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# CHANGING CULTURE

Operational adjustments to  
match the operating environment.

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When I first learned I was going to command a Regional Psychological Operations Battalion focused on the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility, I immediately realized I had a lot to learn. I grew up in the PSYOP Regiment exclusively focused on CENTCOM. I have learned a great deal after assuming command and working “down South” for the last couple of years. I appreciate the inherent differences between these AORs, their conditions and the threats faced by the deployed regional PSYOP teams.

One of the consistent mantras surrounding culture and behavior is that change takes time. This applies to both the foreign audiences we influence, as well as our own organizations as we assess conditions and adapt to operational realities. In developing and implementing the Alternative Regional Engagement Strategy, I have experienced both of these realities as the battalion has adapted employment methodology for the deployed teams, and those actively training for deployment, to sustain influence effects against a range of adversary threats.

## CONDITIONS DEMAND ADAPTABILITY

A little more than three years ago, I was sitting in Kabul, Afghanistan in command of the Military Information Support Task Force. Even as I was in command of that organization, I already knew I was selected as the Battalion Commander of a Psychologi-

cal Operations Battalion at Fort Bragg. During one of the quiet evenings, I was contemplating the growing demand for our professional skills in the SOF enterprise and the finite numbers within the PSYOP Regiment. At this time, I was not aware of the imminent 1:2 Deployment to Dwell policy and the corresponding support for it from the leadership of 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne), U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the U.S. Special Operations Command. Nevertheless the current resources within the Regiment were not enough for the growing requirement.

As an extension of this condition, and reflective of the diverse nature of our adversaries and their actions, I sought a way to adapt how we were employing teams to satisfy standing requirements while also maximizing the benefit of these teams’ deployments. Teams in many places have been deployed into one country to work directly with a respective Country Team, partner units, U.S. Government agencies and partner nations against shared objectives outlined in theater special operations command strategy documents, theater campaign plans and integrated country plans. The fundamental challenge to this model is that many of the adversary threats, from non-state to state, don’t constrain their efforts to one country at a time. The average number of countries across all Geographic Combatant Commands is 38 within their AOR. A fully manned Regional Battalion can only employ 24 total teams. Even under a 1:1 dwell time policy, a GCC could only ever address a fraction of the possible deployment locations in a one team — one country model.

I took command of the battalion in the summer of 2016 and found that we were operating at 100 percent commitment of available forces, even before implementing a move to 1:2 D2D. This deployment model was dependent on the battalion force strength at 100 percent with 100 percent of those personnel available for deployment. I knew this was unrealistic and untenable and sought a change that would protect the force, the mission and meet D2D guidelines. Born out of this calculus was the Alternative Regional Engagement Strategy. This strategy is not new as other Regional Battalions are operating similarly in other GCCs, but had not been implemented in SOUTHCOM. The battalion staff conducted mission analysis and course of action development to design a phased implementation for ARES that would ultimately reduce the footprint at the tactical

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A Psychological Operations Soldier talks with Salvadoran police officers to coordinate events in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAYMIEN MCMILLIAN



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end to reinforce the available forces at the operational level while also seeking opportunity to employ the teams in training as part of the D2D pre-mission cycle. The chief benefit of ARES for the TSOC Commander and his primary staff was its ability to sustain current gains while also providing for an enhanced contingency force to respond to annual catastrophic weather events or emerging crises within the AOR. Under the past practice, any new business would have required stopping or postponing current efforts to address any new contingencies. By building a bigger bench at the deployed C2 nodes within the AOR, the command was gaining a greater capacity to enhance and synchronize regional effects as well as an immediate response force to address new requirements.

ARES made sense to the TSOC Commander and his staff based on the analysis, D2D ramifications and conditions within the AOR. The CG subsequently authorized the ARES concept for implementation. This was the easy part of the problem — the harder challenge would be the subsequent changes to practice and culture within the battalion to make this operating model a reality.

