

The Conduct of War in the 21st Century

Kinetic, Connected and Synthetic

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Chapter 5

Control from the ground up

Embedding influence activities in the
conduct of war

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5 Control from the ground up

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Introduction

Modern conflicts, while being fought locally, might have a far wider and even global impact. Typically, the contemporary conflict environment, or ‘conflict ecosystem’, consists of a wide variety of (internationally) interconnected actors and spill-over effects such as displaced persons and refugees.¹ Fall simply used the overarching term ‘doctrine’ for the variegated ideology, religion, belief, socioeconomic, political or other notions these wars are fought for.² What stands out in all these matters is the centrality of humans and their convictions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, norms, emotions and – most importantly – their behaviour. Despite the impact of innovations in areas such as technology and artificial intelligence, modern conflict dynamics will largely evolve as a consequence of actions undertaken in the human domain. Mitigating today’s sophisticated threats, thus, requires us to look beyond the traditional military realm and inherently involves concepts focused on relevant populations.³ Kilcullen, in this regard, devised a theory of competitive control. Based on insights from the fields of counter-insurgency and rebel governance, he argues that when armed actors vie for control over a populace, the actor ‘best able to establish a predictable, consistent, and wide-spectrum normative system of control’ will prevail.⁴ This chapter explores this argument and proposes multiple alterations for embedding it in modern warfare. While underlining the relevance of a local perspective and human behaviour, we aim to broaden the scope of targeted actors and argue that targeting groups is more relevant than targeting individuals. For this purpose, we adopt the fundamental proposition that a competition for control can be won by altering an existing normative system instead of establishing a new system. This will enable us to build a comprehensive framework for designing influence activities rooted in actual human behaviour – contrary to focusing on attitudes, preferences, or legitimacy.⁵

Thus, this chapter not only aims to provide an academic analysis of the utility of the theory of competitive control in modern warfare but also presents a guideline for actually operationalising this population-centric approach in the conduct of war. Whereas the first decade of the

21st century saw a return of counterinsurgency and affiliated influence activities during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, interest in this approach quickly faded away during the 2010s. This was the consequence not only of the lack of success in both wars but also of the renewed emergence of big power competition which acted as a catalyst for a reorientation toward conventional warfare. Yet, as aforementioned, the human domain remained central to the conflicts that were fought over the last decade. State actors like Russia or Iran actively exploited social cleavages in neighbouring countries, while non-state actors such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram and Al Shabab successfully established influence and control over relevant populations. Embedding influence activities in the conduct of war, therefore, is not only highly relevant for modern warfare but also essential for winning the competition for control over the local population in a conflict ecosystem. For this purpose, we will elaborate upon the theory of competitive control and subsequently develop a framework for influence activities. Doing so, however, first requires us to explore the most fundamental aspects of human behaviour and the relevance of the local level under conflict conditions.

The primacy of behaviour and the imperative of the local level

Human interaction and behaviour are central to understanding conflict. The emphasis of conflict studies however lies on attitudes and preferences of relevant populations.⁶ Whereas behaviour is often influenced by interrelated concepts such as attitudes, values and norms, it is certainly not determined by these factors. Hence, emphasising attitude exclusively is insufficient.⁷

This is easily understood through the following example of an information operations (IO)-campaign in Afghanistan that aimed to reduce the number of IED-strikes and American deaths.⁸ Although this effort positively changed the local attitude towards US soldiers by portraying them as friendly people devoted to their family, an increase in IED-strikes nevertheless occurred. This prompted the IO-campaign team to evaluate its methods, which revealed two reasons for the failure. First, it was found that those involved in placing the IEDs were mostly extremists, whose attitude nor behaviour could be changed. Second, and more important, the IO-campaign showed images of soldiers with their families at home, which also depicted the beauty and richness of the United States. The unintended effect of this was that the people involved in producing and transporting IEDs, who were mainly motivated by financial reasons (and therefore more susceptible to the IO-campaign than extremists), stepped up their effort in order to earn money for immigration to the United States. Thus, contrary to the desired effect, the locals involved boosted production and transportation which resulted in an abundance of available IEDs. This contributed directly to an increase in US combat deaths.

