

# Inter Agency Essay



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## Converging on Whole-of-Government Design

by *Rick Swain*

In 2010, at a conference held by the Cornwallis Group, an international organization interested in peace operations and whole-of-government approaches, Dr. Cynthia Irmer, Senior Conflict Prevention Officer for the Department of State Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction (S/CRS), described the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF), as a means of assisting participants in an interagency process “in jointly examining a complex, adaptive system from a complex, non-linear, systems perspective.” The State Department’s on-line handbook describes ICAF as “a tool that enables a team comprised of a variety of U.S. government agency representatives (interagency) to assess conflict situations systematically and collaboratively and prepare for interagency planning for conflict prevention, mitigation and stabilization.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Irmer was followed by Colonel Ellen L. Haring, a U.S. Army Civil Affairs officer. Colonel Haring criticized current joint doctrine and offered that the ICAF was a tool that, “if used properly by military planners, will significantly improve operational design and center of gravity identification and help the military community conduct operations that will lead to durable and sustainable peace.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that USAID and military problem-solving approaches are converging, and broadly understood techniques of design offer the best synthesis for achieving unity of effort in whole-of-government operations.

The ICAF protocols, which succeeded an early Department of State Conflict Assessment Framework,<sup>3</sup> were developed at the same time the Army Training and Doctrine Command produced a concept for operational design titled the “Commander’s Appreciation and Campaign Design” or (CACD).<sup>4</sup> ICAF corresponds roughly with the first part of the CACD process, the commander’s appreciation.<sup>5</sup> “The output of an ICAF is not a solution, nor a plan for devising a solution to a problem,” said Dr. Irmer. “It is, instead, a reliable method of bringing a group of people, with disparate perspectives...to a shared understanding of the situational dynamics and forces impelling a society toward conflict or instability.”<sup>6</sup> Both the ICAF and CACD, no less the current Army design doctrine (Chapter 3, FM 5-0, *Operations*) and emerging joint doctrine (JWFC Pam 10) are grounded in Rittel and Webber’s understanding of the complex nature of social-political problems,<sup>7</sup> and the use of complex systems theory to deal with them.

Use of the ICAF is part of the program of instruction for interagency practitioners taught by S/CRS. The tool has been used in numerous studies and assessments.<sup>8</sup> The CACD has been superseded by a procedural doctrine (Chapter 3, FM 5-0) that characterizes design as the conceptual

element of planning and an important element of the Army operations process. *WE Are the Interagency: Exercising a Comprehensive Approach to Crisis Action and Conflict Termination and Stabilization*, by Major Edward Lee Bryan and Lieutenant Colonel David Pendall, described an interagency exercise conducted in Europe in 2009.<sup>9</sup> The essay tells how the S/CRS and U.S. Army Europe planners collaborated in whole-of-government campaign design, “reaching agreement on a common approach, acquiring a shared understanding of the crisis, and identifying the necessary operational level response.”<sup>10</sup>

Although no reference is made directly to ICAF or Army or joint design doctrine, this list of exercise accomplishments suggests that training in the techniques of ICAF, and operational (or campaign) design, can be useful to prepare leaders for interagency conflict analysis and collaborative planning. Indeed the three accomplishments claimed above are central products of operational design understood beyond the limits of strictly doctrinal structures. Design involves organizing both the collaborative work and learning;<sup>11</sup> acquiring a deep, shared understanding of complex human situations; and creating effective operational responses based on that understanding.

The old USAID conflict assessment process involved a fairly sophisticated analysis of conflict situations and a search for opportunities to influence them.<sup>12</sup> It began with identifying socio-economic factors linked to violence as underlying incentives; sources of resources fueling unrest; government and social ability to resist; and regional and international causes. It also searched for temporal windows of vulnerability likely to increase destabilization: elections, economic shocks, natural disasters, and so on.<sup>13</sup> Given this broad situational analysis, the process then called for a review of existing programs, followed by identification of innovations to improve the situation—a sequence implying, perhaps, a more or less linear cause and effect relationship between focused interventions and desired outcomes.

