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Constructive Engagement: A Proven Method for Conducting Stability and Support Operations

by

Martin Rodriguez, Andrew Farnsler and John Bott

In the Iraqi theater of operations (ITO), successful conduct of stability and support operations (SASO) requires an imaginative combination of lethal and nonlethal methods. For the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division, the combination is known as constructive engagement (CE) and is conducted in battalion sectors throughout Baghdad.¹ CE combines the full spectrum of military operations with diplomacy at the tactical level, a strategy described by top commanders in Iraq in a 2004 *New York Times* article as “a mix of military tactics, political maneuverings, media management and a generous dollop of cash for quickly rebuilding war-ravaged cities—a formula that, if it survives the test of time, could become a model for future fighting against the persistent insurrections plaguing Iraq.”²

During full-spectrum operations in a SASO environment, a commander must balance the application of military (lethal and civil-military) operations with diplomatic engagement to achieve the desired endstate. CE describes the methods commanders use to reach this balance, and in Baghdad the goal is the creation of a safe and secure environment in which the seeds of a republic will flourish. The mix of military and diplomatic tactics required very much depends on the environment within each unit sector and the personality of the battalion commander; a commander's skill as a Soldier and diplomat often determine the unit's level of success. Many small-unit leaders and commanders in Baghdad found diplomatic methods are often the most efficient means of reducing the insurgent base. Operations research analysts measured the effects of this approach through analysis of the changes in the types and number of enemy attacks in sectors across Baghdad. Statistical comparison of attacks before and after engagement operations began demonstrated the *decisive* operation type in Baghdad's SASO environment is nonlethal. Commanders used military operations to *shape* the environment but used CE to achieve success.

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During constructive engagement the commander assumes the role of top “tribal leader” in his/her area of operations (AO). The linchpin in this technique is that an Army battalion is the most powerful force in the sector. Local tribal and religious leaders must be made to understand this fact through discussion and justifiable use of force. CE centers on the fact that the U.S. Army and local leaders have common goals, such as the improvement of living and economic conditions, security and the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. However, CE works only if small-unit leaders keep their promises, respect the local populace and display results in improving their lives. In addition, commanders must increase the prestige and influence of the tribal and religious leaders in the AO. Once empowered, these leaders marginalize and deny support to insurgent forces and causes.

This strategy has measurable impact at the tactical level. Attacks are reduced when insurgents in a particular area are isolated, marginalized and defeated through constructive engagement. However, understandably, CE does not cease all attacks in the AO. For example, mortar attacks originating outside the sector often continue after engagement takes root; therefore, commanders must still conduct lethal operations to target and destroy extremists. CE requires trust, respect, commitment, and expectation and consequence management. In addition, local leaders must know that coalition forces will back up what they say in both military operations and kinetic operations.

A Real-life Application

In the vicinity of Baghdad International Airport, the commander of 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division (2-12 CAV), instituted several CE methods in his battalion’s urban sector. These techniques utilized extensive civil-military operations (CMO) to underlie a “white page,” or clean slate, truce—a contract with local tribal leaders that established a new start to relations marred in the past by mistakes and distrust on both sides. The white-page agreement codified mutual reconciliation and the cessation of violence for the purpose of building a peaceful, representative and prosperous future for the people of Iraq. The battalion commander used local media to advertise his engagement actions such as prisoner releases, because in public engagement activities, media coverage increases the prestige of the local leader and displays coalition forces improving the lives of average Iraqis.

The battalion commander made tribal leaders vouch for, or “guarantee,” individuals in their tribe who were suspected of anti-coalition activities. Human intelligence often provided them sufficient details to justify the coalition’s detention of tribe members. Tribe leaders then pressured those individuals to reform. Often, if the individuals were jobless, they could seek employment through coalition forces. Those anti-coalition tribe members who wouldn’t be marginalized left the AO. The commander also supervised implementation of prisoner releases from Abu Ghraib prison. This program provided enormous prestige to local leaders by involving tribe leaders and family members in the release “ceremony.” Pan-Arabian media, including Al-Jazeera, covered these events, adding information operations benefits to engagement.

