

## Influence Activities in an Irregular Tapestry

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**M**y previous submission to SAGE International (10/10/2012) included an analysis of the New Zealand Army experience in irregular



warfare – from our New Zealand War’s, all the way through to modern operations in Afghanistan with the Provincial Reconstruction Team. The paper also touched on our influence operations in Malaya, Vietnam, East Timor and in other peace support operations. A constant theme emerged in our experience; the New Zealanders did not shy from the application

of force and sought to closely weave this into the fabric of influence with other softer applications of power. This was particularly prevalent during the Malayan Emergency where the New Zealand military, and most notably the Special Air Service, effectively made life unbearable for the irregulars, subsequently forcing them from their jungle sanctuaries to engage with Government – to be in-effect, politically neutralised. Force was a staple of our modus operandi and when used in close co-operation with the pen, was very effective. These skills and techniques have long been the domain of classical counter-insurgency operations which, with operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, have gained renewed flavour. The purpose of this short piece is to propose new ideas for the application of ‘influence activities’ and the necessity for a holistic approach in the application of *power* to generate influence. Influence, it will be shown, is not so much a physical capability restricted to the occasional media article or public relations broadcast, but is the very essence of how soft and hard power is applied. ‘Influence’ is technically everything we do. It is not resigned to one particular operating system or a supporting element, but is literally the engine room behind every action we undertake, whether that be kinetic or non-kinetic in nature.

### The Need for Influence Proficiency

Much has been written about the future littoral, congested and interconnected mission space with a multitude of actors,

both state and non-state, with exceptional access to sophisticated weaponry, tactics and ideas. This cannot be argued with. The future of conflict is certain to be a highly congested and convoluted affair, with confusing boundaries of responsibilities in part a result of the geography and social nature of future conflicts, but also as a natural defence against the technological advantage of Western militaries. If the future is to be a tapestry of actors with varying degrees of influence, motives and lethality, then intervening forces will need to reassess their application of influence and, most importantly, the process of determining when to apply force. Violence will certainly be required, but in such a congested, media-heavy environment, force for the sake of it will cause more harm than good; but if used accurately and in conjunction with other elements of power, provide a powerful influence tool. In this environment, Western militaries will need to seriously reconsider how to apply influence in the irregular tapestry of future conflict as so frequently commented on by modern writers and thinkers.

David Kilcullen, among other highly distinguished and respectable authors, have written on the future of conflict and the irregular ‘ecosystem’, as some like to describe it. This author does not seek to criticise any of their work for their experience in various conflict situations is indisputable, however, one does get a sense of ‘what next’? Future conflicts will become highly confused, cluttered and intentionally convoluted affairs, blurring the lines

between state and non-state actors and drastically undermining our Cold War preference for conflicts that can be easily disassembled into counter-insurgency, peace support or interstate doctrinal definitions. The future, as numerous authors testify, will be incredibly dark and fought in the shadows. We are left with the fundamental question: how on earth are we to operate in this matrix of intentional confusion and what does this mean for the application of influence, when popular perception and persuasion is as important, sometimes even more crucial, than hard force.

### **A New Paradigm for Influence**

Intervening forces need to develop a new paradigm for influence that does not relegate ‘influence activities’ to a supporting element, but recognise them as the very essence of what is trying to be achieved.

*Information operations* has taken the limelight for the production of effectively marketing material to sway local perception, however, this in itself is not



influence. Influence is a combination of tools – both kinetic and non-kinetic – to project a particular theme. In short, true influence is the orchestration of effects to project a message; it is not merely a public relations exercise or misguided humanitarian projects.

Every action we take will have to be designed to gain influence over an opponent

that may not be easily defined, and will subsequently change and adapt as our ‘message’ changes the composition of the target. Our actions, both the hard application of force and soft power techniques, will need to be woven together to deliver a theme to the world stage and the target audience in particular. Such a theme of grand-strategic relationship management will require a true strategic leader, part diplomat, soldier, businessman and most importantly, a master of reading energy and how actions have implications for the broader security system.