This example illustrates an assumption that attitude alone could determine behaviour, while in reality a bias towards attitude might have an adverse effect on the desired change of behaviour. Tatham, Mackay and Rowland, therefore, advocate that behaviour is what matters most in communication efforts and influencing a target audience should be grounded in social and behavioural science.⁹ The term communication, in this regard, not only concerns verbal communication, but *all activities* aimed at influencing the *behaviour* of an actor.

Since behaviour is key, it is relevant to explore this concept further. Clearly, all humans differ. At the individual level, biological, psychological and neurological variations lead to immense differences in outlook and behaviour. This is further augmented by *inter alia* sociological, geographical and climatological differences at group level. These differentiations will lead to significant variety in behaviour. In addition, different normative standards will lead to a different appreciation of behaviour and actions. In other words, what may be considered unacceptable at a certain place or a certain point in time may be customary and widely accepted at another place or another moment.

Consequently, behaviour should always be understood from a local and temporal perspective. This, however, is more complicated than it seems. Bar-Yam, in this regard, emphasises that the complexity of the human civilisational system, combined with progressive specialisation, blurs our ability to understand society as a whole and only enables us to understand a small portion of our social environment.¹⁰ Applied to contemporary conflicts, this insight implies that any attempt to define and understand concepts such as legitimacy and extremism should be understood from a temporal, *local* behavioural context. This is echoed in the debate on legitimation in both counterinsurgency and rebel governance literature, which stresses that lasting effects can only be obtained by exploiting local patterns of legitimacy.¹¹ The same 'local logic' pertains to extremism which can be defined as the level of deviation of the median popular preferences and therefore should also be understood from a local perspective.¹² Consequently, influencing behaviour as part of the conduct of war requires the ability to tailor all relevant activities to local circumstances. How to design and implement such an approach?

Discussions on how to enhance popular support through legitimation are often dichotomised in top-down or bottom-up approaches.¹³ Another way to categorise these approaches as strategies can be provided by the owners of the problem, the internal actors, or by external actors who intervene. In this view, the top-down approach is often supported or conducted by external actors. Typically, the lack of a proper understanding of the situation forms a major problem for the intervening actor. Christia, for instance, describes in detail the continuously shifting 'intergroup alliances in multiparty conflicts' in Afghanistan, Iraq and Bosnia. Kitzen refers to the same dynamic of local leaders in contemporary Afghan tribal

society.¹⁴ These shifting alliances eventually lead to interveners having supported their own foes, and both authors show that these ‘alliances’ are actually based on local leaders’ self-interest and opportunism. ‘Alliance’-labels, therefore, might be hardly useful and probably irrelevant at the local level, and only make sense as part of an ‘externally imposed construct’ – what sociologists and anthropologist term an *etic* framework.¹⁵ This is the opposite of the bottom-up, local, perspective incorporating the view of the problem-owners – better known as ‘*emic*’ –, which greatly enhances understanding of the local situation.¹⁶ Moreover, such an approach also fosters collaboration with the local populace, and allows for identification and achieving of locally attainable goals. However, this is not to say that a local perspective is the solution to all problems. Kilcullen explains the necessity to strike a balance between both an external and internal actor-driven approach: to avoid fetishising external, technocratic, top-down, white-guy-with-clipboard knowledge. At the same time, it also tries to avoid the magical thinking associated with treating local people as the fount of all knowledge and insight. If locals could understand and agree on the problem, let alone fix it, there’d be no need for outside intervention. If outsiders understood and could fix the problem, their interventions wouldn’t be failing so often. Both outsiders and locals need to come together, in defined spheres of expertise and in a defined process, to jointly design approaches to the problem.¹⁷

Thus, co-designing an acceptable solution from both internal and external perspectives provides a solution for enhancing popular support and bolstering the position of a local government. This might have far reaching consequences as the local perspective of success, which can only be understood in *emic* terms, should inform an external actor’s political choices and strategy.¹⁸ Bar-Yam supports this as he underlines the necessity of involving people within any complex civilisation-system and stresses the relevance of analysing the complexity and scale of necessary behaviour to counter internal and external challenges.¹⁹ In line with the importance of humans in conflict and the primacy of behaviour, both local and political notions of success should not only be defined as measurable, realistic and attainable objectives, but should take account of localised human behaviour.

