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# NOT READING TEA LEAVES

## EDUCATING THE FORCE FOR FUTURE THREATS

BY DR. SPENCER B. MEREDITH III, PH.D.

At a U.S. Army Special Operations Command Futures Forum earlier this year, Lt. Gen. Kenneth Tovo and Maj. Gen. James Linder asked several critical questions about the indicators and warnings for groups like Boko Haram in Niger and the FARC in Colombia. At different times during the briefing, both Commanding Generals identified the role of latent discontent and proximate sparks to ignite what in other places and at other times would lead to political dissent rather than overt violent rebellion. Yet at the same time, they also emphasized the role of greed and outright thuggery in the rise of both groups. While not discounting the genuine anger many

disposed populations experience at the hand of abusive political, economic and social structures, the inclusion of such agency issues as self-interest and personality play a central role in both explaining the rise of violent extremists organizations and the contexts under which they may arise in the future.

In order to understand the complexity of those factors, several categories of analysis have proven beneficial in scholarly research into comparative politics, the context that shapes and often drives the violent non-state groups facing the U.S. today and that will likely exist in the future. International factors certainly shape those environments,

but the axiom that “all politics is local” stands true because perspectives get filtered through the local context, even when that context may include larger regional and transnational influences.

The basic premise starts with structural factors that both constrain and incentivize individual behavior, either personally or in a group, and compares them to the agency of those individuals that operate within and sometimes change the structure. Structure applies equally to the state and society, carrying with it attributes of *capacity* — the actual resources used in the operation of power, as well as the ability and willingness to use them; *autonomy* — the ability to make and enforce decisions without alternative authorities overriding decisions; and *legitimacy* — the persistence of active support, all the way down to the absence of overt opposition. The value of this format is that it allows for comparison across cases and can include data collected from multiple academic disciplines ranging from political science, history and economics, to sociology and anthropology. It also includes diverse inputs from practitioners in the field, whether through Department of State country briefs, or more localized Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs missions designed to accumulate and analyze information, as well as shape perceptions on the ground.

The interaction of those dynamics creates the relationship often called the social contract, whereby the state agrees to provide certain benefits in exchange for society’s submission to its decisions and demands. That relationship can be both resilient and vulnerable to change depending on a host of factors, all of which become more complicated with the increase of information available to average citizens, the use of demonizing language by political opponents to influence those populations to their sides, and the role of transnational groups seeking to stir the pot even more. So how can we make sense of this “Gray Zone” of data? Social movement theory does

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The future operating environment can be a bit hazy for ARSOF operators working in dynamic situations with violent extremists organizations at play. Looking at the past through a scholarly lens can provide insight to help shape how ARSOF reacts to future threats.

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BY SPC. BRIAN KOHL



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A Psychological Operations officer talks with his Uganda People's Defence Force counterparts. Encounters such as these provide an opportunity to accumulate and analyze information for future use.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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A Special Forces officer with his Montagnard counterparts in Vietnam. ARSOF personnel must develop a deep understanding of local conditions and cultures in order to shape the operational environment — understanding history is critical to this process.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO

a good job of telling one side of the story, the rise of movements, how they are structured, and what they are capable of accomplishing based on internal dynamics. However, it lacks a contextual grounding in the state-society relationship, or at least emphasizes the social side too much. As a result, a more effective model uses basic comparisons of key concepts between and within states and societies, thus allowing more explanation of information that could otherwise overload and threaten to spin out of analytical control.

Yet, knowing what has happened in the past and what is going on right now is not enough to give indicators and warning for future threats. Trend analysis puts that picture into context by evaluating *likelihood and consequence* to determine the level of threat posed by various indicators. The USASOC G9 has been working on these aspects to give a reliable picture of future threats, as well as a framework that can adapt to so-called “black swans” or exogenous factors that lie outside of a predictive model. In that sense, using structure and agency allows for both tried and tested methods of analysis, and a systematic approach

that can survive first contact with a new variable.

Comparative politics is helpful in that regard, and building competencies in the discipline would serve SOF well, as would greater education in cultural empathy and conflict resolution. These have strong roots in SWCS training methods, and can be integrated into a variety of short-courses to longer-term educational opportunities, like the one at the National Defense University's Joint Special Operations Master of Arts program at Fort Bragg. The program is part of the College of International Security Affairs, with its blended faculty from both traditional civilian academia and professional military and interagency backgrounds. The faculty represent the college's mission to educate practical skills in critical thinking and analysis that do more than increase knowledge, rather seeking to expand the options for effective, feasible policy making.

Competencies such as cultural empathy, with its emphasis on learning how to step outside of “self” to see the world from “other's” perspective, and conflict resolution efforts to move beyond the power-

ful emotions and interests associated with violence in order to see and show the disputants the available options so easily missed by narrow perspectives in conflict, do not come easily. They do fit into the SOF truths though, by stressing the role of humans over hardware and the need to take time to build a force capable of navigating the complex security environment facing the U.S. currently and what will develop in the future. Continuing to educate SOF in competencies that go beyond the necessary war fighting skill sets, and include the strengths of scholarly analytical tools will ensure SOF can continue to take the fight to the enemy, while also learning beforehand what gives rise to them and working where possible to prevent threats from escalating to the point of violence. **SW**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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