## CHANGE TAKES TIME

Some of the manifestations of this culture, due to past deployment practice, was the routine rotation of forces with one company being relieved by forces from a sister company. While this made pre-mission training far easier under the past 1:1 D2D model, it was disruptive under the 1:2 policy as no one company could manage the entire mission load. Additionally, under the “company in, company out” model, the teams’ efforts were constrained to their individual six month band of excellence. This reality led to sometimes divergent efforts between teams as they hit the ground and sought to make their mark within this time window. As part of the ARES implementation, portions of the AOR were assigned to each company. This move enabled these teams to sustain a longer term focus on specific countries while also increasing the incidence of forces returning to the same countries, engaging with the same personal-

ities, and working on the lines of effort within a broader, long-term engagement strategy.

The second promised benefit of ARES was the integration of episodic support both from the SOC-Forward command and control location as well as teams in training back at Fort Bragg. This episodic support from CONUS has been proven viable through the deployment and integration of audio-visual teams to augment deployed forces with additional media capability. Similarly, PSYOP teams in their pre-mission training are available to deploy forward for short periods to reinforce the deployed team, augment partnered training, and conduct pre-deployment site surveys as part of their pre-mission training. Finally, the immediate resource of additional personnel at the SOC-Forward can flex into the countries of their region to augment teams on the ground. This specific practice was used to generate excellent results during a recent deployment to Central America.

## CENTRAL AMERICAN PSYOP PLANNER

In Central America, the rotating deployment of four RPTs into four separate countries, with the same overarching problem set, facilitated conditions for the operationalization of ARES and the augmentation of a PSYOP planner collocated with each SOC-Forward command and control element. ARES places more emphasis on the PSYOP planner and their role in the intersection of relationships with the deployed RPTs, the SOC-Forward, the TSOC J-39, and the resources available at the force-provider level at Fort Bragg. In essence, the PSYOP planner streamlines communication between deployed RPTs and greater SOC enterprise by not only acting as a liaison through the SOC-Forward’s reporting to the TSOC, but to also articulate how PSYOP effects are occurring within the region. These planners either coordinate the temporary employment of flex support from the Force Provider, or they manage the RPT’s forecasted demand signal to identify and catalog future opportunities on how to meet this demand signal. Given this role, the PSYOP planner must fully understand the RPT’s operations, actions and activities in order to both articulate

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Products developed by a PSYOP A/V team to support El Salvador's ongoing information campaign to champion the National Police as the 'Heroes of El Salvador.'

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the short-term demand signals to the SOCFWD and the force provider and the long-term opportunities to the J39 at the TSOC.

This requires the ARES concept to place the most experienced PSYOP operators at the planner position to provide a long-term context to PSYOP OAs as part of an over arching influence narrative. In the case of Central America, the SOF problem set is one where the supported countries are battling endemic corruption at the political level leading to a paucity of resources with which the partner-nation security forces seek to affect lasting change. The nature of SOF partnerships is to identify areas for development which will have an enduring impact beyond the original scope of the investment. PSYOP's strongest contribution to this effort was the development of a long-term 'image enhancement' narrative incorporating the actions from all U.S. Country Team security related successes into a coordinated campaign extending beyond these individual efforts. This coordinated campaign not only integrated existing and forecasted PSYOP series, but also identified areas from which other SOF effects could support the aforementioned series' messaging. With this approach, PSYOP in Central America encourages positive behavior in two important ways. First, it provides security forces a professional standard to live up to with measurable benchmarks from which all security forces could feel pride in their accomplishments. Second, these coordinated actions drive support from the population towards these security forces while also articulating the population's role in this struggle.

With this in mind, the PSYOP planner at the SOCFWD proves an invaluable resource in articulating how all reporting comes down to three important elements: outcomes, insights and opportunities.

From a reporting perspective, outcomes are valuable because they indicate a change in the operational environment that commanders can leverage to sustain momentum within their respective missions. Insights are observations that further illuminate the operational environment and enable commanders to update the assumptions being incorporated into current and future planning.

Most importantly, however, is the PSYOP planners' identification of opportunities and development of plans to exploit that opportunity. These plans highlight what conditions or shortfalls need to be updated, and in what phase, in order for the opportunity to be realized. These comprised the demand signals that empower commanders at all levels to determine what internal resources are available to minimize the identified shortfalls. With respect to ARES, and the increased emphasis on the PSYOP planners, this drives the communication between the planner and the force provider to identify what opportunities can be forecast by teams in pre-mission training. On a more immediate level, it enables the planner to articulate what forces can be temporarily flexed from the force provider or within the augmented planner cell to meet that demand signal sent up from the RPTs on the ground.

