

# Understanding the Human Dimension for Unified Action: *An Approach to Scholarship, Complexity, and Military Advice*

**by Stephan Bolton**

Now is the time for enlivened discourse about unified action, national policy, and the human dimension. The peoples and institutions that inhabit operational environments are always significant to our desired outcomes. As the U.S. military moves through that traditional period of postwar reflection when leaders re-professionalize their forces, identify and capitalize on the lessons of recent conflict, and pursue efficiencies in the face of resource constraints, the question of human engagement becomes central to achieving the intent of policy. This is a question for the whole-of-government. National security is a multiagency responsibility in the era of globalization. The rapid diffusion of ideas across borders and peoples carries the promise of progress, but also the potential for threats to emerge in unexpected policy environments. At the intersection of national policy and the human dimension, the first obligation is to understand the environment. All that follows is contingent on that understanding. Many senior leaders have recognized this obligation, but they have also recognized that there is something missing in the military's approach to understanding the world. This gap does not always preclude policy success, but it is often responsible for seeming failures. New approaches to understanding the human dimension are needed to fill this gap.

Mid-war Department of Defense (DoD) initiatives, such as the return of counterinsurgency and cultural intelligence methods, approached the human dimension in doctrinal and practical ways that lay the groundwork for concepts currently under development, such as Strategic Landpower and the Engagement Warfighting Function. Those first efforts held great promise, but often left leaders frustrated, as both the military doctrinal framework for understanding and the common practice of it habitually produced suboptimal results. Reports given by Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus while commanding in Afghanistan show that both were keenly aware of the untoward strategic effects caused by failures to understand tactical-level social dynamics. Awareness of the gap is also evident in the 2012 *U.S. Army Capstone Concept*, which recognizes that "current doctrine does not address the moral, cognitive, social, and physical aspects

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of human populations.”<sup>1</sup> Another component to operational understanding, perhaps more fundamental than doctrine and practice, is the professional ethic. The 2010 Army White Paper, “The Profession of Arms,” and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey’s subsequent adaptation of that paper for the joint force have renewed a necessary dialogue within the military about professional obligations, the exercise of judgment, and the way in which these influence military contact with the human element in the world.

To help fill the gap in the current military method, I propose the following approach:

- The practice of multidisciplinary analysis to develop deep situational understanding of cause-and-effect relationships in complex environments.
- A menu-of-options approach to intervention.
- An expanded concept of military advice.

All of these approaches enable the unified action community of interest to achieve policy objectives. The “Local Dynamics of War” seminar at the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) employs this approach to augment doctrine, inform the practice of planning, and pursue a comprehensive understanding of the operational environment. The seminar also answers the calls to action from several of the military’s top leaders to study the most modern perspectives on the social science aspects of warfare. The social sciences are comprised of several domains and sub-disciplines, such as political science, economics, sociology, and anthropology, and examine environmental variables of great interest to the military practitioner. Among these variables are the peoples, cultures, ideologies, and institutions found in operational environments, the socioeconomic and political underpinnings of state and non-state actors, and the complex microdynamics of their interactions.

This article discusses the benefits of multidisciplinary thought and the importance of causality and complexity, addresses the potential of deep situational understanding, and describes how a spectrum of interventions based on acceptable or desired conditions may be more appropriate for complex environments than traditional end-state campaigning. It closes by proposing an expanded professional responsibility to unified action in all environments. Many of the references are to Army or military usage, but in principle, the ideas presented here are applicable by all policy actors. Similarly, use of the term “unified action” refers primarily to U.S. actors, but admits to contexts where international or non-governmental actors are partners in policy efforts. Unified action is defined in joint doctrine as “the synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.”<sup>2</sup>

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## **The Benefits of a Multidisciplinary Approach**

A multidisciplinary approach emphasizes openness to ideas, drawing upon expertise in many fields of study. Its strength is in its diversity, as contrasting ideas promote critical thought. Critical thought increases the objectivity and reality of one’s understanding. A multidisciplinary approach achieves two immediate purposes. First, such an approach

helps to mitigate many of the pitfalls inherent in the military's institutional planning processes. These pitfalls constrain understanding of complex environments. Three common pitfalls in military planning and decision making are a tendency to focus on macro-level narratives about conflict, excessive use of reductionism and simplification to explain cause-and-effect relationships, and the influence of organizational and individual cognitive biases.