The departure of the ICAF and CACD from this earlier process was grounding such an analysis effort in a more general theory of conflict that takes for granted that human systems are inherently complex. Both procedures provide a kind of conceptual approach that calls for deep multi-perspectival collaborative learning to evaluate the context of conflict from differing perspectives in terms of both core grievances and what the ICAF procedure calls “social/institutional resilience”<sup>14</sup>—or strengths. This situational understanding allows participants to identify drivers of conflict and mitigating factors and then describe opportunities for increasing or decreasing conflict. The contribution of Rittel and Webber and complex system theory itself is the presumption that the multitude of relationships and the complexity of overlapping and conflicting interests governing political situations will make the actual results of any transformative infusion of energy difficult to forecast. This, in turn, requires a heuristic approach to action that observes system response and adjusts its course accordingly, not only to enemy counters but to the systemic changes resulting from the sum of actions of friendly, hostile, and neutral parties. That said, one should not be too quick to reject the variables identified by the USAID conflict assessment process. They remain productive starting points for mapping the nature of conflict situations, which is the major element of all four conceptual approaches.

In common with Army design doctrine, emerging joint doctrine begins with activities called framing the environment and framing the problem.<sup>15</sup> These two inquiries involve developing a deep, multi-perspective, situational understanding. They parallel the limited object of the ICAF. ICAF divides its efforts into “Conflict Diagnosis” and the “Segue into Planning.” It focuses most of its discussion on the former and is highly superficial discussing the latter. “Conflict Diagnosis” searches for what it calls “Core Grievances” and “Social/Institutional Resilience, Drivers of

Conflict and Mitigating Factors” and “Opportunities for Increasing or Decreasing Conflict.” The segue into planning involves “[mapping] existing diplomatic and programmatic activities against the prioritized lists of Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors.”<sup>16</sup>

Joint Operational Design calls this segue developing an operational approach and documenting the results—the former creates a broad-action scheme to achieve assigned goals, and the latter gives guidance to planners.<sup>17</sup> The differences in ambition result, presumably, from the fact the ICAF assessment is a collaborative effort of peer representatives of independent agencies while operational design is a focused effort with and by leaders with authority to direct action, preliminary to decision making. It should be clear that USAID and the uniformed services are converging on a common broad problem-solving technique which, if high church arguments are avoided, can contribute to developing unity of effort in whole-of-government strategy, campaign development, and execution.

Operational design, as used here, consists of a set of techniques applied in accordance with sequential logic, though not necessarily within a sequential process. The process of design is recursive. It doubles back on itself as new information invalidates prior conclusions, or actors—those who are obstacles to achieving desired goals, assumed allies, and neutrals – do not respond to the developing situation as expected. As these contradictions appear, designers reframe or restructure their understanding and even their actions. They then resume forward movement in their inquiry, taking account of the new facts. Although military doctrine writers often feel compelled to place design functions in the flow of the planning cycle, it is best thought of as a continuous parallel activity that informs and guides the traditional, detailed, planning function. Often the same participants perform both functions simultaneously—sometimes engaging in design, sometimes in formal planning. The one function is largely conceptual, while the other is more practical in content and often limited by necessity to the particular operations of single agencies. Design properly seeks to describe how the whole-of-government will approach transforming the current situation by the harmonized actions of all agencies and other favorably interested parties. It does so in an environment where many actions must be negotiated and agreed to by independent agents.

Design always starts with a task, mission, or goal—something that must be done. The first step in design is assembling a design team or group in which all interested stakeholders are eventually represented. This may be done in a number of ways. A military joint task force commander may have a group of staff officers drawn from across his command to do much of his design work. This group could be supplemented by an advanced civilian team representing different agencies of government as was the case in the USAREUR exercise cited above. In this work, the commander will have to address what his organization will attempt, how he wishes to influence and leverage the actions of other agencies to reinforce his efforts, and what he can do to further their efforts to achieve the common end. He will also, very likely, have a forum to draw information from subordinate, supporting, and relevant peer commanders and agency leaders, and some method of seeking and gaining support from other governmental, non-governmental, and interested extra-governmental agencies that may share some but not all of his responsibilities and interests. Moreover, if the commander operates within a functioning state in which U.S. affairs are otherwise managed by an established chief of mission, the military leader or his subordinate may be a member of an existing country team working within the authority or responsibility of an ambassador. If he is acting within a region of several states, he or his regional commander will likely have to coordinate with both chiefs of mission and State Department regional managers. Properly understood, decision makers’ design efforts take place within all these design groups.