During the most recent rotation, these demand signals enabled the PSYOP planner to request audio-visual teams from a sister battalion at the force-provider level. One audiovisual two-man team was able to update product imagery in anticipation of El Salvador's revitalization of an ongoing partner-nation led information campaign integrating a current PSYOP series that championed the 'new look' El Salvadoran Policia Nacional Civil as the 'Heroes of El Salvador'. The initial PSYOP Series in El Salvador leveraged the U.S. Country Team's investment into the training and revitalization of the PNC. Products from within the series championed over arching themes of a 'revitalized police force' and set conditions for PSYOP to be heavily integrated into event planning for maximum dissemination. These events enabled increased civil engagements between the PNC and locals wherein 'prizes' were given to civilians who could best describe the positive developments within the PNC. This type of engagement facilitated PNC led events to be expanded

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into under-governed, less permissive areas throughout El Salvador. This expansion of civil-security activity provided opportunities for increased observables that could strengthen the messaging for continued expansion. The RPT in El Salvador identified this opportunity and forecast the demand signal to enable an A/V team to update the footage for future products during the holiday season that led to an extension of the 'Heroes of El Salvador' PSYOP series for another year.

In Panama, the RPT was able to leverage a temporarily flexed A/V team to take advantage of a joint training event between other SOF elements. In this case, there was no ongoing RPT-led PSYOP series to champion the security forces in Panama. However, the Panama RPT employed the A/V team which enabled the separate security forces working in the land, maritime and air domains to showcase interoperability within the Panamanian Security Forces. Additionally, the capturing of observables for future products facilitated an increased partnership between the RPT and both SENAFRONT (border forces) and SENAN (maritime forces) to adopt a more holistic approach to combatting narcotics in their country. Success from the RPT's role in this joint training event led to products that encourage increased coordination from partnered security elements both from within SOF and the U.S. Country Team.

Deploying short-term forces from Fort Bragg is only one example of the value of an augmented PSYOP planner cell to meet the short-term requirements from the deployed RPTs. The added personnel depth at the planner position provides an immediate resource to support team requirements. In this way, a PSYOP planner was able to conduct assessments of border aligned units in Honduras and Guatemala, freeing the RPTs to sustain their relationships with their partnered forces. These assessments were conducted in line with a new SOCFWD

priority to identify areas of interoperability between different countries along the porous border regions.

In Guatemala, the PSYOP planner was able to leverage support from the SOCFWD element to conduct an assessment of an interagency task force working on the southern Guatemalan-Honduran border. This assessment led to the RPT in Guatemala increasing the relationship with a unit that had regional oversight over multiple interagency task forces throughout Guatemala. Follow-on working groups between the RPT and the regional unit will enable the interagency task forces methods from which to share best practices for civil engagements across multiple departments. This will be especially important considering the RPT's ongoing relationship with the Guatemalan doctrinal center for civil-military engagement and the need to ensure the newest practices are sustained throughout the operating forces in Guatemala.

In Honduras, the RPT's relationship with the border forces were not as strongly established. However, given the SOC-Forward's new prioritization of the border regions and the PSYOP planner's shared perspective, the PSYOP planner was able to work with the SOC-Forward Civil Affairs Planner to integrate with a Civil Affairs team travelling to the Honduran border region. This joint assessment led to a structured approach towards developing a common operational picture that will facilitate a deliberate approach to future trans-border influence initiatives. These trans-border influence initiatives will be grounded in understanding the conditions and vulnerabilities of border aligned units and will also identify which behaviors can be reasonably encouraged among the populations on both sides of the border to support the security forces' efforts.

