

Understanding Local Actor Bases of Power

By Patrick D. Allen

Abstract

Influence operations in support of stability operations require a clear understanding of who wields power in a given region, the dimensions that provide the basis of that power, and whether that power is robust, growing, or declining. There are many dimensions to power, and some power is inherent to the actor while other forms of power are inferred through relationships such as blood, marriage, religion, cooperation, or coercion. Having an understanding of the base of power of each actor will assist local commanders in being better able to focus influence activities such as shoring up allied bases of power, or weakening adversary bases of power. Moreover, the ability to broker power can lead former adversaries to become allies, or at least cease being adversaries. This paper describes a set of mental models and displays that can represent the various bases of power, distinguish between inherent and inferred power, and describe the information requirements necessary to understand the local bases of power and the cooperative or competing relationships between both local and more distant actors.

“...our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade.” MG Michael T. Flynn, U.S. Army.¹

Background

General Flynn highlighted a major shortcoming in intelligence collection in current stability operations. Traditionally, intelligence collection has been focused on targeting adversaries. In the introductory remarks of his paper, he states:

Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and landowners, *hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced*, incurious about

the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers – whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers – U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency. [Emphasis mine.]

While General Flynn is not the first senior leader to state this need,² the public dissemination of his paper has helped focus renewed emphasis about what is needed to obtain the intelligence information we need to better perform stability operations. Being able to clearly identify who the power brokers are, iden-

tifying their base of power—whether multi-dimensional or single dimensioned, inherent or inferred, and how the actor is trying to change it over time—is all essential information to the local U.S. Commander performing stability operations.

Stability operations occur in complex environments involving many actors with varied interests. It is essential to understand where each actor derives its base of power, both in terms of power that derives from that actor (inherent power) and power that comes through relationships from others (inferred power). Identifying the sources of power is essential to supporting good actors and neutralizing bad actors. In a similar manner, identifying sources of conflict and cooperation among various actors is essential to creating a stable envi-

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ronment. Identifying and supporting cooperative arrangements among good actors, and disrupting the same among bad actors, is also essential in stability operations. Note that an actor can be an individual or a group, but that in each local region there tends to be an individual actor that is considered the leader of a group.

Overview

This paper presents four “mental models” that can be turned into physical tools to help U.S. commanders and their staffs visualize, populate, and utilize these types of information about power and critical relationships in modern stability operations:

1. A Political Powerbase Model that describes the various dimensions of power that each local actor is able to call upon, categorized by the elements of PMESII (political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure). Actors that have multiple dimensions of power to call upon tend to have a more robust power base than actors that have only one dimension of power, and are also more capable of asymmetric applications of power.
2. A Political Powerbase Relationships Model that describes which elements and dimensions of power are inherent to the actor and which are inferred through relationships of differing degrees of strength. Inferred bases of power are generally more vulnerable than inherent bases of power due to the reliance on the relationships that support them.
3. A Theory of Conflict and Cooperation Model that describes how each actor is attempting to expand, protect, or exploit existing powerbases through cooperative or conflicting relation-

ships with other local actors. Unless one understands the carrot as well as the stick, one cannot effectively influence local actors.

4. A Planning Considerations View or display that helps guide and prioritize the collection of the information necessary to populate the first three models described above. This view helps to categorize planning considerations and defining the information required, understanding that initially the data will be conflicting, that it will change over time, and that allegiances of local actors tend to not be permanent in the local areas in which we are currently operating.³

1. A Political Powerbase Model

Senior U.S. leaders who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan want to understand where each key actor in each area gets their power. Besides General Flynn in Afghanistan, U.S. field grade and general officers and ambassadors who have served in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan have asked for better methods of identifying, collecting, and visualizing this information so that they can better understand the environment in which they must operate and achieve missions.⁴

Every local actor has a powerbase. We need to understand the following:

- What is it based on?
- How many dimensions does it have?
- Is it legitimate or otherwise?
- How is it related to other actors and their bases of power?
- How is it changing over time?

Leaders with a broad base of power are usually stronger and more robust than actors with narrow or one-dimensional power bases. For example, if Actor A has a recognized religious standing,

has a military body that he commands, and owns the local electric power grid, then Actor A will have a broader power base than Actor B who simply commands a body of armed men. Having more than one dimension of power facilitates survival through adaptability, and by enabling recovery from a temporary or permanent neutralization of one dimension of power.

