

Strategic Engagement: Illuminating Civil Affairs Influence Pathways

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Civil Affairs wields a unique form of influence through long term overt network engagements with indigenous populations. However, existing doctrine and joint force training concepts do not fully operationalize the strategic influence capabilities of Civil Affairs. Without a conceptual construct to define, train and validate it, this form of influence will remain underutilized. In an operating environment characterized by the fragmentation of traditional alliances and institutions, the concept of nation state based public diplomacy and strategic influence is being challenged. Strategic influence must, like expeditionary diplomacy, include actions at the local levels where Civil Affairs typically operates, and must involve shaping the behaviors and decisions of a wide variety of nonstate actors.

Just as our national security capabilities are imbalanced in favor of kinetic options, our influence capabilities are imbalanced in terms of tactical and operational messaging. This imbalance is largely a failure at the institutional level to identify these shortfalls or to effectively define influence into Information Operations doctrine writ large. Organizational changes within Civil Affairs and better integration with Joint, Interagency, and Multinational (JIM) partners, while necessary, are not sufficient to operationalize influence in competition.

The overall purpose of this paper is to identify some institutional and operational gaps that hinder Civil Affairs effectiveness while illuminating a pathway for Civil Affairs in strategic influence using “resilience,” as defined in the Resistance Operating Concept, as a case study for the further development of Civil Affairs influence capabilities nested within updated Special Warfare doctrine. The Resistance Operating Concept (ROC) is a comprehensive effort to study resistance and resilience and provide a shared understanding for the U.S. and its allies.

The significance of the ROC is that it illuminates a framework for influence through engagement that can be exercised and validated within a larger joint exercise. The ROC holds promise as a conceptual model to train and validate Civil Affairs engagement activities at the strategic and operational levels. The ROC can also serve as a model for the continued evolution of Special Warfare doctrine which can drive revisions of Information Operations doctrine incorporating strategic engagement.

The authors’ argument is that the concept of strategic engagement must be recognized as a mechanism for influence, with updated doctrine to reflect it, and incorporated into joint warfighting through training and validation exercises. Further, new models are necessary to integrate Civil Affairs across the spectrum of Warfighting Functions. Strategic engagement by Civil Affairs, in conjunction with other SOF and JIM partners, can address gaps in irregular warfare capacity that limit U.S. effectiveness in great power competition.