

Interagency *Collaboration* *By Design*

by Alex J. Ryan

When Interagency Collaboration Goes Wrong

Over the course of nine meetings of the National Security Council between September 13 and November 23, 2009, President Obama conducted a painstaking strategy review for Afghanistan. President Obama set the guidelines to encourage open inquiry. “We have no good options here,” Obama said. “We need to come to this with a spirit of challenging our assumptions.”¹ The guidance for the second meeting reinforced this message. “We’re going to begin with interests ... and then figure out what it is we want to accomplish, how we’re going to do it and eventually get to resources. We don’t want to talk about troops initially.” Yet at the eighth strategy-review meeting, they were still wrestling with the same basic questions raised in the first meeting. The President was presented with four strategic options. Two were infeasible; the remaining two were not distinguishable and came with a decade commitment and \$889 billion price tag. Obama was increasingly frustrated. “So what’s my option? You have essentially given me one option.” What went wrong? Why did a team comprised of the most powerful and capable security professionals fail to generate credible options for the President?

Bob Woodward’s book, *Obama’s Wars*, offers some insights into the dynamics that undermined Obama’s intentions for free and open discourse. One issue was the factions that formed within the team. Coalitions are counterproductive to critical and creative thinking because they collapse the discussion into a tug of war between two poles and encourage participants to view “the other” as either ignorant, stupid, or evil. The first fault line separated Obama’s campaign team—the “water bugs”—from subsequent additions to the team. The second faction crystallized around the military chain of command, which put up a consistent and strong united front. Some perceived the

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“COINistas” to be wed to the counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine successfully developed and implemented by Petraeus in Iraq. The application of COIN theory to Afghanistan was evident in McChrystal’s leaked assessment. In opposition to the “COINistas,” a faction of six dissenters, led by “contrarian” Vice President Biden, met separately on half a dozen occasions to promote Biden’s “counterterrorism plus” option. Other rifts were evident between the military chain of command and its civilian equivalents in theatre, as well as the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

A major source of tension arose from information flows that circumvented the chain of command. Most famous was the *Rolling Stone* article that resulted in General McChrystal’s resignation, but leaks and breaches of protocol also led to the removal of NSC Chief of Staff Mark Lippert, numerous reprimands, and rescinded reports. Having options aired publicly made the President feel boxed in. Leaks also encouraged a hollow debate. If reports of genuine fighting got out, it would create the impression that the President had lost control. The cumulative effect of leaks is to institute policies to control information that inhibit valid

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and often essential sharing of information, as evidenced by systemic over-classification of data and Office of the Secretary of Defense bans on sharing plans with other interagency partners until it has approved them and set them in stone.²

More disturbing was the lack of evidence that participants were learning and changing their perspectives or positions as a result of listening to one another. “People have to stop telling me what I already know,” Obama complained at one meeting. The camps were already in fixed positions by the first meeting. The military camp was firm on a 40,000 U.S. troop increase to implement a COIN strategy to defeat the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The opposing camp advocated limiting the increase to 20,000 troops for counterterrorism and training to defeat Al Qaeda and disrupt the Taliban. Yet the logic of both camps, which ran from means, to ways, to ends, was exactly the reverse of the debate Obama had initially envisioned. This is evident because even as the objective was clarified and narrowed over the course of the review, the size of the troop request advocated by each camp remained the same. The proposed approach for the review— working from national interests, to ends, to ways, and finally means—would have opened the door to learning. The actual approach encouraged confirmatory, information collection to validate predetermined means and drove an obsession with the size of the troop increase.

The issues that plagued Obama’s review of strategy at the highest level of government are by no means unique. The same underlying phenomena are present in almost any interagency team, regardless of level. Team members who have been promoted and rewarded for paying attention to their survival needs and those of their organizations assemble with stakeholders who compete for a limited pool of policy direction, influence, and resources. The very existence of an interagency team is an admission of the limitations of the organizations that have supplied its members. The enduring nature of the home institution contrasted with the temporary nature of an interagency project team means that it is irrational for a self-interested team member to place the interests of the interagency

team before the interests of his/her home organization. Add to this the universal human instincts to protect perceptions of competence and authorities, and defensive routines and turf wars become an inevitable part of interagency team dynamics.³

Fortunately, not all teams are predestined to spiral into dysfunction. Small teams are, in fact, a pivotal tool for coping with complexity, given effective regulation of group dynamics. Checkland and Poulter observe that “typical discussions among professionals are characterized by a remarkable lack of clarity... different voices will be addressing different issues; different levels, from the short-term tactical to the long-term strategic, will be addressed; different speakers will assume different timescales. The resulting confusion will then provide splendid cover for personal and private agendas to be advanced.”⁴ To avoid this, they advocate mapping out models of purposeful human activity from multiple perspectives and using these models as a source of questions to help focus group discussion.