We need not necessarily look to more modern works to understand the fundamentals of future conflict. Clausewitz said it best when he stated, “war is an extension of politics by other means”. Whilst we write and preach as though we understand and conform to this idea, we continually detach the application of force towards a broader political end-state. If we are doing one thing with the fist of state power, and saying another with the pen of diplomacy and cultural engagement, then our entire strategic theme is confusing and open to ridicule with the tools of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter proving to be just as influential in swaying popular perception as hard power.

Let there be no doubt that the application of force has and will always remain a crucial part of future conflicts. The complication emerges when determining the right time to employ force and how this is orchestrated within the broader strategy. This is not an issue of modern day commanders but has

surely influenced the fundamentals of warfare for centuries. The complications emerge when physical destruction and the resulting collateral damage, which is sure to follow, is manipulated for strategic gain. Of course, this is not to say that field commanders are required to sit and contemplate the strategic repercussions of their actions when engulfed in a firefight. During such moments it is merely a matter of survival. However, in more prepared engagements, social perception and strategic utilisation of information and perception can and should be considered when planning operations. If employed appropriately, ‘influence activities’ can shape perception such that the application of force maybe even greater than previous. ‘Influence activities’ may be used to almost prepare the battlefield, if you will, to unleash substantial firepower if that is deemed appropriate. Rather than viewing influence activities as divorced from the overall campaign strategy, it needs to be viewed as an enabler that can literally allow intervention forces to conduct operations it may not have previously been able to. ‘Influence activities’ is literally the oil in the engine of conflict; it is not a separate component but the very basis for a successful operation.

### **Grand Strategy & Influence**

‘Influence’ is commonly restricted to counterinsurgency and other irregular conflicts against non-state actors. In a highly interconnected community with unparalleled media access and online scrutiny, inter-state

conflict will certainly continue though shrouded in political manipulation and influence.

The fundamental principles of coercion and influence are (and are currently) being employed by powerful state actors. The probability of state-vs.-state warfare has not necessarily reduced, however, the advent of open large scale state-vs.-state warfare with a clear open declaration of war has certainly diminished. Certainly this argument has been recited for some time and constantly been proven wrong; but with the advent of such intense media scrutiny the ability to openly go to war with another state and not be chastised as the destabiliser to regional peace is certainly problematic. One could assume the global community that has prospered so much from the Western-based international system, would certainly have something to say to any destabilising actions that threatened its economic viability. However, a 20-30 year campaign of social integration, cultural exchanges, port facility development and ‘humanitarian assistance’ can certainly shape one’s perception and potentially achieve the same strategic objective without a single shot having been fired. Which is more preferable – open war and a wicked backlash from the international system, or the slow and subtle art of influence were all avenues of national power are employed to effectively make any peer competitors irrelevant?

## **Conclusion: The Art of Influence**

This opinion piece has sought to inject a new perspective on the nature of ‘influence operations’ in the future irregular tapestry. There are countless pieces of brilliant work on counterinsurgency that all offer rich insights on countering irregulars. All publications offer a similar perspective; combating future irregulars, whether they are state or non-state based, will be as much about influence as pure military force. Whilst this has commonly been captured in counterinsurgency terminology as ‘hearts and minds’ and the necessity for ‘full spectrum operations’, it still comes down to ‘influence’ at its core basic tenants and identifying the correct tool for the correct effect.

The key point this piece has sought to project is that ‘influence’ is the end state, not a supporting element to enable kinetic operations (for example). If we are to operate in the highly congested irregular environment most strategic thinkers anticipate, then we must firmly grasp what exactly we mean by ‘influence activities’ and its position in our thinking. A 5.56mm that eliminates a particularly unpleasant individual, restoring security to a community, can be just as influential on the local populace and the irregular system, as undertaking a reconstruction project. Neither is superior to the other. Our challenge is trying to determine what tool, whether that be force or non-kinetic to achieve a desired end-state, and that challenge rests primarily on the leaders’ ability to read the irregular

tapestry, the energy flows within it, and where and how to act.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

**Images accessed 17/01/2014 –**

Psyops poster:

[http://disinfo.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/psyops\\_poster.jpg](http://disinfo.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/psyops_poster.jpg)

Power to influence badge:

[http://www.flyingtigerssurplus.com/product-images/lg/U135\\_lg.jpg](http://www.flyingtigerssurplus.com/product-images/lg/U135_lg.jpg)