Competitive control

Building an influencing framework also requires exploring the utility of the theory of competitive control in the conduct of modern war. Kilcullen has based his theory on the work of, among others, Fall, who, debating the Vietnam War, explained that ‘any sound revolutionary warfare operator ... most of the time used small-war tactics – not to destroy ..., of which they were thoroughly incapable, but to establish a competitive system of control over the population’.²⁰ In this regard, the ‘military aspect’ is only the supporting effort, while the political, administrative and ideological aspects are

the primary efforts ‘to the furtherance of an ideology or a political system’. Kilcullen has expanded upon this view of competitive control:

In irregular conflicts ..., the local armed actor that a given population perceives as best able to establish a predictable, consistent, and wide-spectrum normative system of control is most likely to dominate that population and its residential areas. Simply put, the idea is that populations respond to a predictable, ordered, normative system that tells them exactly what they need to do, and not do, in order to be safe.²¹

This theory, however, can be challenged. Most fundamentally, it is criticised for assuming that, in order to compete for control, actors have to ‘establish’ a normative system. We start from this position and note that rather than creating a *new* normative system, there is already ‘some set of [local] activities’ in place, which forms the actual object of competition.²² Thus, there is no requirement to establish a new system. Actors might instead aim to alter the existing local normative system to their advantage.

The key mechanism underlying the concept of competitive control is the prevalence of predictability and consistency over the content of a rule-set for enforcing the normative system.²³ Kilcullen explains that consistently enforcing the publicly known rule-set leads to a perception of safety and ‘allows a normative system to function’. The distance between the preferences of the actors and the *policies enacted* – and not the ideological position itself – is the issue at stake.²⁴ While rebels have a vested interest in aspiring for their ideal doctrine, they will, if necessary, adopt a pragmatic approach and enact policies closer to civilian preferences to enlarge popular support, making ideological distance a tool to influence a population. The premise here is that it is not merely the ‘doctrinal’ position or distance that matters; it is the enactment of its divergence from the popular median that is most relevant. Yet again, it is tangible behaviour that matters most.

When we seek to study the way behaviour can be influenced as part of the conduct of war, it is also important to stress that ‘control’ should not be mistaken with ‘imposing order through unquestioned dominance’. Instead it boils down to ‘achieving collaboration towards a set of shared objectives’.²⁵ Whereas non-state opponents might adopt an approach of establishing control through coercion, Western-type state actors typically favour more persuasive actions such as provision of essential services and effective legislation.²⁶ In both cases, however, control can be understood as the ability to influence the behaviour of the relevant population(s). This offers a first point for expanding this theory as today’s complicated conflicts are typified by the involvement of a myriad of actors, both state and non-state. The question, therefore, is whom exactly to control in order to obtain success in modern warfare.

The primary actors in any conflict ecosystem are the forces of the governing authorities and the challengers who are vying for power, but also the population. Traditionally, the struggle for control is conceptualised as

a contest between the former two *over* the population. As such, this latter category is implicitly denied agency. This, however, is far off from reality as civilians themselves employ different ‘survival strategies’ such as fleeing, passivity, armed neutrality, supporting one actor, periodically switching sides or simultaneously supporting all sides in the contest for control.²⁷ Moreover, people also hold an interest in the level of control of their ‘rulers’, aspire for a degree of self-determination and self-rule and are, for instance, consciously interested in the ‘doctrine’ that governs daily life.²⁸ The struggle for control therefore is a highly dynamic three way affair that also involves the relevant population. These actors, their interrelationship and the context are visualised in Figure 5.1. The ‘control’-dot indicates the level of control per objective an actor aims to achieve. Indeed, all three actors are to some extent capable of influencing the level of control. Considering the population as passive bystanders, therefore, will lead to a flawed understanding. A binary interpretation of the competition for control, thus, ignores the intricacies of the social system as a whole.