A comparison of daily attacks using statistical hypothesis tests before and after the “adjustment” period for engagement revealed noticeable effects. Results showed the impact of CE on daily attacks before and after the adjustment period was significant. Constructive engagement correlated with a 50 percent reduction in improvised explosive devices (IEDs),

a 35 percent reduction in overall attacks and a 90 percent reduction in casualties in the AO. Another effect of CE was that the *type* of IED changed drastically. IEDs in the 2-12 CAV AO were no longer elaborately emplaced lethal ambushes, but were what are commonly known as “pop-and-drops,” hastily emplaced IEDs usually thrown from a slow-moving vehicle onto the side of the road. The enemy no longer had the luxury of emplacing, marking and targeting IEDs, which resulted in a far less lethal explosion. In addition, the battalion commander cited an increased ability to get contractors working, increased incidents of “red on red” attacks (when two enemy forces fight each other, e.g., al Qaeda versus Sunni insurgents) and anonymous hotline tips.

Of course there are other factors that potentially affect these results. For example, the battalion commander cited a concerted effort to clean the streets of his AO during the same time as the adjustment period. This certainly affected insurgents’ ability to hide IEDs and may have caused similar results in another area not using CE. Conversely, it showed the community that coalition forces were interested in improvement—thereby supporting CE. This example demonstrates how the application of military and diplomatic operations in concert can yield positive results.

In summary, methods for engaging local leaders include:

- establishing a white-page agreement with top tribal leaders;
- paying solatia (insurance) payments for any death that warrants it. Don’t deliberate—it’s the best \$2,500 information operations tool one can buy;
- releasing prisoners to tribal leaders;
- assisting in the payment of pensions to dissatisfied retired Iraqi Army officers;
- using local and Pan-Arab media to highlight success (Al-Jazeera, Arabia, etc.); and
- requesting a list of Iraqi demands on his tribe (the battalion is the head tribe in the area).

Methods for engaging the local populace include:

- enforcing humane treatment of Iraqis by U.S. military personnel during searches and raids;
- respecting their culture, especially during raids;
- taking an interpreter during raids and patrols; and
- enforcing a policy that Soldiers must learn basic Arabic.

The commander must be prepared to conduct diplomatic and nonlethal military operations that go beyond conventional training. As the top tribal leader in the area, the commander is required to conduct humanitarian and diplomatic activities, such as daily meetings with imams and sheiks. Therefore, leaders in the asymmetric fight must have more than a basic knowledge of history, international relations and the customs and culture of Iraq. “Fence-sitters” decide their militant actions based on prevailing opinion, tribal and religious leadership and coalition actions. Coalition leaders and Soldiers must always respect local customs and traditions, but residents and their leaders must understand that anti-coalition activities cause swift violence of action.

Commanders also must understand the role of respect in Iraqi culture. While respect in any culture earns trust, disrespect demands a vendetta in Iraq. Fortunately, respect and

cultural interest pay tremendous dividends at virtually no cost to the commander except his sincerity and his time. The importance of nonlethal methods such as these caused one commander to comment that operations in Iraq are more “Sun Tzu” than “Clausewitz.” Sun Tzu wrote, “Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”³ Thus, commanders use lethal force only when absolutely necessary, and diplomacy and CMO allow commanders to accomplish the higher commander’s intent of creating local and regional stability. These methods seek to reduce the insurgent base by removing grievances that fuel them. Sun Tsu also said, “Fighting guerilla warfare is like trying to *block* the flow of water; it’s futile since the water simply redirects its flow.”⁴ In constructive engagement, the key is *reducing* the flow of water.