This paper will address whether there is a way to add some structure to interagency collaboration to better leverage the latent experience and multiple perspectives that are present in any interagency planning team but often not tapped because of differences in values, priorities, culture, language, and expectations. A methodology for interagency collaboration must be:

- Inclusive of diverse perspectives.
- Integrative of the contributions of individual agencies.
- Flexible to the scale and range of interagency challenges.
- Robust against power dynamics.

The following section will briefly review existing tools and approaches to interagency

collaboration, identify a needs gap not met by the existing approaches, and propose a new approach to conceptual planning called design recently adopted by the U.S. Army and the Joint Force. Subsequent sections will illustrate how design addresses some of the limitations of and complements existing approaches to interagency collaboration.

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Current Approaches to Interagency Collaboration

Recently, there have been a number of notable efforts to improve interagency collaboration. They include scenario-based planning, conflict assessment frameworks, multilayered assessment, and operational planning systems. This section will briefly assess each of these contributions.

Scenario-based planning involves generating a range of alternative future scenarios, which allows planners to assess the robustness of contingency plans by cross-testing the plan developed for one scenario against the full suite of scenarios. An example of interagency scenario-based strategic planning was Project Horizon—an effort to explore and improve interagency coordination using scenario-based, strategic planning—which included the participation of nine U.S. government departments and six U.S. government agencies or organizations.⁵ One of the most enduring outcomes from Project Horizon was the

network of relationships formed between the participating agencies' strategic planning cells.⁶

A second resource, the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF), diagnoses conflict situations for the purpose of conflict prevention, crisis-response planning, or post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization.⁷ A successor to the U.S Agency for International Development's (USAID) Conflict Assessment Framework, the ICAF was developed in 2007 by an interagency committee co-chaired by the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction (S/CRS) and the Agency for International Development's Office of Conflict Management, with representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and other agencies. (In November 2011, the S/CRS became integrated into the State Department's newly formed Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations [CSO].)

The ICAF is an iterative process that starts by exploring the context of the conflict situation. Next, it inquires into the core grievances and sources of social and institutional resilience. The third step studies key actor motivations and means as a way to identify drivers of conflict. Step four looks for windows of vulnerability and opportunity. The ICAF does not produce a plan, but it can inform planning. Irmer recognizes the need for a planning process that is consistent with the philosophy of complexity theory underpinning the ICAF. "Untested, as of yet, is the enormous potential for employing the results of an ICAF in a planning process also predicated on a complex, adaptive system approach."⁸

A third resource for interagency collaboration is the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) program. Prioritized by the Joint Staff and executed by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Rapid Fielding, SMA provides planning support to commands with complex, operational imperatives requiring multi-

agency, multi-disciplinary solutions that are not within core service or agency competency. Beginning in 2007, the annual SMA conference brings together planners from across the U.S. government with analysts and researchers from academia, government, and industry to focus multiple perspectives on complex, operational themes. In addition to the annual conference, several multilayered assessments are conducted on regional issues each year.

A fourth resource is an operational planning system. In 2007, the Interagency Management System (IMS) was developed as the official vehicle for coordinated planning among interagency stakeholders.⁹ If the IMS were triggered, the S/CRS planning and operations division would provide the core team.¹⁰ However, the IMS has never been triggered and has been de-emphasized as an operational concept since 2010.¹¹ Further, when S/CRS was transformed into the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations, the scope of its mandate was reduced from an interagency leadership/coordination role to a supporting role for analysis and strategic planning for conflict prevention and crisis mitigation.

Although the IMS may never be executed in its entirety, the basic structure is still of interest as a potential model for interagency collaboration. The IMS utilizes a four-stage planning framework consisting of situation analysis, policy formulation, strategy development, and interagency implementation planning.¹² Ideally, situation analysis is ongoing and includes a comprehensive assessment using the ICAF. Policy formulation provides clear policy options, which outline the assumptions, risks, benefits, overarching policy goal, and strategic objectives (major mission elements) in a policy advisory memo. Separate planning teams are established for each major mission element, which produce the element concepts. The strategic plan must address resource requirements and availability for each major

mission element. Implementation planning then refines the strategic plan, maps donor inputs to identify gaps, establishes short-term and long-term targets, and determines the mechanisms for executing and assessing the strategy.