It should be noted that the three primary actors in our model each are far from homogeneous. Authorities typically consist of governments and supporting intervening states, populations often reflect the fragmented character of a conflict society and often more than one rebel group is competing for influence. Another, related, feature of the contemporary security environment

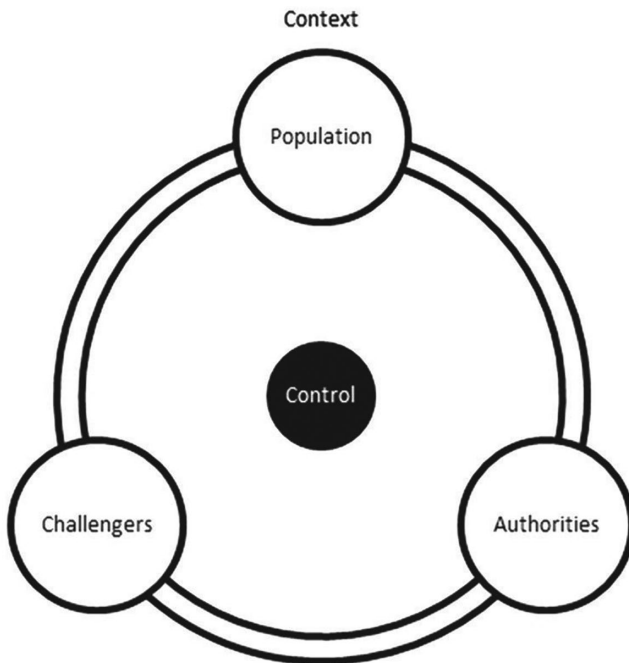


Figure 5.1 Actor/Control Model

is that conflicts are rarely isolated events. Instead, contextual factors such as foreign or transnational support frequently form the background of the dynamical contest for control. This is further complicated by the support which comes from different foreign actors and agencies, each of whom may have competing objectives.²⁹ Thus, the modern conflict ecosystem reflects a mosaic of different actors that interact with each other and with external influences. This indicates there is no ‘one level of control’: the extent of control an actor exerts might differ per objective the actor aims to achieve. A government might be able to influence people to register as voters, but may be completely unable to persuade them to provide intelligence on insurgent activities. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between different objectives and required level of control, and determine appropriate influence strategies. Without playing down the complexity of modern conflicts, the proposed three-actor model offers a first step for understanding this highly dynamic competition as it can be applied per objective, with the ‘control’-dot (Figure 5.1) visualising the current and desired situation. Our model offers a first indication of which actor(s) should be influenced in order to obtain the sought-after effect.

How to put this into action? First it is important to discuss the question of how exactly influencing works. Human decision making is considered to be ‘rational’, that is, based on a cost-benefit calculus.³⁰ Behavioural studies, like Kahneman, remind us that decisions and choices are affected by different factors and limitations such as time and a sense of crisis.³¹ These factors affect one’s ability to formulate and execute logical strategies as well as the understanding of actions and the consequent counterreactions of others.³² When applied to modern warfare this may lead to diverging conclusions: either to a simplification bias, with actors expecting logically derived results of another actor’s cost-benefit calculus or to the conviction that targeting behaviour is too difficult and will lead to unpredictable effects.³³ Furthermore, there is also the question whether or not all actors in a system are influenceable. Deterrence theory, for instance, considers influencing terrorists troublesome.³⁴ While, indeed, some actors might be so (un)supportive of a doctrine that they will probably not alter their behaviour, the vast majority of people are influenceable (see Figure 5.2). There might be a percentage of ‘irreconcilables’, whose convictions are unalterable and whose behaviour cannot be influenced. These extremes, however, are rare, and even die-hard true believing terrorists are often influenceable.³⁵

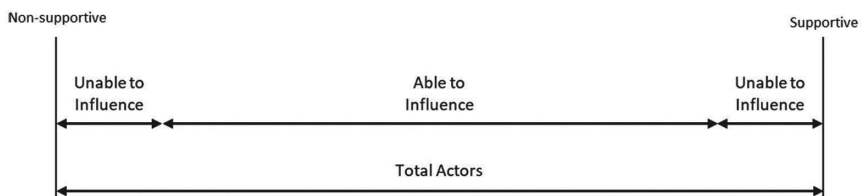


Figure 5.2 Ability to Influence Actors³⁶

An individual's behaviour is difficult to predict. As a social species, humans in a group are targetable and amendable for change. Defining and distinguishing groups is often oversimplified and as such either irrelevant or incorrect. Complexity theory offers help for overcoming this problem and advances the understanding of relevant groups.³⁷ When a subgroup of a complex system has coordinated behaviour, or simply put, when 'members' of a single defined group within the system act in a similar vein when confronted with the same specific impulses, the group has been defined correctly. A well-defined group, therefore, is better understandable and influenceable than an individual.³⁸