Broadly speaking, design involves the answers to five questions: Why are we here? Where are we? Where do we want to go? How do we move from here to there? How shall we do that?<sup>18</sup>

Both design and the ICAF process assume a more nuanced understanding can be drawn from an informed, multi-perspective inquiry, than from single interest observation. This would seem to be the case, particularly, when trying to anticipate social-political responses where the members of the subject system possess multiple identities with competing interests that are not always in harmony. The case of Hezbollah provides an interesting example. Hezbollah responds to regional events as an Arab, Shiite, political community within Lebanon; as Lebanese nationalists concerned for the security and the autonomy of the homeland within the region; as an ally, at least of convenience, with Syria, often perceived as the greatest threat to Lebanese nationalist ambitions; and as a client of the Persian state, Iran. The last is a political-economic relationship that involves formal acknowledgement of a theocratic supremacy of the Iranian religious hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> How Hezbollah will respond to any particular intervention depends a good deal on which of these interests seems to be paramount at the moment and how the rest balance out. Since its founding, Hezbollah has clearly adapted as a social-political system. Hezbollah's multi-faceted existence requires examination from a number of critical perspectives, not least economic, to begin to forecast Hezbollah's behavior.

Whatever the name of the process—design, ICAF, commander's appreciation process, even joint intelligence preparation of the operational environment (JIPOE)<sup>20</sup>—it requires the critical, competitive examination of differing views of all available information and inference. These inquiries are organized around discovering the behavioral propensities of involved parties by examining their various identities, perceived interests, and relationships within the relevant system. The relevant system is bounded broadly to include all actors, including ourselves, likely to have an interest in the intended situational transformation.

Design discourse is not a “group grope” of the blind and ignorant. Available expertise must be sought out and acquired. Where available, experts may be part of the core staff design group. More often, they will be brought in to contribute their knowledge and depart. The design group, then, will test opposing views from external advisors and infer logical understanding through its own discussions. Other expert information will be supplied by the leader or leaders, from his or their broad range of contacts. The practice of design discourse is difficult for the beginner not accustomed to dialectical learning. It is a skill requiring practice, self-criticism, a modicum of humility, and good will to succeed.

Design discourse is not intended to convey negotiation and acceptance of the lowest common denominator of agreement. It is challenging critical debate where the bases of conflicting inferences and interpretations are made explicit and closely examined. Shared outcomes are both areas of finely defined agreement and equally well-delineated points of disagreement, with the latter developed to the point of identifying requirements for further guidance or additional information necessary to resolve acknowledged differences. Design discourse is hard, emotionally fatiguing work. Shared mission understanding will ultimately require reference back to the sources of initiating guidance for confirmation. Often the design process itself will have to continue provisionally pending the resolution of differences of view.

The relevant system cannot be described until the goals of the initiating party, whoever created the requirement to design an action or set of actions, are understood (why are we here?). At the national level, these authorities may be the President, the heads of executive departments of government, or senior officials within the departments. The task of the action agencies is to try

to figure out what is intended— not just the specific mission or task assigned but the underlying stimulus, motivation, and expectations that led to it— and how the expressed new guidance relates to other existing programs or directions.

It can generally be assumed that the situation prevailing heretofore was considered to be at least tolerable. A starting question, then, is: What has changed? Answering that question involves conducting a quick survey of the past in order to understand how we got where we are at the point of action. Each agency involved will probably seek to understand the goals within its organizational boundaries first, and then collaborate in discovering how the expressed goal is to be understood within the whole-of-government.

