



The Assessments Process in Contemporary Operating Environment

by Jimmy A. Gomez

Background

It sometimes seems as if the internal politics of Kabul are easier to understand than the latest doctrinal changes in our Field Manuals. However, as our doctrine evolves it continues to lag behind the reality and complexity of our operations in the Central Command (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR). As the security agreements and strategic objectives are changed, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) continue to evolve with them. This increases the degree of interactive complexity of any given situations within a unit's AOR and the staffs vision, understanding and execution of the operation.

As the ROE changes, the emerging spectrum of threats is not easily defined or understood by the staff which leads to our inability to develop and recommend solutions. Unfortunately, our doctrine does not keep up with these variables of the Contemporary Operational Environment (COE). As we enter the 10th year of combat operations in Afghanistan, a lot of questions continue to surface from every staff functional area and War Fighting Function (WFF) in reference to the validity, relevance and tactical applicability of the Assessments process.

FM 5-0 (March 2010) finally formalizes and outlines the Assessments Process. Depending on the structure of the problem, the staff may take different approaches to both understanding and defining problems and eventually developing solutions tied to campaign goals and the Division Commander's end state. Yet, the biggest question to habitually surface is "What is the role of each WFF within the Assessments process?" In this paper, we discuss and outline the staff participation in this essential, yet most analytically elusive process at the Division Staff level.

The Problem

If commanders had no way to influence the future, if they believed that the natural course of events would lead to a satisfactory outcome, or if they could achieve the desired results purely by reacting, they would have no reason to plan. (FM 5-0, 2010)

To put things in perspective, the Assessments Process is not a new concept. It has been around for many centuries. The crux of its applicability, effectiveness and mostly its relevance as the core component of every staff's battle rhythm heavily relies in having a detailed Assessments framework in place and a staff able to functionally apply it. The Assessments framework must measure the progress along our Lines of Operations (LOO's) outlined in the Campaign Plan and in support of achieving the Campaign Endstate(s). This framework must define the decisive,

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shaping and sustaining operations as well as transitioning these operations to their respective Partner Nation Institutions. Further, the Assessments framework must be understood and implemented by the entire staff not just the Fires WFF within the Division staff.

If the Assessments process remains isolated and independent then no amount of staff planning will truly realize the effect of staff synchronization or the impact of synchronizing and massing the WFF on the right target, at the right time, at the right place, with the right intensity to achieve the desired effect.

Helmut Von Moltke (1800 - 1891) possibly the most committed disciple of Clausewitz was head of the Prussian and German General Staff from 1858 - 1888. In his book *On Strategy (1871)*, Von Moltke describes that *“Only the layman sees in the course of a campaign a consistent execution of a preconceived and highly detailed original concept pursued consistently to the end.”* (Moltke. 1871)

In essence, the Assessments Process must be viewed by the collective staff as an Operation’s *discipline*. Therefore, it must be a major component of every staff battle rhythm and must be a critical task within the Operations Order (OPORD) and subsequent Fragmentary Orders (FRAGOs) to formally capture all permutations of the plan as well as consistently measure all progress or regression along the Division Commander’s Lines of Effort and the outlined Division Commander’s end-state.

Von Moltke also summarizes that *“No plan of operations extends with certain beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength.”* Regardless of the staff’s echelon; herein lays every staff’s most difficult task. In the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE), the enemy’s main strength is not always tangible, readily identifiable or easily defined in conventional terms. Von Moltke adds, *“Certainly the commander [in chief] will keep his great objective continuously in mind, undisturbed by the vicissitudes of events. But the path on which he hopes to reach it can never be firmly established in advance. Throughout the campaign he must make a series of decisions on the basis of situations that cannot be foreseen.”* (Moltke. 1871). In essence, the plan changes but the objectives do not change unless the mission changes.

