) programs all contribute to the problem, forcing heavily burdened tactical commanders to forge their own ad hoc solutions. Below are some concrete recommendations based on CJTF82's lessons learned from Operation Enduring Freedom X.

- **Embrace Synchronized Communications.** Joint organizations are moving toward an understanding that synchronized communications is the way ahead. Uncoordinated or incoherent messaging, both vertically and horizontally, is self-defeating in a fast-moving and chaotic information fight. Messaging entities scattered across the staff without direct access to the command group often get sidelined. Division and corps staffs in garrison do not need a CAG; combined, joint organizations actually in the fight clearly do. The manpower cost is low, but the payoff is real.
- **Get the Doctrine Right.** To justify a separate IO career field and to create a distinct staff "lane," a disaggregated mixed bag of specialties—Operations Security (OPSEC), Computer Network Operations, Military Deception, Electronic Warfare and Psychological Operations—was pulled from other parts of the staff to allow commanders to mass the effects of the information element of combat power.⁹ CJTF82 found the practice quite different from the theory. First, the resident expertise for these specialties is found elsewhere—in the G2 (Intelligence), G3 (Operations and Plans) and G6 (Information) sections. The handful of officers assigned to the IO division staff had little or no training in these specialized areas. As one four-star general observed while visiting RC(E), lumping disparate subfields together to create an artificial career track makes little sense in the current COIN fight. Constantly changing doctrine is another limitation that impacts IO across the board: stability and continuity, even at the 80 percent mark, is best when the U.S. Army is engaged in active operations.
- **Reconsider the FA 30 Career Field.** The FA 30 Information Operations career field has enjoyed mixed success. Often manned by officers who are not strongly competitive in their original basic branches and ineligible for command themselves, FA 30 officers often struggle to influence the combat-arms officers who monopolize operations and command positions. Many are posted to continental U.S. billets in the institutional Army and are not found forward deployed anyway. With some notable exceptions, the

CJTF82 experience was that officers with a strong and successful operational background, given a short training course in IO, outperformed FA 30 officers consistently.¹⁰

- **Fix Psychological Operations.** In the field, the IO component of synchronized communications is concerned almost exclusively with broadcast, print and face-to-face messaging—the bread and butter of psychological operations. PSYOP officers command companies and battalions, deploy to the field frequently and are far more expert in these key disciplines. Eliminating the FA 30 career field and moving those spaces to the PSYOPs community deserves serious consideration. Army leaders might also consider a new name. The term PSYOP unavoidably creates perception problems with journalists, State Department public diplomacy officers and many others, without countervailing advantages. “Influence Operations” is one possibility that has gained currency as an alternative to “PSYOPS.”

Other changes also merit review. Past decisions to align active-duty PSYOP units with the Special Operation Forces (SOF) community, leaving the reserve component (RC) to support all conventional units, has resulted in a dramatic shortfall in PSYOP support for most of the Army. Although SOF units, by definition, do not function as battlespace owners, they currently monopolize well-manned, well-resourced active-component (AC) PSYOP formations. By doctrine, a division-sized organization conducting Stability and Support Operations (SASO) should be supported by a PSYOP battalion. In OEF X, an understrength RC company was allocated to support CJTF82. Its Soldiers performed superbly, but their low numbers meant that some brigades and many battalions fought with no PSYOP support at all. A stronger RC PSYOP community and a better aligned AC community are badly needed.

- **Institutionalize KLE.** The schoolhouse has begun to recognize the importance of KLE, but manning has yet to catch up. At the division and brigade levels, small KLE sections are powerful drivers for effective command group communications. The U.S. Army might well consider enshrining them in doctrine and supporting them on joint manning documents with dedicated personnel.¹¹
- **Resource the Field.** Army leaders acknowledge that the information domain is critical in COIN. However, capability in the field is minimal. Divisions have a handful of trained officers and almost no non-commissioned officers (NCOs); maneuver brigades are assigned a single IO officer, while battalions have none at all. As a consequence, in Afghanistan artillery officers and NCOs are widely used to man “out-of-hide” IO sections. While effective, they have little formal training, and the fires mission clearly suffers. An optimum arrangement is to field a school-trained S7 Information Operations major and captain at brigade level, with a school-trained captain (03) at the battalion level. PSYOP NCOs at progressively senior grades—staff sergeant (E-6) for the company, sergeant first class (E-7) for the battalion, master sergeant (E-8) for the brigade and sergeant major (E-9) for the division—are just as essential. Battalions also lack Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)-trained PAOs or NCOs; and given their regular contact with host nation and international media in dispersed operations, the need for them is urgent.
- **Leader Training.** To be effective, synchronized communications must be commander’s business and integrated into operations. This awareness must begin early in leader training and reinforced in PME. Using fires as an analogy, we can ask: are leaders trained to employ information to the same degree? Do commanders learn at the career course, staff college and precommand courses that every operation should have an information objective, a consequence management plan and prescribed themes and messages? Successful company, battalion and brigade commanders “get it”—but usually from hard-won experience, not from the training base.

The artful use of information is true combat power. Successful commanders throughout history have intuitively sought to control and employ information offensively and deny it to the enemy defensively. They did so by making the information fight truly commander’s business. U.S. adversaries state this plainly and, with a fraction of our resources, fight effectively in the information domain. CJTF82’s experience in OEF X suggests a way ahead for mastering the information domain in counterinsurgency that offers decisive results.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance of the CJTF82 Commander and staff in the preparation of this paper.
- ² Prior to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) X, division-level organizations in Afghanistan and Iraq typically employed traditional staff elements with no coordinating function; for example, the IO cell was embedded inside the CJTF J3 Operations section and the Public Affairs element in the Command Group, with no Key Leader Engagement entity.
- ³ “Information” here refers to facts or data communicated to the different audiences affecting the campaign, which is distinct from intelligence. Traditionally, military organizations have not approached operations in the information domain as a distinct “line of operation.”
- ⁴ CJTF82 Campaign Plan, 2009.
- ⁵ S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War* (Delhi: Adam Publishers, Reprint, 1999), p. 59.
- ⁶ This network enabled the CJTF to reach all communities in the RC(E) battlespace and all areas not absolutely denied by terrain blocking line of sight. RC(E) covers an area approximately the size of New York state.
- ⁷ An RC(E) campaign encouraging locals to report on weapons, improvised explosive devices and criminals. Operation Jaeza, a program developed by CJTF82 and Afghan National Security Forces, is part of DoD’s Rewards Program.
- ⁸ Abdul Waheed Wafa and Sharon Otterman, *New York Times*, 27 August 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/28/world/asia/28afghan.html>.
- ⁹ Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-13, *Information Operations: Doctrine, Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, (November 2003), p. v.
- ¹⁰ For most of OEF X, the CJTF82 IO Chief was a U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant colonel (O-5) who had commanded a Light-Armored Vehicle (LAV) company and served in Iraq. He is a DoD-Inspector General (IG) Special Agent in civilian life and attended the one-month Joint IO Course before deploying. The CJTF Senior PSYOP Planner, a U.S. Army Reserve lieutenant colonel (O-5), is an advertising executive in civilian life. Both are combat veterans whose broad mix of civilian and military skills and experiences lent much to RC(E)’s information line of operation.
- ¹¹ KLE is a recent development that has yet to gain full doctrinal acceptance. Ideally, KLE principles and best practices would be taught in the schoolhouse, incorporated into doctrinal publications and resourced by the Army with trained officers and NCOs in the field.

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