In addition, having more than one dimension of power provides the opportunity to wield power asymmetrically against any opponent. Continuing the preceding example, if a cease fire is being enforced by external forces, then Actor A can wield his religious, media, or economic influences, while Actor B can only sit back and take it, or decide that he must be the one to break the cease fire. Multiple dimensions of power are essential for influencing an opponent that may be stronger in one dimension but not in all dimensions.

When a U.S. commander in an area understands the base of power of each local, he can identify and exploit opportunities to help shore up or expand the base of power of cooperative local actors, and to identify and exploit opportunities to weaken non-cooperative local actors, often through asymmetric means.

With these principles and objectives in mind, Figure 1 presents the first mental model, the Political Powerbase Matrix Display. The left hand side of the matrix lists the dimensions of power, using the PMESII format. The local commander is free to choose a different arrangement of dimensions, but starting with at least a basic common set of dimensions will facilitate sharing information with other commanders. Any set of dimensions or hierarchical arrangement of dimensions may be used in this matrix as long as they are useful to the local commander and can be communicated clearly to others.

Across the top of the matrix is a list of the local key actors. The elements of the matrix are the strength each local actor has in each dimension of power. To continue our previous example, Actor A has strong local military power, strong economic power (through control of the electric power station), and medium social power through his religious

| PMESII Category | Actor A | Actor B | Actor C | Actor D |
|-----------------|---------|----------|---------|----------|
| Political | Weak | Weak | Strong | Episodic |
| Military | Strong | Strong | Weak | Weak |
| Economic | Strong | Weak | Medium | Medium |
| Social | Medium | Weak | Weak | Strong |
| Info/Media | Medium | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Infrastructure | Medium | Episodic | Strong | Weak |

Figure 1: Categorizing the Base of Power of Each Local Actor

standing. In the other dimensions, he currently has little or negligible power.

The U.S. commander might want to order the columns by the strongest actors on the left, decreasing in the number of dimensions as one looks to the right of the matrix. Conversely, he might want to display allied or supportive leaders on the left, neutral ones in the middle, and adversarial ones on the right. How the matrix gets displayed is based on the needs of the commander and his staff at a given time and emphasizing different points of interest.

The supporting data might be displayed by clicking on a dimension, which then expands to show its components as defined by a formalized hierarchy, as shown in Figure 2. One can “drill down” into supporting data by simply clicking on the cell, and the supporting data is presented. If one clicks on Actor A’s Economic cell, then the ownership of the electric power station will be shown, along with other economic strengths, such as farmland controlled and number of livestock owned by the family. This form of display would be most useful both while first gathering the information on bases of power, as well as once a formal categorization of elements within each dimension have been established.

In our examples we are using qualitative measures such as “strong, medium, weak, or episodic” as opposed to more quantitative measures. Quantitative measures are useful and should be used where available, as long as the net rep-

resentation is not misleading. For example, Actor B may have a large body of men in his militia, but they may be ill-equipped, untrained, inexperienced, and unreliable in combat. Simple quantitative measures of numbers of things are more useful in sub-categories of dimensions, while the qualitative measures that implicitly account for a wide range of factors are more useful at the higher dimensions.

Also note that this mental model allows for simple reports from various sources to be entered into the matrix without requiring all elements being filled. Simply being able to visualize what is currently known about the power base of some actors in a region, and knowing that certain dimensions of the base of power of other actors is not yet known, can be very useful to the commander on the ground. *Being able to provide an aggregate picture of what is known and not known about the power base of the local actors can by itself be very useful.*

2. A Political Powerbase Relationships Model

The second mental model is the distinction between inherent power and inferred power. Inherent power is the power intrinsic to that actor. For example, the founder of a militia usually owns that militia, the owner of the electric power station owns that power station, while a significant religious leader inherently carries the power of that position. Inherent power is the power the

actor brings to the table by being who they are.

Inferred power is power that can be controlled by an actor through established relationships. These relationships may be ties of blood, marriage, religion, nationality, economic investment, political favors, or other factors such as friendship. Figure 3 shows the elements of inherent and inferred power that underpin the dimensions of power of Actor A in our continuing example.

The combination of inherent power and a wide range of inferred power can create a combination of power dimensions that is very robust and powerful. At the same time, a local actor relying primarily on inferred power may have vulnerabilities not present with his inherent power. In Figure 3, the inherent power of Actor A is shown in the left hand column, while each of the columns to its right shows the dimensions of power that are inferred. Moreover, we have ranked the columns with the strongest relationships to the left hand side, with the least strong relationships on the right hand side. For example, ties of blood and religion are stronger in our sample culture than are ties of marriage or of a simple alliance.