Once the preliminaries are complete, the actual business of gaining deep environmental understanding is begun—answering the question: Where are we? This requires organizing the work by deciding how to structure the design group(s) for learning and organize the learning process—that is setting the learning tasks, framing the questions that must be answered, and identifying the sources of knowledge that could be engaged to enhance understanding. In a group with an identifiable chain of command, the decision maker can take whatever advice he or she is comfortable with and decide how to move forward. In peer groups of collaborating authorities, the organization for work and learning will likely be the result of group negotiation, facilitated by the extent to which efforts are grounded on a shared understanding of the requirements and motivated by a shared desire to achieve a common end.

The group must identify the actors who make up the system. Then, they must learn how they relate to one another. What are their known interests and proclivities and why? What motivates them to act one way or the other? Where the actors are groups of players, with separate or at least distinct interests and agendas, these motivations must be identified in order to understand how the collectivity is likely to respond. Building a systemic understanding of the existing state of affairs involves the greatest investment of time and energy in the design process. It creates the shared situational understanding that underpins subsequent design actions.

In successful design efforts, groups use a combination of graphic and narrative portrayals to advance their understanding. The graphic permits capture of gross relationships and interests, while the narrative permits introduction of nuance and clarity. Both provide a record of progress that can be critiqued and refined, or referred to as a check on coherence as the design process advances. As these representations are created by the design group or groups, divergent understandings should be compared and contrasted in search of the underlying sources of difference. Where possible, external authorities should be engaged to critique the products, to identify weaknesses, and to draw in new considerations. Eventually, a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the existing situation will emerge, grounded on understanding explicit inferences from observable facts.

The final task involved in understanding the environment is estimating what a more satisfactory system of actors and conditions would look like—creating a parallel desired system that would produce the outcome intended by those who initiated the design process (Where do we want to go?). This understanding serves as the basis for framing or giving form to the problem, defining, if you will, how we can move the situation from here to there— where we want to be.

To answer the question of how we move from here to there, or what needs to be done, two more inquiries suggest themselves: What will oppose us in our efforts, and what will assist us? Using the system understanding developed in the environmental framing, the first task is to develop a system of opposition, and the second task is to develop a system of support. These differ from the systems of the environmental frame because they identify, in the case of actors likely to oppose the

desired transformation, both strengths that must be overcome and weakness that can be exploited. These strengths and weaknesses of the actors are overlaid with identified friendly strengths and weaknesses to portray a system of opposition (including both enemy strengths and friendly weakness) and a system of support (including both enemy vulnerabilities and friendly strengths). Designers will also seek to identify other areas of inquiry, derivative and original, which require thorough examination as part of developing a sufficient understanding of what is required to move to concept development. Among the most obvious in the case of whole-of-government and other collaborative problem solving is the cybernetic question addressing the kind of organizational structure both required and feasible to provide the highest degree of unity of effort and draw in other external partners to achieve the desired situational change.

The techniques used here involve the same competitive critical discourse, graphical and narrative documentation, as environmental framing. The questions differ and require rearranging knowledge developed in the environmental frame. It is common in asking these new questions that new learning takes place, learning which requires expanding or adjusting the existing understanding of the current situation. New questions arise that open new inquiries. These new inquiries need to be managed in concert with forward movement. If serious enough questions are raised, either from new information revealed or changing circumstances observed, designers may have to reframe, or reconstruct their understanding of the environmental frame. The product of the problem framing is an inventory of things that must be done—the Leninist question: “What is to be done” to achieve the desired situational change?

This is the point where the ICAF segues into planning, while the design process continues to formulate a concept or broad strategy by making or recommending choices of broad organization of effort, setting priorities for resourcing, and proposing a provisional relative timing. In short, answering the question: How shall we do that? This concept is not yet a plan. Within a hierarchical organization, it is the basis of the decision maker’s guidance to his planners. Within a group of collaborating agencies, it provides a basis for harmonizing individual organizational actions against which various institutional plans may be measured. The concept or agreement can guide detailed planning to give substance to the common concept.