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The second purpose of a multidisciplinary approach is to enhance existing practice through the frequent engagement of scholarly research and methodology. Conflict and war in all its forms are studied in great detail by many social scientists. They regularly contribute to a large body of knowledge about micro-level human dynamics, causation, and other topics of specific interest to the military profession. These scholars share perspectives on the operational environment that practitioners might not have considered when using doctrinal planning processes. Few military practitioners know of such research, where to find it, or how it can inform their understanding. Military operations, actions, and activities are always guided and underwritten by policy, plans, and doctrine. The decision-making process is still influenced by the practitioner's education, training, and experience. But when practitioners consult scholarly perspectives on a given environment, they introduce valuable information, sometimes contrarian or counterintuitive, which brings their understanding closer to reality. The work of proven scholars, by virtue of the rigor and

validity in their research, may add to, confirm, or refute the facts and assumptions upon which practitioners base their understanding.

This knowledge is available to the practitioner from many sources. Scholarly journals present research articles whose arguments are succinct and easily assimilated. Publications such as *Perspectives on Politics*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Armed Forces and Society*, and many others can be of great value to a commander and staff's understanding. More extensive research is published in book form by university presses. The value of large-scale research is evident in three recent works by political scientists about the tactical-level influences of sub-state conflict. In *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*, Fotini Christia examines conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia to describe how minority actors continually shift their allegiances and coalitions in order to maximize the outcome of their particular interest. In *The Trouble with the Congo*, Severine Autesserre studies why external intervention in internal conflicts often fails to achieve sustainable peace. She finds that the perceptions held by foreign interveners, formed from their own institutional biases, frequently leads to incorrect assessments about the nature of conflict, and then to ineffective actions. And in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Stathis Kalyvas studies the local and geographic dynamics in civil wars that lead to violence by all parties against non-combatants as a means of influencing popular support. These are only three examples of the wealth of knowledge available on elements of conflict with which the unified action community has become very familiar. The theories of these scientists ought to contribute to the understanding of similar environments.

### **Causality, Complexity, and Microdynamics**

Multidisciplinary and scholarly approaches

also seek out the hidden, but influential, cause-and-effect relationships that are poorly described by macro-narratives and strategic-level understanding. Design and other planning processes do account for cause-and-effect relationships; however, the oft-heard claim that military efforts have fallen short of achieving the desired political end states in Iraq and Afghanistan begs the question: Why? General Dempsey echoed as much in an interview in 2013 when he related a key lesson he learned as a wartime leader: “The application of force rarely produces—and, in fact, maybe never produces—the outcome we seek.”<sup>3</sup> He and many senior military leaders assess that this shortfall begins with how the military understands the environment and the causal mechanisms of conflict. This assessment applies across all policy domains. Military and political actions and measures of effectiveness are often tied to assumptions that those policies and actions are engaging the right cause-and-effect relationships. If, however, those assumptions about causation are wrong, then agents of policy cannot hope to achieve their intended ends via their designed ways.

The military’s institutional fixation on end states and the campaign plans to achieve them also highlight another common failing—the perception of the environment as being only complicated, rather than complex. The important distinction, as defined in David Snowden’s use of the Cynefin framework for decision-making, is that the action models appropriate in one domain are unsuited for the other. When leaders and planners assess that an environment is only complicated, they mistakenly think of the environment as a problem to be solved through the application of subject-matter expertise, as though it were a calculus or engineering dilemma. This thinking implies that no matter how challenging the military problem, forces can achieve the desired end state if enough experts work on it. However, the solutions produced in

this manner break down in complexity, lead to unintended consequences, and are overcome by the system’s evolution. One’s interaction with the human dimension will never be guided by the tame problems of complicated domains. There is nowhere in the world of policy and human engagement that is not complex. Those environments are permeated by constantly-evolving, wicked problems that are associated with moral, social, and political issues.

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In 1973, urban planners Horst Rittel and Martin Weber described the characteristics of wicked problems in complex social planning. By reviewing a few of the rules for wicked problems, one instantly gains an appreciation for the immense challenge of complex environments. According to Rittel and Weber’s rules, to fully describe a complex environment, the actor must compile an exhaustive list of possible interventions and their possible effects; it is, however, impossible to consider all potential interventions and effects. Solutions to wicked problems have no immediate means of measuring their effectiveness, have no termination date to their effects, and can only be about better-or-worse outcomes, not definitive ones. All wicked problems are the result or cause of other wicked problems.

Such problems result from the constant interaction among components in complex systems. These components, often systems of themselves, might be individuals, villages,

civic organizations, insurgent groups, and religious sects. They engage and evolve in spatial, temporal, and hierarchical domains, interacting in ways that may defy easy description. In complexity, cause-and-effect relationships do not exist in isolation, and the more subtle among them are rarely self-evident. The effects of micro-level interactions will spiral upwards through the system to influence macro-level actions and objectives. If strategic and operational practitioners are not attendant to tactical-level dynamics, then they cannot hope to influence or even to perceive the system effects occurring at that level.