It is important to keep the context in mind and analyse a group on the right level. A lack of nuance in dichotomising groups typically leads to incorrect conclusions about peoples' behaviour. The specific facts on the ground influence the behaviour of the population. For instance, even under the rigid self-proclaimed Islamic State-regime, there were enormous differences in behaviour and survival strategies between fighting age males who recently lost their wives and family and married fighting age males who believed in their ability to keep their relatives safe. This shows the relevance of properly vetting groups and their specifics.³⁹ It also demonstrates that the social spectrum as a whole should be understood in a nuanced and deliberate way. Identifying and segmenting relevant groups, therefore, is a highly difficult process which needs to be done to correctly identify attainable behavioural aims.

To summarise, it is important to note that we have identified three alterations to the theory of competitive control. First, instead of establishing a new normative system of governance, altering the existing system is a more likely approach. Second, we highlight a three-actor model. This means that authorities should include both challenger(s) and population when imposing a normative system, while also considering their own role and (biased) understanding. Third, we found that an actionable approach should focus on changing the visible and tangible behaviour of actors by influencing relevant groups that need to be purposely identified. This of course requires a thorough understanding of local dynamics, which is intimately related to the aforementioned premise of co-design. Let us now discuss a framework for embedding this in the conduct of war.

A framework for embedding influence activities in the conduct of war

Influencing encompasses employing activities that are part of a spectrum varying from persuasion to annihilation for either directly or indirectly addressing relevant actors. In case of a competition for control, contesters apply 'a range of capabilities across a spectrum from persuasion through administration to coercion, and they are designed by armed actors – owners or proponents of the system – as a mean to corral, control, manipulate,

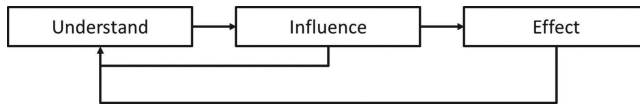


Figure 5.3 Proposed Understand, Influence and Effect Framework

and mobilize a population'.⁴⁰ However, as mentioned, this first requires actors to understand the problem and those involved and formulate realistic objectives. While a framework is helpful for operationalising this approach, it should be emphasised that any concept is a guide. Yet, this provides utility for realising the desired level of control. In its simplest form our proposed framework encompasses three interrelated stages comprising understand, influence and effect (Figure 5.3).⁴¹ This represents a conceptual approach of an actor's process of influencing the actual outcome of a situation (which can be visualised by repositioning the 'control-dot' in Figure 5.1). While these three stages might appear blatantly obvious, influence activities often take place without properly defining the (non-)desired and attainable effects or without an appropriate understanding of the situation.

The process itself is, of course, debatable and apparent critique on the linear projection of these steps need to be addressed directly, because it depicts a highly simplified concept of reality. The perpetual changing actors, their interests, circumstances, continuous learning, actions and counterreactions will never be reflected by such a simplified process. However, this model provides a clear analytical framework to start with. Let us now first turn to its different stages.

To understand violent conflicts and to help realise solutions etic and top-down perspectives remain relevant. This may include open source analysis and other research conducted by for instance intelligence services and think-tanks. Such research should focus on attainable behavioural change of the population and challengers to achieve the desired solutions. Emic and local-level understanding of the situation are, however, essential to achieve lasting solutions. Micro-level analysis according to anthropological and sociological research protocols helps to understand the emic perspective.⁴² The outcomes should be broadened by incorporating the insights of local residents, who bring a micro-level understanding of their own environment. This *ground truth* understanding can be achieved through for instance community policing or deploying special operations forces, who traditionally focus on intelligence-collection and forging local partnerships. Consequently, local and bottom-up perspectives should be coupled – or co-designed – with etic and top-down perspectives which will aid in formulating broader spectrum solutions and will also place these solutions within a wider context.