Design does not end with either initiation of planning or execution. Design continues through detailed planning, adjusting the broad concept as planners confront actual limits of time, space, and changing resource projections. Once execution begins, design shifts to observing changes in the relevant environment, the system of opposition, and the system of support to see how each evolves in response to the infusion of energy by the various actors acting and responding to each other. Designers look particularly for indications that the general system is not responding as expected and when diminishing return on investment begins to appear as opposition builds. They anticipate that at some point systemic change will be of sufficient magnitude that reframing will be required. Eventually, a new environmental understanding will have to be constructed based on emerging conditions and new concepts of actions developed more relevant to the changed circumstances. In the end, design acknowledges that a new situation will be created through the combined efforts of all camps, opposition as well as collaborating, and that as time passes, the old mission will lose its utility in face of new requirements. At some point, the old problem will be overcome by new concerns.

None of this will succeed, of course, without the active collaboration of all relevant agencies of government drawing on the support of every external agency or authority willing to collaborate, even in limited ways, with those engaged in changing the existing situation. Indeed a principal function of all decision makers in a whole-of-government effort is drawing in the support of allies

and interested humanitarian or private concerns willing to contribute to even a partial resolution of broadly understood problematic situations.

Design in military circles has often degenerated into dogmatic arguments where more energy was expended in debates over what to call a particular action or procedure than in working together to achieve a useful outcome. There are signs that with publication of an authoritative reference, however unsatisfactory to the purists, some of this fervor to indict heretics is waning.<sup>21</sup> Design, ICAF, and the conflict assessment process have more in common than in conflict. The way ahead in generating whole-of-government agreement depends on focusing on the common search for understanding and putting aside notions of structural purity. The critical common element—once the fairly obvious (and shared) logic is understood—involves the patience to apply techniques of critical, creative, collaborative thinking in pursuit of a common end.

An essential feature of this involves what the Army’s manual calls “disciplined questioning.”<sup>22</sup> Disciplined questioning—meta questioning for the philosophically inclined—involves each member of a design group being willing to challenge the source of his/her own conclusions and those of others by asking why he/she believes what he/she says. Participants in design discourse make explicit the trail from evidence to inference. They remain open to the likelihood of valid alternative interpretations from varied perspective points. The truly creative part of building collaborative understanding involves the ability to formulate synthesizing descriptions that can accommodate apparently opposing ideas or viewpoints—usually by adopting a new perspective point capable of comprehending both.<sup>22</sup> This process is culturally difficult for Americans and requires patience, self-discipline, and good will. Not everyone is capable of collaborative learning.

Formulation of solutions or approaches for achieving change requires the pattern recognition of inductive thinking, the deconstructive skills of analysis, and the imaginative skills of synthesis to create new combinations and patterns of action in harmony with conditions as they actually are. A sense of humility—acknowledgement of the possibility of error—must be combined with the character to decide and persevere in the face of uncertainty. Design does not resolve the nature of the human condition.

To move ahead in whole-of-government collaboration, civilian and military designers and planners must gain familiarity with each other’s learning methodologies, understand the common assumptions underlying all of them, and work together to employ the most relevant parts of each to create hybrid problem-solving schemes for each unique set of circumstances they confront. Practitioners must become comfortable with critical, creative thinking, as well as more traditional information gathering skills. Both must understand that winning is solving the problem and not prevailing in applying some pure learning methodology. *IAE*