The concept expressed in Figure 3 is that relationships that define inferred power can be influenced more readily than can inherent power, and that the weaker the relationship to the actor, the more vulnerable is the base of that actor’s power. Therefore, if our intent is to take influence actions to shore up the local representative of the Afghan government, then creating these relationships and defending them from adversary attacks is critical to the survival of that friendly actor’s power base. Conversely, if an adversarial actor has weaker relationships from which inferred power is derived, then influence actions can be better focused against those weaker relationships that can erode the power base of that actor. In general, influence actions will be easier or more effective against relationships of inferred power than against inherent power of a given actor.

Note that the actor (individual or group) that provides the local services that people in the area rely upon has

| PMESII Category | Actor A | Actor B | Actor C | Actor D |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Political | Weak | Weak | Strong | Episodic |
| Military | Strong | Strong | Weak | Weak |
| Trained Militia | 100 | 150 | <25 | |
| Untrained Militia | | 150 | | <25 |
| Economic | Strong | Weak | Medium | Medium |
| Electric Power | Gen. & Dist. | | | |
| Water & Sewage | | | | Pump Stations |
| Drug Trafficking | | | Grower | |
| Social | Medium | Weak | Weak | Strong |
| Info/Media | Medium | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Radio Station | | | Owner | |
| Pirate Radio | | | | Supports |
| Infrastructure | Medium | Episodic | Strong | Weak |

Figure 2: Expanding on Specific Elements of Power in Each Category

at least a partial basis of power by providing those services. Al Sadr's militia in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Taliban in Afghanistan provide services to the locals in order to establish a base of power. If the local actor is providing the basic services of sewage, water, food, repairs, or security when the government is not, then the power resides in the local actor that is providing those services. It is not just an "I do you this favor, you do me that favor" bargaining relationship; it is also part of the Middle Eastern culture of "I give you a gift now, you give me one later" that entails an open-ended commitment. The U.S. commander needs to be aware of to whom the locals look toward to provide the services they need, not just the actor who is supposed to be responsible for providing those services.⁵

The data for these relationships can be gathered through interviews with locals and other local leaders, as well as through more traditional intelligence means. At first, some of the data will be contradictory or confusing, but eventually a fairly accurate picture will emerge, as described in section 4 below. Social network analysis can be used to help identify less obvious relationships whose disparate elements are collected during interviews.

International figures, such as Al Sistani in Iraq, may have such incredibly strong single dimensions of power (in this case religious) that many other actors will willingly provide inferred power relationships that are also very strong based on the nature of his inherent power.

In a similar manner, other nations, such as Iran, can be actors at a local level in Iraq or Afghanistan based on the type (dimension) and amount of influence it can bring to bear on the local region. For example, Iran's support of Al Sadr and Iran's provisioning of advanced EFP IED materials to Iraqi insurgents and foreign fighters provide examples of international actor influence on local bases of power.⁶ The local effects of these international actors must also be accounted for in this model, but limited to those elements of power that can be brought to bear in the local situation.

3. A Theory of Conflict and Cooperation Model

Many authors have discussed theories of conflict to try and understand why violence arises and why peace is difficult to attain.⁷ The focus on elements of conflict is one reason why U.S. intelligence assets have been focused primarily on the adversaries. However,

understanding only the conflicts inherent in stability operations presents only half the necessary picture. The other half describes the cooperative relationships among the various local actors. Understanding both conflicting and cooperative activities among the local actors is essential to planning and assessing influence operations. The local U.S. commander needs to understand not only the theory of conflict, but also the theory behind cooperation.

Most actors are usually trying to increase or sustain their power base. They may be attempting to branch out into other dimensions, or they may be trying to gain a monopoly on one dimension of local power. Which actors are trying to gain additional inferred power through cooperative actions? Which are trying to increase their inherent power, or reduce another actor's inherent or inferred power, through uncooperative actions? It may be that power in a given dimension is being obtained through coercion, which is a form of conflict that appears on the surface to have some cooperative features (at least to an external observer).

For example, in Figure 4, if Actor A is trying to coerce Actor B, then Actor B may need to cooperate with Actor A until the opportunity arises to defeat or counter the source of coercion. Therefore, the U.S. commander needs to monitor the cooperative and conflicting actions and relationships occurring among the local actors in addition to determining the base of power of each actor. This will, in turn, show where either a supportive or adversarial local actor is vulnerable to actions of conflict or overtures of cooperation from other actors. Knowing in advance which local actors, friendly or otherwise, are vulnerable to being co-opted can go a long way in avoiding negative surprises and creating positive ones.