Every commander and every staff must be prepared to use diligence in dealing with temporary setbacks and unanticipated obstacles. Additionally, they must cooperatively remain rigidly focused on the endstate, but creatively flexible in how the Division Commander’s endstate is reached. Von Moltke concludes that *“The successive acts of war are thus not premeditated designs, but on the contrary are spontaneous acts guided by military measures. Everything depends on penetrating the uncertainty of veiled situations to evaluate the facts, to clarify the unknown, to make decisions rapidly, and then to carry them out with strength and constancy.”* (Moltke. 1871)

As diplomacy and foreign policy evolve, the Partner Nation Security Agreements evolve. Our Rules of Engagement (ROE) fluctuate and trend towards being more restrictive. Therefore, our campaign plan’s LOO must logically evolve to account for these variables. The goal of these changes should not be to simply comply with the guidance but to creatively and logically exercise freedom in operational planning and execution. Naturally, our Assessments efforts must gradually transition to measuring the effectiveness of our lethal and non lethal initiatives and our intended and unintended adaptive-responses along each venue.

In Afghanistan, Key Leader Engagements (KLE) and Reconciliation Cells initiatives certainly qualify as “*veiled situations*”. As we decrease our foot print outside the Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), KLEs and the Reconciliation Cells’ initiatives have gradually become the Division and Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Commanders’ focal point to comply with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander’s (COMISAF) guidance. These COE functions need to ensure they too support the campaign endstate, objectives and the continuous assessment process respectively.

The day to day events and contents within these special staff sections are very abstract but they have become our most important glimpse at the path towards Tactical, Operational and Strategic success. The results will be slow but forthcoming, so the commander and the entire staff must collectively exercise tactical patience. Remember KLEs are designed to influence behaviors (or earning trust and confidence), and as such it requires our persistence to diligently manage and implement these important non-lethal initiatives.

Commanders integrate recommendations from the staff, subordinate commanders, and other organizations with their personal assessment. From those recommendations, they decide if and how to modify the operation to better accomplish the mission. (FM 5-0, 2010)

The Combat Training Centers (CTC’s) continue to collect trends and Lessons Learned during After Action Reviews (AAR’s) at the end of every BCT’s training rotation. In each instance the CTC Mentor/Trainers (M/T’s) consistently outline the salient fact that most commanders lose their “*confidence*” in the Assessments Process because of the staffs’ lack of confidence in the application and understanding of the process which leads to imminent frustration and mismanagement. The staff then follows suit and discounts this fundamental process as a core component of their battle rhythm. Typically this occurs upon returning to garrison after conducting their final pre-deployment training event at a CTC. The collective consensus is that “two weeks in the box” is just not enough time for the BCT Commander to see the intelligence, operations and targeting cycles in their entirety. But this two week cycle is consistently replicating in theatre with a two week targeting cycle. In Afghanistan, this operations cycle is a bookend every 16 weeks by a Commander’s Operational Assessment Brief (COAB).