That is not to say CE is easy or without risk. Keeping the attention and loyalty of tribal leaders is a full-time job. Cultural loyalty in many areas of Iraq is dependent on relevance; if the tribal leader cannot provide jobs, water or protection to the local populace, he will not be followed. Therefore, if coalition forces don’t provide tribal leaders with prominence, resources and respect, the whole tribe may develop anti-coalition tendencies. Conversely, if tribal leaders cannot control their tribe or attacks in their area, the coalition forces will not provide respect or resources. This “marriage of convenience” often follows an unstated *quid pro quo* format. Indeed, local leaders don’t expect everything, so just listening to complaints or socializing is often enough for small-unit leaders to maintain engagement. Conversely, broken promises, disrespect and collateral damage are remembered long after CMO projects are completed. Furthermore, bribery does not facilitate meaningful dialogue.

A Real-life Application

The commander of 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery (4-5 ADA) began a deliberate CE operation that significantly reduced the insurgent base in his battalion’s rural area of operations. This operation followed the premise that the local populace must stop terrorists from endangering their homes and families. The battalion used focused information operations to portray the difference in actions between coalition forces and the enemy in the area. Tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) developed under that framework as engagement took root.

In 4-5 ADA’s sector, the greatest need was water. If resources permitted, the unit built water purification stations for local villages. This was a powerful card to play as it helped the community and increased the tribe leaders’ status in the rural area south and west of Baghdad International Airport. Medical team visits to villages further bolstered coalition beneficence in the area. These projects were prioritized by security concern and the need to more effectively leverage money against other scarce resources to rebuild Iraqi society. Alternatively, a biweekly trip to the local village with a “water buffalo” (water trailer) got coalition Soldiers talking with the local populace while fulfilling the tribe’s greatest need, building tactical awareness and trust at the grass-roots political level. Indeed, the battalion staff cited their primary intelligence source as Soldier involvement and local leader visits to the battalion civil-military operations center (CMOC) after the engagement operation began.

Battalion targeting meetings included the CMO officer, who has the ability to recommend a cancellation of a lethal mission due to the severity of second- and third-order effects that can negate months of successful constructive engagement. This unit cited backing up what

they say and do as being the most important elements of CE. In addition, by working with local religious and tribal leaders to elicit the local tribe's needs, coalition forces could affect engagement and reduce the insurgent support base in the AO. The battalion commander also has a strict "no extortion" policy—if local leaders offer less violence in their AO for some gain it must be quickly turned into an opportunity to marginalize the tribe leader for knowing about attacks but failing to prevent them.

The battalion cited word of mouth as the most effective information operations tool they had. Local Iraqis in the battalion sector quickly reported all coalition activities to their tribe members and leaders. When coalition units did something positive for the community, word spread. Conversely, when coalition Soldiers detained a tribe member, they had to have hard evidence to support it because the tribe leaders visited the CMOC within hours of the detention. Fulfilling promises and judicious use of military force present a balanced "carrot and stick" approach to reducing the insurgent support base. The battalion commander cited two instances of locals failing to support attacks in progress or even being planned due to his CE efforts.

Using another tack, 4-5 ADA's CMO officer told local religious leaders that their peaceful religion, Islam, had been stolen and perverted by zealous fanatics, and that it is up to local religious leaders to take the Islamic faith back and convince Westerners that not all Muslims are violent. Debating religious philosophy is a very powerful engagement tool and takes an in-depth knowledge of the Quran. As a result of these CE efforts, there was a 60 percent reduction in average daily attacks and a 76 percent reduction in average daily IEDs. In addition, the battalion commander cited incidents of the local populace denying support to insurgent forces.

In summary, the 4-5 ADA commander's methods for engaging local leaders included:

- telling them if they helped to get rid of the enemy, the United States would help them and they could then begin to rebuild;
- beginning infrastructure projects that have an immediate effect to show the commander is keeping his word;
- informing them of any acts that could cause a harsh U.S. reaction and following through if such an act takes place;
- informing local leaders that if they are not powerful enough to control their area they are of no use to the tribe (the battalion); and
- informing local leaders that if attacks continue, the security environment will not permit the water project (political power is very useful leverage with local leaders).