The emphasis on identifying cooperative and conflicting relationships also helps maintain a multi-sided view of the situation. Many actors may be cooperating or competing with each other in a given region at the same time. The mental models encourage the U.S. commander to see the multiple sides and factions competing and cooperating in the

| Actor A Categories | Actor A Summary | Owned | Inferred (Blood) | Inferred (Marriage) | Actor D (Allied) |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Political | Weak | | | In-Law Head Elder | |
| Military | Strong | | | | |
| Trained Militia | 100 | 20 | 60 | | 20 |
| Economic | Strong | | | | |
| Electric Power | Generator | Owned | | | |
| Power Distrib. | | | Brother Owns | | |
| Social | Medium | | | | |
| Religion | | Religious Leader | | | Top Cleric |
| Info/Media | Medium | | | | |
| Radio Station | | | | In-Law owner | |
| Infrastructure | Medium | | | | |
| | | Power Gen. | Power Grid | | |

Figure 3: Describing Inherent vs. Inferred Power

region, and to avoid seeing the situation as simply two-sided (us versus them) or static, since power relationships change over time and allegiances shift as well.

4. Planning Considerations View

Given the preceding three mental models and displays, a local commander and staff should be able to select a local actor and display his dimensions of power, whether they are inherent or inferred, and if inferred, whether they might be vulnerable to friendly or opposing influence activities. Moreover, the local U.S. commander should be able to display which actors are trying to influence this local actor and vice versa, both through cooperation and through conflict, and which and where the U.S. commander is most likely to be able to influence.

This degree of situational awareness will not be available overnight, nor will it ever be an unchanging picture. Getting at least a partial view of the power bases of local actors is essential to planning and measuring the effectiveness of Allied and adversary influence operations. Military decisionmakers are trained to make decisions in the absence of information, and even partially completed displays such as these can help avoid unnecessary risks. For example, if the data is relatively recent, additional effort should be made to have contingencies in place in case the information is incorrect. Moreover, if data is known to be missing, influence actions can be undertaken that are intended to solicit a response to help fill in the missing information.

The preceding displays are useful not only to a local commander’s situational understanding, but also to the staff and intelligence team to determine the essential elements of information required by the commander. The commander can rank which actors he wants information on first, and the staff can proceed to fill in the required information and provide status reports on the completion of the matrices. These matrices can act as a guide for the staff as to the information they need to provide to their leaders.

Figure 5 shows an example of a display that can help a staff ask the right questions. This figure is focused on the ownership or control of local media, such as the owners and operators of local legal and pirate radio stations, and the popularity of each in the local area.

These displays, even when incomplete, provide the local U.S. commander a view of the factors to consider when planning both influence and kinetic operations. Who is related to whom? Who is supporting whom? Do you really want to directly attack a local adversarial leader who is related to an allied local leader, or are there other, less obvious, methods to reduce the power of the adversarial leader?

The list of questions does not have to be completed before one starts collecting data for the first three figures. The list can be built over time, as new elements in the local area appear and become important to the local commander. The draft lists of questions can be shared among other local commands to

help fill in the blanks others might have missed. The wording, order, and priority of each question can be modified by local commanders and their staffs. We recommend not deleting any questions, only moving them down in priority or placing them in a non-active box.

As mentioned previously, data collected early will tend to be contradictory and will need to be corroborated through independent means. This is no different than normal intelligence activity, where conflicting information must be evaluated as to its reliability. Moreover, when planning influence operations, they can be planned so as to help discover which side of the conflicting information is true, if either.

Lastly, the staff needs to be aware that power bases are multi-dimensional, that there are many “sides” active in the region (not just us and them), and that the current relationships among the actors are not fixed over time. Allegiances tend to shift in many parts of the world, and that may be an acceptable part of local culture.⁸ The opportunity for shifting allegiances is not just another complication to plan for, but may be the ultimate objective of our influence operations.