The Gap in Interagency Collaboration

The purpose of scenario-based planning is to anticipate a range of future threats and opportunities in order to inform investment decisions in future capabilities. For example, Project Horizon conducted strategic, interagency, investment planning using a 20-year planning horizon. Scenario-based planning can help to coordinate interagency capability development. However, it is not intended to inform strategies and operational plans for present-day operations.

The ICAF provides an accessible starting point for developing shared understanding of the drivers of conflict for current operations. However, it does not directly link this understanding with a strategy for intervention within the conflict situation. The framework recognizes the need for a component called “segue into planning,” but planning itself is not a part of the ICAF. The ICAF is designed for conflict situations, but this is only a subset of interagency issues, which may involve issues such as energy security, food security, epidemics, and natural disasters.

The SMA methodology provides a science-based approach to analyzing a complex strategic situation from multiple perspectives. SMA provides a deep, rigorous, and broad survey of existing knowledge on a particular region or theme. The quality of the SMA product depends on access to international experts and a sufficiently stable problem to perform and publish in-depth analysis. Because it would be difficult to dramatically scale up the number of concurrent SMA studies or scale down the length of time required for an SMA without diluting the quality of the analysis, SMA

can only be performed on several strategic issues per year. The SMA feeds into military or interagency planning during the course of action development phase.

Scenario-based planning is future focused, while the ICAF and SMA provide support to interagency planning and decision making, but do not by themselves produce a strategy or operational approach. Most of these approaches have struggled to maintain traction. There is no successor to Project Horizon, the transformation of S/CRS into a State Department bureau has left DoD as the primary champion of the ICAF, SMA has been shifted between agencies several times, and the IMS has never been activated. Most importantly, none have addressed steady-state planning, which is the most frequent and continuing need. Interagency planning for current operations therefore must use an operational planning system, such as the IMS

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or Joint Operational Planning Process. But these types of rational decision making models assume that:

- Participants agree on the rules of decision making.
- Participants share a common language.
- Organizational and cultural contexts do not significantly influence decision making.
- The problem or goal can be clearly identified and agreed on by all participants.
- The problem can be solved by an

instrumental rationality of allocating means to ends.

- The basic required means are known and will be available.
- Information required to make a decision is available or can be acquired.
- Consistent choice criteria are agreed on by participants.
- The environment is relatively stable during the decision-making process.
- Sufficient time is available to generate, consider, and evaluate alternatives.
- When planning occurs at multiple levels, decision making is nested and proceeds from the top-down.

Unfortunately, as Obama's Afghanistan strategy review illustrates, in strategic and operational interagency planning situations, few if any of these assumptions hold. The real world of politics; egos; private agendas; group dynamics; and annual, agency-specific, congressionally-earmarked budgets, all embedded in a rich cultural and historical context, bears little resemblance to the doctrinal

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convenience of rational actors logically deciding on the basis of course of action comparison. To be effective, interagency collaboration under real world conditions requires a planning approach that relaxes these restrictive assumptions.

Figure 1 illustrates the contribution of design for interagency collaboration. Like

the SMA approach, design emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives for appreciating a complex, operational environment. However, whereas SMA layers the various perspectives, design synthesizes different perspectives to construct a systemic explanation and a single, coherent logic. Design integrates art and science—creative and critical thinking—to reframe the environment from new perspectives. It also integrates sense-making with decision-making to connect new ways of seeing innovative forms of intervention. Whereas rational planning procedures view current operations, emerging threats, and future contingency operations through the framework of the prevailing paradigm (the taken-for-given assumptions that bound the scope and direction of inquiry), design constructs new frameworks capable of recognizing new potential that is not obvious within the current paradigm. In this way, design expands the space of the possible.

Using Design to Structure Interagency Collaboration

The U.S. Army recently updated its doctrine for operations to include a new methodology for design. According to Major General Edward Cardon, “Design represents the most significant change to [U.S. Army] planning methodology in more than a generation.”¹³ The change is significant because it recognizes the incompleteness of planning founded on the rational decision model as a basis for organizational problem solving.¹⁴ Instead, as the name suggests, design draws on an alternative intellectual tradition associated with professions that often cross disciplines, such as architecture, industrial design, urban planning, and engineering, to solve real-world problems. After World War II, professionals within these disciplines began to reflect on the knowledge and skills required for professional mastery. They began to write about design.