During the most recent PSYOP rotation to Central America, the ARES construct oversaw the successful flex-

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**Students play sports with Salvadoran police officers in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador, as part of a national campaign to revitalize the connection between the police force and the community.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAYMIEN MCMILLIAN

ing of temporary forces into theatre to action forecasted opportunities that led to stronger partnerships and stronger product development. Additionally, the construct enabled the RPTs to set the groundwork for partner-nation assessments necessary for developing a long-term engagement strategy. When looking at these multiple lines of effort facilitated through the SOC-Forward PSYOP planner, it is clear why the ARES concept reinforces this node with additional personnel and experience. The PSYOP planner leads through standardizing reporting formats from the teams, informing the SOC-Forward, TSOC J-39 and to the RPTs in pre-mission training. Furthermore, the ARES Concept successfully identifies the effects from the RPT's partnership with the supported countries' respective security forces to be the most valuable element from the RPTs' rotations. The nature of RPT's partnerships determines the potential, and feasibility, of ongoing and future PSYOP campaigns to be conducted by, with and through the partner nation. As the primary sensor on the ground, the RPTs work through the ARES construct to identify opportunities and push up demand signals that are articulated and actioned by the PSYOP planner to incorporate resources both from within the SOC-Forward and from the force provider.

These forecasts for demand signals are not specific to the deployed RPTs. The long-term nature of the overall PSYOP mission and the short-term nature of the RPT's deployments require a mechanism of continuity to facilitate communication through multiple rotations. These mechanisms are captured in the standardized assessments from the deployed RPTs of their specific partner nation relationships. The SOCFWD PSYOP's planner's role in this relationship is to maintain understanding of these assessments and communicate with the force provider how these assessments forecast requirements for future RPTs. The cross talk between the force provider and the deployed RPTs determine the nature of what resources are temporarily flexed to exploit opportunities and what resources are developed as part of a three to five year engagement strategy.

The Alternate Regional Engagement Strategy in Central America placed a majority of emphasis on PSYOP planner's ability to articulate to the SOF-Forward Commander the operational considerations of effects being generated by deployed teams, to identify opportunities for exploitation and to ensure constant communication with the training teams. These opportunities are derived from the RPT's relationship with the partner nation. Given this redirection of mission priorities, PSYOP's role in the regional mission set enables the RPTs' deployed footprint to contract or expand while maintaining the spotlight on the operational effects from the RPTs' enduring relationship with the partner-nation security force.

## FRICION AND THE UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS

In any change there is always friction. In organizational change that is a certainty. Resistance to these changes ran the gamut from, "That's not the way we've always done it," to, "I can't be effective with this few

people." To the first complaint, I would offer that the implementation of ARES was based on the conditions, constraints and decision made by the TSOC Commander. As his principle representative for PSYOP within his AOR, it was my responsibility to preserve both the mission and the force. The battalion is training its third wave of ARES Teams for deployment this fall. These teams have been trained and prepared for ARES as opposed to implementing it mid-stride. As such I am confident they will continue to improve the team-based competencies of planning, communication, and managing the broad range of engagements with U.S. Government, SOF and partner nations. Similarly the competence at the PSYOP planner level will continue to improve as will their ability to provide immediate flex forces and coordinate short term support from the teams in training. Soon this will be, "The way we've always done it."

Regarding the reduced footprint at the team level, that was done intentionally for a couple of reasons. The first was to reinforce the planner position at the SOCFWD to enable regional integration of effects. The second, and arguably more important reason, was to prevent the teams from pursuing a six-months-of-excellence model by forcing them to coordinate their efforts within the country, across adjacent teams and requesting support from the team training to replace them. This simple adjustment created the practical reality that enables adherence to an integrated and coordinated three-to-five year strategy instead of an independent and unsynchronized three-to-five month strategy. In other words, if everyone on the team is invested in the tactical outcomes, who is minding the shop at the operational and strategic levels.

The TSOC is under-represented with PSYOP manning, with only two or three assigned personnel within the J-39 section. The battalion reinforces this with an additional four personnel. Even with this additional manpower, it is a struggle to get beyond current operations tracking and reporting. In the 21st century digital information age, where every action or event can be captured and around the globe, live and in near-real time influence must be a pre-consideration of every plan, CONOP and action. PSYOP's role is to understand the human domain, and identify how and where these actions can be made to effect behavioral change. As indicated in the operational vignette above the synchronization of PSYOP, Special Forces and Civil Affairs and Naval Special Warfare creates opportunities for all of these elements to apply their unique skills, not just within SOF, but as a broader effort integrating U.S. Country Team resources and partner-nation forces. This integration begins at the planning stage, is sustained in execution and must be continued through assessment. ARES seeks to connect the deployed forces, the TSOC staff and the entire Battalion here at Bragg to participate in, and operate as, part of this integrated effort. 

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