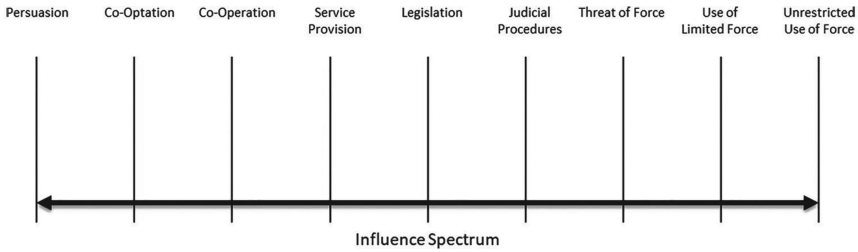


Figure 5.4 Influence Spectrum

While not aiming to describe all possibilities for influencing an actor, it should be noted that the suggested approach is most inclusive.⁴³ On the one end of the influence-spectrum (Figure 5.4) one will find consensual strategies such as persuasion, co-optation and cooperation. In the middle, one will find administrative strategies such as legislation, service provision and judicial or legal procedures. On the other end of the spectrum, one will find the threat or use of force, including targeting and decapitation strategies.

There is significant overlap, interrelationship and reciprocity between all these concepts. Furthermore, the activities can be further subdivided as persuasion, for instance, might involve incentives, inducements, reassurances or other positive reinforcement measures. The framework thus incorporates all available influence options and aims to broaden the spectrum of target groups to include segments of the authorities, the challengers and the population. This also opens the way for practices traditionally associated with interstate conflicts to be applied more widely; the broadest possible spectrum of activities should be contemplated to achieve the desired effects. For instance, although coercive diplomacy is developed for state interaction, it should not be dismissed as a feasible strategy against non-state actors.⁴⁴ Last, all activities should be aimed at influencing the local level, while also incorporated in the political-level strategy. This is distinct from current practice, in which political interests exclusively dictate activities on the ground and sometimes even hamper successful conduct of activities.⁴⁵

To make the theoretical persuasion-coercion spectrum practically applicable it is relevant to define what the objectives are and how these can be achieved. Conceptions of desired effects matter and too simplistic and externally composed notions such as ‘a safe and secure environment’ or ‘stability’ are problematic in the practical reality on the ground. Kilcullen emphasises an emic perspective, and underlines the necessity of ‘a constant realization that outsiders *don’t* understand how things work, and therefore need to experiment, test hypotheses, start off small, and seek local context’. Furthermore, when aiming

to influence particular actors to achieve desired effects, then there should be methods to understand the efficacy of influencing. Measuring desired and non-desired effects, therefore, should be based on (quantifiable) behavioural outcomes and focus should be less on the current practice of measurement of performance such as measuring how many operations have been conducted or measuring how many insurgents have been killed or detained.

Putting this framework to practice requires integration from the onset of a mission. Hence co-designing is not only instrumental in establishing a profound understanding and identifying the right effects as well as methods for measuring them, it is also highly important for the sake of embedding influence activities in the conduct of war. But how to make sense of such a complicated task and start co-designing?

Understanding the level of control is a first step which can be specified by defining the different ‘avenues’ or ‘lines’ of conflict. Fisher and Mercado propose the use of the United Nations Development Programme’s 16 areas of governance as a starting point for defining the ‘lines of conflict’ and ‘lines of control’, possibly in conjunction with the ‘lines of effort’ as detailed in Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency.⁴⁶ RAND, in its seminal work *Paths to Victory*, has conducted a review of nearly 300 factors of influence on 70 counterinsurgency case-studies and, using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, identified the 26 most relevant effects to achieve or avoid for success in counterinsurgency. Using these factors could provide a useful guideline for influence activities designed to fit the local context.⁴⁷ RAND’s factors are quantifiable, measurable and include various actors in the conflict ecosystem. Refining these factors into desired and non-desired behavioural outcomes can provide a solid starting point for a ‘government’ as this actor’s *input* for the co-design phase, leading to specific and locally attainable desired outcomes based on actual behaviour.