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### **Situational Understanding**

Situational understanding is the sum of a multidimensional approach, causal understanding, and appreciating complexity. This approach supports and augments military doctrine. Army Doctrine Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, defines situational understanding as “the product of applying analysis and judgment to relevant information to determine the relationships among the operational and mission variables to facilitate decision making.”<sup>4</sup> In practice, planners tend to emphasize the variables themselves, commonly referred to as PMESII-PT (the operational variables: political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time) and METT-TC (the mission variables: mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations).<sup>5</sup> But as our

discussion of complexity suggests, the most important word in the definition of situational understanding is *relationships*.

The relationships between sub-variables, including all those associated with the human dimension, “establish the situation’s context” in the plan phase of all operational processes dealing with complex problems. It is the evolution of those relationships, sometimes in response to intervention, that causes “periods of reduced understanding.”<sup>6</sup> These notions of context and evolution bound up in relationships suggest that a temporal component ought to be more explicit in the definition: situational understanding also demands an appreciation of the historical and potential pathways of key relationships. By what path of contingency did the environment arrive at its current state? What path should military action steer to nudge the environment toward better long-term stability? The goal of such understanding is to more fully appreciate the potential military role within the environment—the more realistic the understanding, the greater the number and variety of interventions that might be brought to bear.

Practitioners must be aware that situational understanding is always fleeting. In some circumstances it may never be satisfactory. The world’s pluralistic nature further confuses understanding through friction, emergence, and uncertainty. Friction is a term inherited from Clausewitz and well known among military professionals. It refers to the impossibility of perfect knowledge and prediction due to the constant interaction of events and individual judgments that produce new effects. In systems theory these are described as a system’s emergent properties. These are the properties and effects in a system that derive but are completely unique from the properties and effects of its component parts. It is an act of creativity, sometimes accidental, that comes from the engagement of two or more system components.

Uncertainty is evident in both these concepts, but uncertainty implies something more: it is the counterintuitive knowledge that identical interventions conducted on an identical set of initial conditions are not guaranteed to produce the same results. This does not seem like a rational idea, yet it is experimentally proven in the field of physics. The implication for unified action practitioners is that confidence in their actions should be tempered by awareness that those actions will always produce unintended outcomes. It follows that, as Ritter and Weber proposed, a variety of potential actions must be considered against their potential outcomes.

### **A Menu of Options for Engagement**

Unified action practitioners have an obligation to proffer advice to decision makers and partners based on their position and expertise. This advice should include a range of engagement options that inform the debate about policy and plans and give decision makers greater room to conduct cost-benefit and risk analysis. However, common practice in military planning usually limits the number of courses of action (COAs) considered. These COAs may offer little variation in their degree of impact because they all seek to achieve the same end state. This is a result of ends-ways-means thinking. However, if practitioners approach intervention in terms of choices and consequences, the objective is no longer to achieve a fixed, comprehensive end state. Discerning practitioners consider instead a spectrum of desired states and think of their interventions as moving the system incrementally toward a better state of affairs, of “finding our way forward to an improved position”<sup>7</sup> through experimental action. As unified action seeks greater harmony with the human dimension in conflict, this approach might suggest options that are nuanced in their effects and more appropriate in the midst of complexity. Another of Ritter and Weber’s

rules is that intervention in wicked problems is not about testing hypotheses, but is about trying to improve some aspect of the real world where people live. There is a penalty when the practitioner gets it wrong, and the greater the error, the greater the penalty. When understanding is poor, there is an incentive to tread lightly.

General Dempsey has also alluded to this concept of experimental action. In a recent interview posted on the website War on the Rocks, he contrasts the traditional campaign plan and end state approach to strategy with a complexity-influenced approach in which subtle, probing actions are taken to elicit subtle responses. Experimental action is the mode of choice for engaging newly emerging patterns in

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the environment. Complexity models like the Cynefin framework and wicked problem criteria also follow this logic. Small interventions allow practitioners to observe emerging patterns, identify cause-and-effect, and maintain greater control. Larger interventions produce larger immediate effects, but are also likely to have a higher number of indirect effects that might be obscured in the chaos of new patterns. So there is a potentially inverse relationship between the degree of intervention and the practitioner’s ability to maintain situational understanding or control. As noted previously, once understanding is impaired, so too is the ability to craft effective interventions.