Different domains of design exhibit

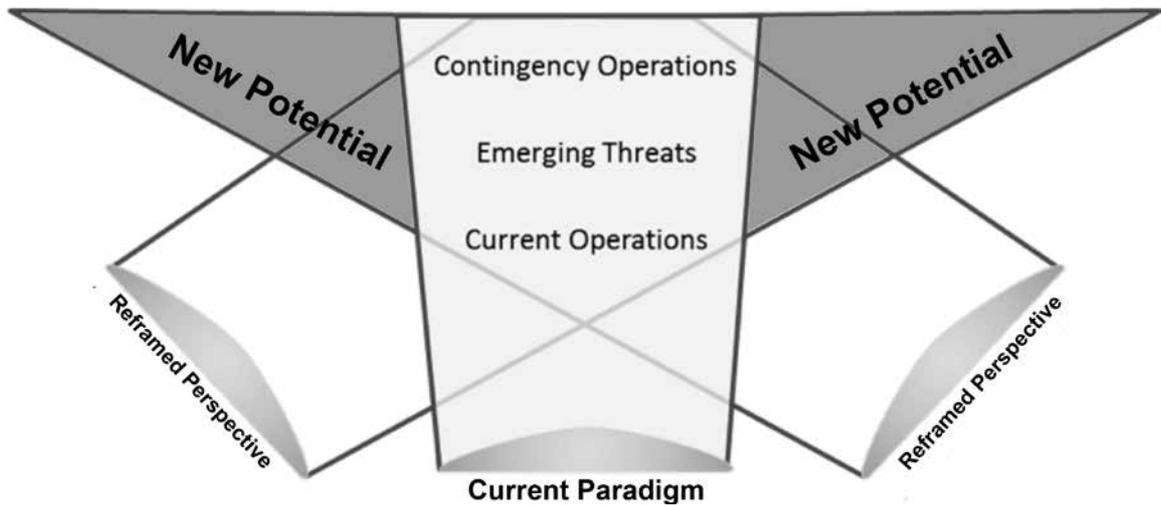


Figure 1. The contribution of design to interagency collaboration

significant variation in the medium of expression, the degree of external constraint, and the possibilities for quantification. Yet in spite of these differences, these fields share a common ethos that is often called “design thinking.”¹⁵ Design thinking enables the application of this approach in other professions. For example, Roger Martin contends: “The most successful businesses in the years to come will balance analytical mastery and intuitive originality in a dynamic interplay that I call design thinking.”¹⁶ For Martin, “design thinking for business broke down into three essential components: (1) deep and holistic user understanding; (2) visualization of new possibilities, prototyping, and refining; and (3) the creation of a new activity system to bring the nascent idea to reality and profitable operation.” A similar adaptation of design thinking for U.S. Army operational planning is evident in Army Doctrine Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*. Design is also broken into three activities to “understand, visualize, and describe unfamiliar problems and approaches to solving them.”¹⁷ The three activities are framing the operational environment, framing the problem, and developing an operational approach.

There are several characteristics of design that render it particularly suitable to interagency collaboration. First, design has been described as a meta-perspective, which means design does not commit to a single theory of learning. Instead, the first question a design team asks is how will it learn about its unique situation? This learning process requires considering alternative perspectives to the current institutional paradigm. From the very start of the design process, it is inclusive of the variety of experiences and perspectives brought to the design team by its participants.

Second, design inquiry is centered on egalitarian discourse. Design’s discursive structure facilitates holistic understanding, in contrast to traditional, rational, decision-making approaches that decompose problems into functional areas, which are then parceled out to subject-matter experts. While the latter approach may be more efficient for detailed planning, it is less effective in resolving interlocking issues because solutions to sub-problems have unintended consequences that often defy simple deconfliction. Achieving deep, shared understanding and reaching a shared vision is essential to the principle of unity of effort for interagency collaboration.

A further benefit of design discourse is that it is relatively robust to power differences among team members. Before a team can reach shared understanding, it must develop a shared frame of

reference.¹⁸ This process involves surfacing assumptions, challenging definitions, and negotiating boundaries for inquiry, which prevents the team from adopting a dominant frame of reference unquestioningly. Having a shared, public frame limits the influence of private agendas.