Dissecting the desired end state into specific and measurable factors will allow for a more nuanced and precise view, and will probably contribute to addressing the problem effectively. This will also improve identification and classification of the extent to which actors have influence over a specific ‘line’ or ‘path’. Key, however, is that this framework merely provides a starting point and that the actual strategy for influencing the behaviour of relevant segments of a society should be devised using a local, context-specific and emic perspective.

Further it is essential to grasp that there is a *degree* of control, which might differ per specific factor. While binary juxtaposition aids quantitative analysis and simplifies reporting, only qualitative nuance will lead to relevant, measurable and attainable objectives. Formulating these objectives in behavioural terms, such as ‘the local population provides actionable intelligence on rebel activities’, helps quantifying them and doing so will help minimise the risk of mistaking measures of performance with measures of effectiveness. A more encompassing and elaborated

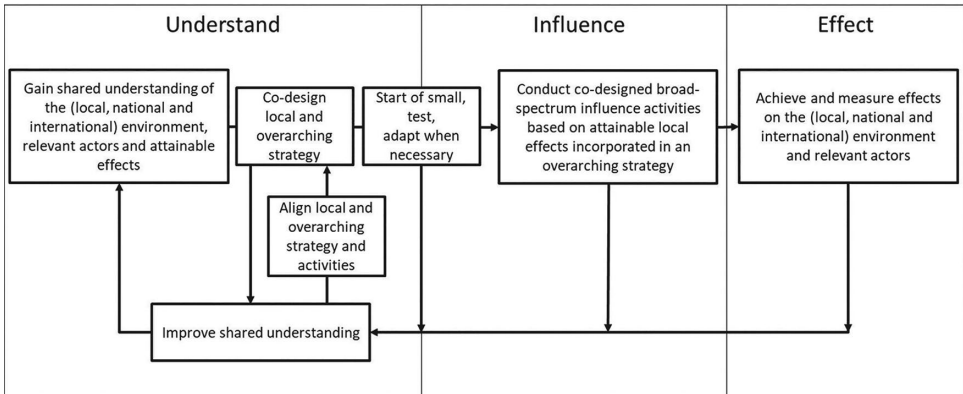


Figure 5.5 Elaborated Understand, Influence and Effect Framework

framework, as presented in Figure 5.5, takes the abovementioned aspects into account.

Conclusion

Humans are central to conflict and as such influencing the behaviour of relevant actors is essential. The theory of competitive control has provided us with a starting ground for embedding influence activities in the conduct of war. In our view, however, three alterations are necessary. First, there is no need to establish a new normative governance system, since there is already a normative system in place which can be altered for establishing control. Second, the scope of targeted actors should be broadened to include authorities, challengers and the population. Third, focus should be on changing actual human behaviour. This can be attained by targeting groups instead of individuals. Relevant groups should be properly defined and understood in the context of the overall conflict ecosystem.

For this approach to succeed it should be tailored to the specific local situation. Co-designing solutions and approaches, incorporating both an etic and emic perspective, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches all function to achieve a shared understanding. This provides an underpinning for defining and conducting influence activities as well as an understanding of how to interpret results and measure success. Such a localised approach also implies that local behavioural objectives, as formulated in the co-design phase, should be incorporated in the political aims of host and intervening states, which requires flexibility in the (political) strategy. In current practice, however, political guidance is rarely adjusted to context-specific results and often dictates actual activities. Instead of

rigidly sticking to overarching concepts, including (a perception of) legitimacy, it is important to adapt these concepts in such a way that they are relevant on the local level.

This chapter has presented a framework for embedding influence activities in the conduct of war. The phases understand, influence, and effect offer a clear path for deploying a full spectrum of influence activities on the basis of an appropriate understanding of the conflict ecosystem, its dynamics and the way to influence relevant groups. This, however, should always be tailored to the specific circumstances. Doing so gives the much-needed guidance for obtaining the desired effect(s). The suggested framework, therefore, should be considered a first step for enhancing existing influence activities in the conduct of war. As human behaviour will remain dominant in future conflicts population-centric concepts should be anchored and serve to sharpen thinking on war and peacemaking.

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