### **An Obligation to Unified Action**

Military professionals have a responsibility

to provide good situational understanding and advice about the potential influence of military capacity on policy. This is as true for tactical advisors, such as a civil affairs detachment supporting an embassy or regionally aligned force, as it is for the Chairman informing national security discourse. Unified action partners share a similar obligation as the common heritage of the war against violent extremism, which has created a high degree of

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interdependence among them. Complexity in the human dimension is as much a challenge for unified action partners as it is for the military. They face the same risk of falling short of policy intent if their situational understanding is poor. There ought to be a common desire among these partners to create mutual understanding and a broader narrative of the environment that benefits all. This is not to suggest there should be a common, agreed-upon narrative, but rather a common knowledge of all the conflicting narratives that partners bring into collaboration. Such a diversity of perspectives represents one of the best aspects of unified action and is akin to the multidisciplinary approach.

The U.S. military's chief concern is to fight and win the nation's wars. Recent conflicts, however, have led the military to appreciate threats that are not constrained by borders, yet often must be addressed within the boundaries of U.S. partners. The military has long had a role in diplomacy-dominated environments; yet, this role is often viewed as a discrete or technical adjunct to other policies. The growing interdependence of unified action partners

prompts a re-evaluation of the benefits that military capacity might bring to peacetime conditions. The *U.S. Army Capstone Concept* still charges the military professional to fight and win the nation's wars, but now also to "prevent" and "shape" potential conflict environments before they give rise to wars or export violence. These two tasks clearly define a military obligation to peacetime national policy. They imply a greater purpose for military capacity than has been previously realized in policy approaches such as security cooperation or partner-capacity building. However, if the military is to fulfill such peacetime policy roles effectively, a change is required in how the military views its place in unified action.

The spectrum of operations with which the military describes its conduct of policy is too narrow a framework for probable future efforts. In its usual representation, the five phases of military operations—deter, seize initiative, dominate, stabilize, enable civil authority—show the rise and fall of military activity in war over time, from initiation of hostilities until transition to peace. Phase 3 (dominate) is largest, suggesting its greater importance to the military over other phases. The five phases are bookended, pre- and post-conflict, by Phase 0, a steady state condition of non-conflict which is represented with no greater significance than any other phase. The graph of activity in these phases suggests that military action in a given conflict starts from nothing in the pre-war Phase 0, and tapers to nothing in the post-war Phase 0. This conceptualization does not represent the reality of the policy world, and it does not resonate with non-military unified action partners.

Military professionals ought to view themselves as unified action partners first and foremost. The "strategic corporal," after all, influences more than military policy; he must ask "how does my tactical action benefit the long-term interests of the nation?" In

recognition of its greater role in non-conflict environments, the military should see that it is only one of many partners acting on a spectrum of policy application. On this policy spectrum, Phase 0 is the predominant global condition. The phases of military operations are the exception, coming into being when necessitated by policy. Extending this perspective, practitioners can appreciate that multiple unified action partners contribute to policy objectives at any point on the spectrum. The implication is clear: defense, diplomacy, development, and other interagency actors share a blending of roles in both peacetime and in war.

## Conclusion

The human dimension is an ever-present variable in the operational and policy environment. Improving military engagement in that dimension can only come from constructive changes in ethical, doctrinal, and practical approaches. In “Toward Strategic Landpower,” Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland and Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Farris captured the importance of these changes: “If we believe military success will most likely require a deep understanding of...the human factors involved in a given conflict, then recognizing the human domain becomes a critical organizing and resourcing concept for supporting national security.”<sup>8</sup> Defense institutions and leaders at all levels must play an important role in bringing better understanding into common practice. To this end, DoD has expanded its research relationships with academic institutions to broadly explore complexity and human elements. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates launched the Minerva Initiative in 2007 to “improve the ability of DoD to develop cutting-edge social science research, foreign area and interdisciplinary studies, [which are] developed and vetted by the best scholars in these fields.”<sup>9</sup> It only makes sense that the military should consult this body of knowledge as a component of its environmental understanding. But such practice has not yet reached the operational force, and scholarly methods and research are rarely discussed within professional military education. Situational understanding suffers as a result, as do the strategies, campaign plans, and courses of action that are intended to support policy.

Military and other policy professionals have an ethical obligation to advise and inform the conduct of unified action in peace, war, and other circumstances, which requires consideration of a menu of engagement options suited to the environment. Situational understanding of the complex systems and causal stories throughout all levels is critical for identifying interventions that may incrementally improve conditions or minimize unintended consequences. Existing military doctrine and common practice do not support this depth of understanding. Multidisciplinary approaches and rigorous, validated research do improve understanding and warrant consideration by planners and leaders in all policy domains. Adopting these approaches and the forthcoming doctrinal changes focused on the human dimension require open and honest discourse about the military’s roles and professional obligations. Now is the time to find the way forward to better understanding. **IAJ**



## NOTES

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