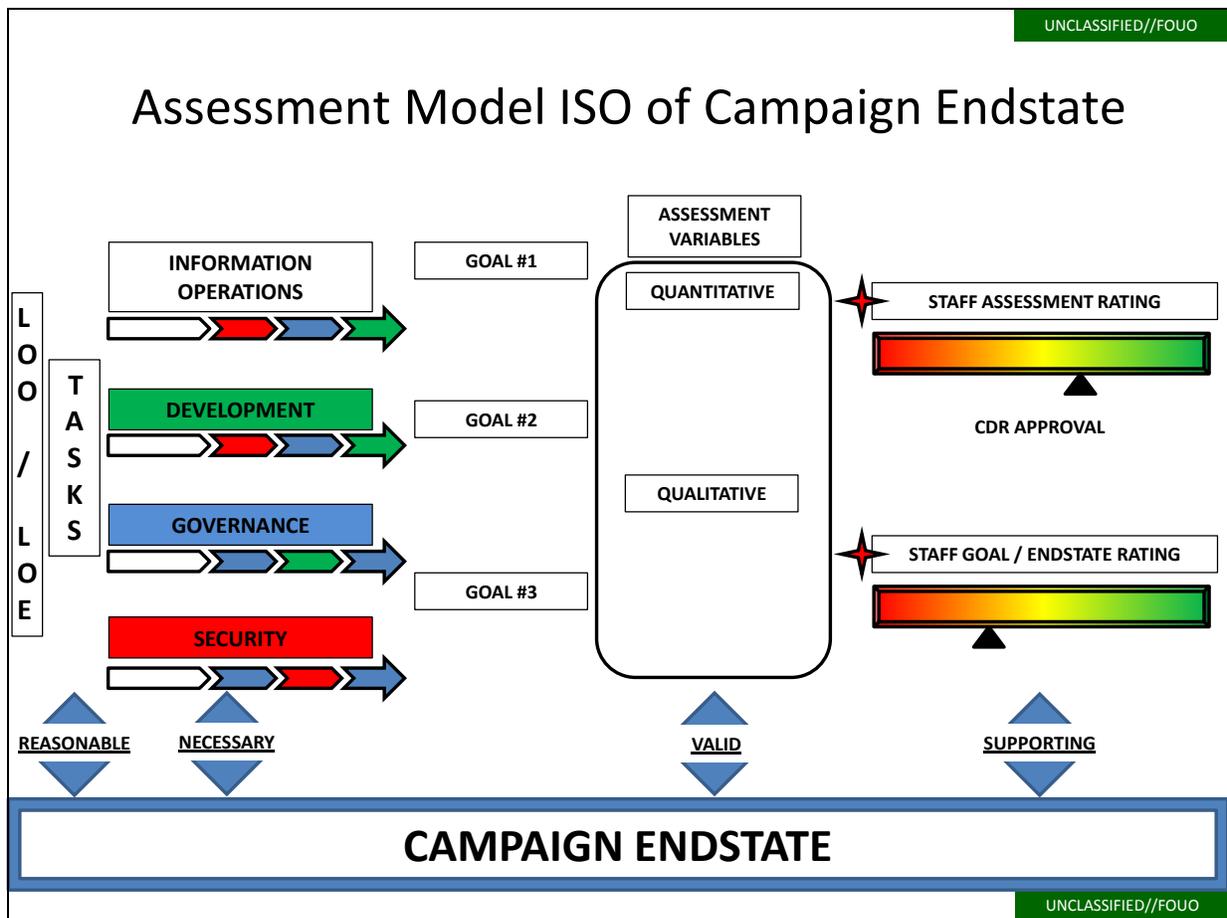
“Among the many problems faced by the staff is “what’s reported” during every battle staff update.” It is always the unusual or spectacular, not whether we are achieving progress or regressing along our Lines of Effort! “Depending on who delivers these reports (S-2, S-3 or the Information Operation (IO) sections) it usually distorts reality and warps the commander’s decisions.” (FM 5-0, 2010)

Multiple Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), as well as national and international journals, magazine and newspapers routinely set out to measure our campaign’s success by measuring how well we are able to “win the hearts and minds” of the population centers within the CENTCOM AOR. Measuring “Hearts and minds” reflects a legacy mindset, inspired by the mantra recited by those in charge of the Vietnam War. A better approach is to measure how well we influence the “*trust and confidence*” of said population centers through interdependent and replicable actions that eventually are self sustained by Partner Nation institutional efforts and resources. The reasoning, we can measure the population’s trust and confidence on the Partner Nation’s governmental and security institutions through the Assessments Process by identifying quantitative and qualitative metrics.

Furthermore, the entire staff must be keenly aware of the ever evolving spectrum of threats within the OE by diligently revising the staff running estimates. Lastly, the staff must be prepared to capture and account for major and significant deviations from the plan. The commander must also be prepared to revise his priorities and planning guidance to keep pace with the evolving COE and all changes to the ROE. A careful consideration that should always remain in the back of the staff's collective mind is that the necessity to change the ROE is not always top down, but bottom up refined and validated.

The Assessments Framework

The current assessment process lies deep within the plans section and managed by school trained Functional Area 49, Operations Research and Systems Analyst (ORSA) personnel. These staff officers are responsible for “operationalizing” an assessment in support of commander’s objectives. This is achieved by framing the significant hurdle to achieving the commander’s goals and the campaign endstate.



The Assessments Process measures trends. The above figure demonstrates that identifying a problem is critical but it resoundingly has a tendency to “spread” assessments across all the lines of effort/operation instead of focusing on the significant, or most critical, assessment needs. These considerations should be focused on the significant problem regardless of the LOO/LOE.