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## ENDNOTES

1. Department of State, USAID, Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, p.1. <<http://www.state.gov/s/crs/what/144930.htm>>. The ICAF is described in Appendix D, FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*, 6 October 2006. The appendix also describes an abbreviated Tactical Conflict Assessment and Planning Framework described by USAID.
2. Colonel Ellen L. Haring, RES USAR USAREC, “Conflict Analysis and Military Planning,” in Alexander Woodcock and David Davis, (eds.), *Analysis of Societal Conflict and Counter-Insurgency*, 2010, pp.185-190. Haring acknowledged the CACD in her list of sources. Her criticism was of the existing Joint Doctrine that was only beginning to come to terms with the ideas of operational design in system terms, though perhaps more than Colonel Haring allows, particularly in development of Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment (JIPOE).
3. USAID, “Conducting a Conflict Assessment: A Framework for Strategy and Program Development,” April 2005, <<http://www.rmportal.net/library/content/tools/conflict-assessment-and-management-tools/conducting-a-conflict-assessment-a-framework-for-strategy-and-program-development/view>>.
4. TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, *The United States Army Commander’s Appreciation and Campaign Design*, Version 1.0, 28 January 2008.
5. TRADOC Pam 525-5-500, p. 20. According to CACD: “Appreciation is the act of estimating the qualities of things and giving them their proper value. It is essentially an understanding of the nature or meaning or quality or magnitude of the situation before you.”
6. Dr. Cynthia Irmer, “A Systems Approach and the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF),” in *Analysis of Societal Conflict and Counter-Insurgency*, Alexander Woodcock and David Davis, (eds.), 2010, p.171.
7. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, Volume 4, 1973, pp.161-167.
8. See State Department Information Paper, “Training & Preparedness,” at <<http://www.state.gov/s/crs/what/151750.htm>>. The course is described in a blog, “Integrated Civilian-Military Planning for Afghanistan,” by “civilaffairspksoiat” at <<http://civilaffairspksoi.wordpress.com/2009/09/27/integrated-civilian-military-planning-for-afghanistan>>. A number of products of ICAF studies are at <<http://www.crs.state.gov/index.cfm?fuseaction=public.display&shortcut=C66Q>>.
9. The Simons Center for the Study of Interagency Cooperation, *InterAgency Essay, No. 10-02*, December 2010. Notably, both authors attended the Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies during the heroic period of design experimentation: Pendall in 2005 and Bryan in 2008. See the retrospective essay by Colonel Wayne W. Grigsby, Jr., Dr. Scott Gorman, Colonel Jack Marr, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph McLamb, Dr. Michael Stewart, and Dr. Pete Schifferle, “Integrated Planning: The Operations Process, Design, and the Military Decision Making Process,” *Military Review*, January-February 2011, pp.28-35.

10. The formulation is taken from Colonel (Retired) Steve Banach, Director of the School for Advanced Military Studies, during the later period of design experimentation.
11. USAID, "Conducting a Conflict Assessment," pp.11, 31.
12. Ibid, p.14.
13. USAID, "Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework," p.8. Social/Institutional Resilience reflects "social relationships, structures or processes...able to provide dispute resolution and meet basic needs through non-violent means."
14. Chapter 3, FM 5-0. JWFC Doctrine Pamphlet 10, p.5.
15. Department of State, "Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework," pp.6, 15. In the taxonomy of ICAF "Drivers of Conflict can be understood as active energy, while Core Grievances [a tool of analysis] are potential energy. Mitigating Factors...can be understood as the kinetic energy produced when key actors mobilize the potential energy of Social and Institutional Resilience."
16. JWFC Doctrine Pamphlet 10, pp.13-16.
17. The first three questions were formulated in a Booz Allen Hamilton-run, design exercise by LTG (Ret) Mike Steele and Dr. Jim Schneider. The last two questions are slightly reworded versions of their concluding questions.
18. Hezbollah, because of its complexity as a rival, has been a useful foil in a number of Booz Allen Hamilton-run design exercises. For an accessible account see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007, 2009. The Hezbollah manifestos are available on line.
19. Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, 26 December 2006, Chapter 3, Para 9, pp. III-16-19. The JIPOE is described in terms strikingly similar to the subsequent idea of framing the environment. An anticipated new version will likely go further in this direction.
20. See Colonel Wayne W. Grigsby, Jr., et al, "Integrated Planning: The Operations Process, Design, and the Military Decision Making Process," *Military Review*, January-February 2011, pp.28-35.
21. FM 5-0, Para 1-33, pp.1-7.
22. Roger Martin, *The Opposable Mind: Winning Through Integrative Thinking*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, 2009. Martin is the Dean of Toronto's Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto is a leader in business related design.

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