Methods for engaging the local populace include:

- enforcing humane treatment of Iraqis by U.S. military personnel during searches and raids;
- respecting their culture, especially during raids;
- taking an interpreter during raids and patrols;
- showing interest and action in making the community better (talk is cheap);

- knowing the ethnic and tribal background of the sector—engaging tribal and religious (even Wahabbist) leaders;
- making sure they know that coalition leaders will not be extorted (e.g., local leaders told them, “If you buy this, attacks will decrease”);
- being prepared to conduct kinetic operations when absolutely necessary; and
- taking a water buffalo to the village and talk to people as they come to use it.

Conclusion

Constructive engagement is the synchronization of diplomatic and military operations at the tactical level. CE includes raid operations, checkpoint establishment, use of news media through public affairs, CMO to rebuild infrastructure, training security forces and empowering local tribal and religious leaders. It requires lethal and non-lethal targeting in conjunction with supporting efforts at the operational level of warfare to ensure maximum effects. For example, a hasty neighborhood search to net illegal weapons can do more harm than good by destroying months of relationship-building with the local leaders and inhabitants, and even overwhelming military force cannot destroy all enemies in the battalion sector. As a result of CE, units develop TTP that respect the local populace, guidelines that are imperative when security concerns require searches of tribe members’ persons or property. The results of CE also show that spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in a neighborhood does not guarantee a reduction of enemy activities. There are cases where sheiks have said that they have plenty of money; they only need help with jobs and projects in their neighborhood. Sheiks also have refused a reward for bringing in an anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) element because their honor *requires* that they turn him in. CE benefits the leader who spends a sufficient amount of time with local leaders on a daily basis learning their customs. For many commanders, they consider the time spent with local leaders, media operations and CMOs the most effective way to influence the battle. Constructive engagement has proven effective in reducing the insurgent base in these unit zones and others by applying a proper mix of diplomatic means and military operations consistent with the area of operations, the enemy and civilian factors.

This study of constructive engagement validates this approach through statistical analysis. Moreover, non-lethal operations proved to be an effective means of significantly reducing the effects and frequency of enemy attacks in a tactical environment. When using CE methods, success is not measured in the number of bullets spent, but rather in time spent with local leaders and dollars spent in stability and security. In this report, 2-12 CAV and 4-5 ADA were emphasized for demonstration purposes, but other units (1-5 Cavalry Division and 91st Engineering Battalion) were also interviewed, and all of their methods were variations of CE in one form or another. There was unanimous agreement that using nonlethal means was the *most effective* method to defeat the enemy. These battalion commanders agreed that civil-military officers, information operations, public affairs officers, psychological operations and other nonlethal means had more of an effect than conventional military operations in an asymmetric insurgency.

Endnotes

- ¹ The experiences cited in this paper took place during the 1st Cavalry Division's first rotation to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom II—elements of the division were also involved in OIF-I—from April 2004 (when the division assumed command and control of Task Force Baghdad) until February 2005 (when the 1st Cav transferred authority for TF Baghdad to the 3d Infantry Division and began to redeploy). The 1st Cavalry Division has since returned to Iraq, assuming authority for Multinational Division Baghdad in November 2006.
- ² Thom Shenker and Eric Schmitt, "Army Used Speed and Might, Plus Cash, Against Shiite Rebel," *The New York Times*, 26 June 2004.
- ³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/132>.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*

Sergeant Major Martin Rodriguez, USA Ret., currently serves as the Army C4ISR and Simulation Initialization System (ACSIS) Deputy Project Manager at the Central Technical Support Facility (CTSF), Fort Hood, TX.

Major Andrew Farnsler currently serves as an operations research analyst (ORSA) in the Force Strategy division of the Center for Army Analysis (CAA).

John Bott currently serves as a Management Analyst in the Directorate for Organizational and Management Planning (O&MP) in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