Fourth, design inquiry is loosely structured and iterative. There are no checklists or rules specifying the steps in which design activities must be completed and no templates for design products. Instead, there is a governing logic that relates design activities into a coherent whole,¹⁹ which means design is inherently flexible and scalable. The design methodology can be tailored to the time available, the unique nature of the situation, and the scale of the interagency response. In a crisis-response situation at the tactical level, design can simply be a facilitated discussion with a couple of whiteboards, guided by questions such as: What seems to be the story here? Why are we being asked to intervene? What has changed? Where is the potential for improvement? What opposes and what supports our vision for improvement? What pattern of actions can transform the situation for the better? How will we continue to learn about the situation? At the other end of the spectrum, design efforts have continued productively for over three years of steady-state planning.²⁰

Fifth, even though the U.S. Army has pioneered the operational application of design thinking, the design methodology is hardly limited to military operations. Indeed, the original intellectual development of design thinking arose largely in a commercial context. The methodology does not rely on military-specific concepts, such as enemy, target lists, wargaming, or the battlefield. The broader concepts within design, such as the system of opposition and system of support, fit naturally in the context of interagency collaboration.

Conclusion

President Obama's Afghanistan strategy review illustrated the difficulties of interagency collaboration and demonstrated the need for a disciplined approach. This review of scenario-based planning, conflict assessment frameworks, multilayered assessments, and operational planning systems concludes that these tools, while useful, still leave an important needs gap for a robust and effective approach to interagency collaboration.

Designing does not replace scenario-based planning, conflict assessment frameworks, multilayered assessments, or operational planning systems, all of which make important contributions to interagency collaboration. However, it can usefully complement these tools under certain conditions. When rapid changes in the world render old patterns of thinking irrelevant, designing can help to reframe the situation. When politics, individual biases, and group dynamics threaten to undermine rational decision processes, designing can help to generate shared frames of reference to make sense of complexity. When faced with a unique situation and a perceived need to act, designing can enable innovative strategy development and organizational learning. So long as change, politics, and unique action situations are present in interagency teams, design can be of value. **IAJ**

Notes

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- 2 Jane Miller Floyd, Project Horizon participant, personal communication.
- 3 See Dietrich Dörner, *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations*, Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p. 188 and Chris Argyris, *Strategy, Change, and Defensive Routines*, Pitman, Boston, 1985. For the specific case of why public bureaucracies are not designed to be effective, coherent wholes, see Terry M. Moe, "The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure," in John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (eds.), *Can the Government Govern?* Brookings Institution, 1989.
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- 5 U.S. Department of State, Project Horizon progress report, U.S. Department of State, Washington, Summer 2006.
- 6 Floyd.
- 7 The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, Washington, 2008.
- 8 Cynthia Irmer, "A Systems Approach and the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF)," in The Cornwallis Group XIV Workshop: Analysis of Societal Conflict and Counter-Insurgency, The Cornwallis Group, Vienna, 2009, p. 171–174.
- 9 "Interagency Management System for Reconstruction and Stabilization," Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (Unclassified), January 22, 2007.
- 10 "Improving Interagency Support for United States 21st Century National Security Missions and Interagency Operations in Support of Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations," report to Congress, U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, 2007, p. 9.
- 11 Oscar De Soto, a former S/CRS Director of Plans, personal communication.
- 12 "Principles of the USG Planning Framework for Reconstruction, Stabilization, and Conflict Transformation," <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/state/prin_usg_stabil_15may08.pdf> assessed on July 23, 2012.
- 13 Brigadier General (P) Edward C. Cardon and Lieutenant Colonel Steve Leonard, "Unleashing Design: Planning and the Art of Battle Command," *Military Review*, March–April 2010, p. 11.
- 14 General James N. Mattis, "Memorandum for U.S. Joint Forces Command: Vision for a Joint Approach to Operational Design," October 6, 2009.
- 15 See, for example, Bryan Lawson, *How Designers Think: The Design Process Demystified*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2006 and Tim Brown and Barry Katz, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*, Harper Business, New York, 2009.
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- 18 Jonathan H.G. Hey, Caneel K. Joyce, and Sara L. Beckman, "Framing Innovation: Negotiating Shared Frames during Early Design Phases," *Journal of Design Research*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2007, pp. 79–99.
- 19 Rick Swain, *Fundamentals of Operational Design*, Booz Allen Hamilton, Leavenworth, Kansas, 2009, p. 21.
- 20 Shimon Naveh, "Northern Storm: A Narrative of Reflective Command, Systemic Learning, and Operational Design 2002-2005," Presentation to U.S. Special Operations Command, Tampa, 2010.