Once the problem is defined, the ORSA personnel attempt to identify the best quantitative metric to understand and frame the problem statement. The “success/failure” (Commander’s view) or “positive/negative” movement (ORSA view) is now based on whether a number of occurrences show movement. At a glance, this oversimplifies the process but apparently it falls short in depth and scope, which inevitably fails to effectively answer the Division Commander’s questions. In short, the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who are collecting and influencing the commander on the actions related when asked must span beyond just producing an Assessments Brief. This may be a function of Assessments ignorance or troop to task ratio misunderstanding. The significant failure, in our opinion, is how staffs fail to make each LOE/LOO (or WFF) responsible to every significant assessment presented to the commander. By making this a requirement, each staff function would attempt to look at their tasks, purpose and endstate in a true holistic effort.

Failure to function in this manner ensures a separate and independent focus along the (LOOs). If the staff begins independent in effort, then the assessment will only provide an accurate picture by accident or chance. The most likely outcome is an impartial picture as it is viewed by one staff function, and measured only by the actions taken by that staff function. A more successful model is achieved through the staff establishing assessment requirements during the initial planning process as they are: framing the OE (current/desired); identifying key actors (motivations/agenda’s); and understanding friction points (tension/competition). Based on this understanding the staff can begin developing measures of performance and effectiveness along their LOE/LOO that will provide both quantitative and qualitative metrics. These metrics and assessment criteria should be re-visited periodically to confirm validity, re-establish relevant facts and assumptions, and receive Commander’s guidance, approval, and re-task as necessary.

This type of deliberate effort provides the Division Commander with a true staff-vetted, ORSA-validated, operational Campaign Plan Assessment brief (quarterly). This type of transparency and synchronization will have the reciprocal effect of focusing the staff not on a series of random and independent actions, but on a metric the commander deems vital to operational success. Assessments outside of the Commander’s approved Assessments Process should remain within the staff functional area as a separate staff running estimate. It must reinforce and support the approved Assessments Process, tabled during assessments working groups, and prepared to modify or replace on-going assessments.

The Solution

We must not overlook the enormous and incomparable importance of the Assessments Process. By simply changing FM 5-0’s Chapter 6 label from Assessments to “*Mission Assessments*” removes the guess work associated with the proverbial question “What are we assessing?” This would prevent each individual staff section from viewing their priorities as the most important to mission accomplishment thus becoming one sided measurements within the overarching Assessments framework. This highlights the need for synchronization and nesting of tasks to create mutually supporting purposes.

When the Army fields a new piece of equipment (i.e. a new HMMWV model), units do not just sign for it, hand the keys over to the operators who in turn immediately begin using it. “*Before equipment is officially signed over to a unit, New Equipment Training (NET) must be conducted in conjunction with the materiel fielding. NET is the responsibility of the appropriate Program Executive Officer (PEO) or Program Manager (PM) and allows for the transfer of*

equipment use and support requirement knowledge from the material developer to the users, trainers, and maintainers of new Army equipment. The PEO/PM NET teams coordinate and arrange NET support to the gaining units for both operation and maintenance training. NET teams are attached to the Army Field Support Brigades (AFSB) for personnel accountability, tactical logistics (including movement), life support, and integration into the local force protection/security plan. (FM 4-93.41, AFSB Operations, Feb. 25, 2009). Yet, when Field Manuals are revised or new doctrine is developed, approved and released for implementation, little-to-no support is provided for the staff that must implement it. There are only ten Divisions in the U.S. Army Active Component and 8 Division in the Reserve Component. The Combined Arms Center (CAC) should provide a PM and resource NET for each Division Staff to conduct staff training. Additionally, this would be optimal during pre-deployment Mission Readiness Exercise (MRX) planning and training. Additionally, a PM should be attached to the Division staff for a six month period prior to a deployment to provide clarity and prevent misinterpretation by any staff functional area or WFF.

Although initially the Assessments process adds a multiplicity of factors to measure along the decisive points and key tasks within the campaign plan, it also increases the value and depth of the solutions it provides. Clearly, every staff officer must respond to these emerging requirements with renewed intellectual vigor and prevent getting trapped in the proverbial “this is how it worked last time” mindset. Rather, a sense of urgency must drive every staff officer to accurately revise and institutionalize all changes to effectively counter the wide spectrum of threats which interdict the Commander’s End State. Rightly doing so allows the Division Commander to set in motion a sheer variety and number of conditions to reach a favorable outcome and accomplish our most difficult mission: enabling self-sustaining Partner Nation institutions which severely reduce the increasing possibility for destabilization-factors and insurgent growth opportunities.

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