Recommended Use

These mental models can be implemented immediately in the field. The local commander may define an initial set of local actors for which he wants to determine their power bases. The staff can create a spreadsheet to enter the data for Figures 1 and 3 when obtained.

| PMESII Category | Actor A Actions | Toward Actor B | Toward Actor C | Toward Actor D |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Political | Weak | Weak | Strong | Episodic |
| Military | Strong | Strong | Weak | Weak |
| Trained Militia | 100 | Threatening Posture | Security Training | |
| Economic | Strong | Weak | Medium | Medium |
| Electric Power | Gen. & Dist. | Withholding Electricity | | |
| Social | Medium | Weak | Weak | Strong |
| Info/Media | Medium | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Radio Station | | Media Attacks | Media Support | Media Support |
| Infrastructure | Medium | Episodic | Strong | Weak |

Figure 4: Actor A Cooperative and Competitive Actions to Expand Powerbase

| Category | Questions | Answers |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Information/Media | | |
| Radio Stations | Who owns which stations? | Actor A owns KSDR |
| | How many pirate stations? | 2 of unknown ownership, but anti-Coalition tone |
| | How many people listen to each station? | 70% KSDR 10% Pirate radio |
| | Who does each station support? | KSDR is pro Actor A, pirate radio anti-Coalition |

Figure 5: Sample Questions to Ask by PMESII Category

(One could then export the data in the simple spreadsheets to more advanced tools, such as those written in Microsoft Access, MySQL, or Java, but collecting and using the data does not have to wait for an elaborate tool to be developed.)

To obtain the data, the planning considerations guides described in section 4 can be created and elaborated upon, emphasizing the questions and elements of power most applicable to the local situation. Personnel are then assigned to collect the information via their normal duties.

Probably the most difficult display to complete is the representation of conflict and cooperation. These change frequently, and the actors may not want to openly discuss their efforts to expand their powerbase. However, their competitors may be more than happy to talk about what their opponents are doing in order to garner support against them.

Summary

Having a better understanding of the powerbase of each actor, the number and types of dimensions of that power, which elements of the powerbase are inherent or inferred, and whether it is growing or shrinking through cooperation or conflict, are all essential elements of information in stability operations and prerequisites for effective influence operations.

Using the first mental model, the power base for each actor can be described by the dimensions in which they wield power. Actors with more dimensions of power available tend to be more robust and capable of asymmetric actions against opponents.

Using the second mental model refines the first model by describing which of the elements of power are inherent

to the actor and which are inferred through relationships. Power wielded through relationships tends to be less secure than inherent bases of power and more vulnerable to influence actions by allies or adversaries.

Using the third mental model further refines the first two by including changes over time. Each actor is usually engaged in expanding or sustaining their power base, so the third mental model helps capture data about these changing relationships and whether the actions taken are cooperative or conflicting. Moreover, considering time acts as a reminder that allegiances for both allies and adversaries in stability operations are not necessarily permanent and can be influenced over time.

Lastly, the planning considerations model helps the staff ask the right questions to fill in the first three mental models, and can guide the essential elements for future data collection.

Overall, these four mental models are useful categorizations of the information local U.S. Commanders will need to operate effectively in stability operations. Their simplicity makes them easy to implement in the field, yet providing sharable knowledge to other interested parties in a common format.

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Endnotes

- 1 Flynn, Major General Michael T., Captain Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, Center for a New American Security, January 2010, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/AfghanIntel_Flynn_Jan2010_code507_voices.pdf
- 2 The author discussed the need for a comprehensive picture of the stability operations environment with Ambassador Larry Pope, General (Ret.) Dick Hawley, and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Len Hawley during meetings at US Joint Forces Command during a 2006 "limited objective experiment." Each expressed similar desires for information as described by General Flynn, and the need for information categorizations, mental models and displays similar to those described in this paper.
- 3 See Allen, Patrick D., "Training and Planning for Shifting Allegiances," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Journal*, Vol. 153 No. 5, October, 2008. <http://www.rusi.org>.
- 4 See Endnote 2.
- 5 Schuster, Henry, "Hezbollah's secret weapon," CNN online, 24 July 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/07/24/schuster.hezbollah/index.html>
- 6 EFP IEDs are explosive formed penetrator improvised explosive devices. See Associated Press, "U.S. military: Iran training Iraqi bomb makers," MSNBC online, 11 April 2007; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11941340/>, and see Associated Press, "Iraqi government advisor says al-Sadr in Iran," MSNBC online, 15 Feb 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17164516>
- 7 Covey, Jock, Michael J. Dziedzic, and Leonard R. Hawley, *The Quest for Viable Peace: International Intervention and Strategies for Conflict Transformation*, The Institute for Peace, Washington DC, 2005.
- 8 See Endnote 3.