From immemorial time, information has been an indispensable and decisive element in winning the war. Although the morphology of conflicts evolves according to military capabilities, technologies, procedures and combat techniques, as well as the space in which they take place, the communication architecture of the battlefield remains a constant presence.

Contemporary conflict can be characterised by increasing hybridity and the increasing role of information, both in the physical space itself and in the virtual space. With the digitalisation of the information environment (it directly affects the operational environment), the information sphere has become not only a crucial element, but also the battlefield in which the war takes place. In modern warfare, many of the tactics and techniques used by the armed forces have the role of informing/influencing and not destroying. Taking into account the diversity of participants (combatants, non-combatants), we can assert that the civilian population plays a preferential role. Therefore, interaction with a state’s own population and the population in the area of responsibility is essential to ensure the support of participation in the conflict as well as the acceptance of forces in the field. Nowadays, information operations (INFO OPS) are considered a force multiplier in the whole spectrum of military operations, and through technology, actions can be initiated to influence the target audience. The aim of this article is to identify the role of information operations during NATO’s longest and most challenging mission: the International Security Assistance Force/ISAF, in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** ISAF; Taliban; information operations; information activities; target audience;

**INTRODUCTION**

The INFO OPS concept was developed by the Americans in the 1990s and later included in national military doctrine. In this sense, in the first American doctrine, information operations involved “actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one’s own information and information systems” (JP 3-13, 1998, p. I-1), a definition which, by its general character, was valid until 2006, when a new information operations doctrine was developed. Also, in the 1998 doctrine the concept of Information Warfare/IW is mentioned, representing “IO conducted during time of crisis or conflict (including war) to achieve or promote specific objectives over a specific adversary or adversaries” (Ib.). While IW tends to be applied at times of crisis or conflict, as the techniques used involve the use of coercive force, which is seen as hostile, information operations can be conducted in both peacetime and conflict situations. Consequently, in the absence of a clear delimitation between the two concepts, IW was deleted from the 2006 doctrine.

At the Alliance level, Info Ops represent “a military function to provide advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and other NAC approved parties in support of Alliance mission objectives” (AJP 3-10, 2009, pp. 1-3). At the same time, information activities represent “actions designed to affect information and or information systems. They can be performed by any actor and include protective measures” (Ib.).

Information operations can be offensive and involve attacking the enemy’s command and control/C2 structure, while defensive operations consist of protecting one’s own C2 systems from the enemy’s attacks. Therefore, the efficiency of information operations results from the combination of the effects of offensive and defensive actions, in order to obtain information superiority in the decisive points.

**INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN**

The war in Afghanistan began 20 years ago, following the terrorist attacks on the United States of America on 11 September 2001. The US Special Forces, supported by the US intelligence services, together with the forces of the North Atlantic Alliance, initiated the operation in Afghanistan under the code name Enduring Freedom.
The mission was to defeat the Al Qaeda organisation (and its leader, Osama bin Laden, suspected of having planned and carried out these attacks), as well as to remove the Taliban from their leading position (overthrowing the Taliban government). The missions to defeat Al Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power were quickly accomplished. Thus, the Taliban government was quickly removed from power, but the Taliban followers gathered in Pakistan under the spiritual leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar and began slow insurgent actions to retake Afghanistan. Similarly, US responses to the Taliban attacks appear to be different from previous responses to the Taliban attacks on American targets. Since then, the Taliban have adapted their insurgent actions to make up for the difference from US and NATO military forces. Representative of the Taliban actions were the ambushes and the use of various types of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

On 20 December 2001, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established by the UN Security Council Resolution 1386, at the request of the Afghan Government, in order to assist the Afghan Government in maintaining security in the capital Kabul and around it. Its deployment began in 2001, initially under the individual leadership of NATO Allies, and in 2003, NATO took command of the Force, which gradually expanded its operations throughout the country (in the latter half of 2006). To date, the ISAF has been the longest and most challenging mission of NATO, involving troops from 51 NATO member and partner countries, respectively 130,000 troops. As part of the international community’s joint effort, the ISAF mission was to provide the Afghan government with the proper conditions to enforce their authority throughout the country as well as to develop an Afghan security force that would reduce insurgent capabilities, while ensuring that Afghanistan would never become the preferred place of terrorists again. Therefore, since 2011, the responsibility for the country’s security has been gradually shifted to the Afghan forces.

Starting in the summer of 2013, the Afghan forces took over the management of security operations throughout their national territory. The ISAF mission ended in 2014, when the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) took full responsibility for maintaining security and stability throughout the country. In 2015, NATO launched the Resolute Support Mission/RSM. Unlike the ISAF, this mission was non-combat, without the use of force in the defence against insurgents.

Regarding our country’s involvement in NATO mission in Afghanistan, Romania was one of the main contributors. Romanian troops participated in both the ISAF and the Resolute Support missions.

**INFORMATION OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT BY NATO (ISAF) AND INFORMATION ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED BY THE TALIBAN – DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES**

In the Afghanistan war, activities aiming to change perceptions or influence public opinion were led by both the ISAF and the Taliban. Most of the activities were successful due to the use of an indispensable tool – information. Regarding the use of information as a tool, we identified many differences between the two parties, in relation to the manner of conducting information operations, the means used or the purpose pursued. Since the outbreak of the war, the Taliban have shown that they understand the role of information operations very well. Telling the truth was irrelevant to them, so they resorted to a mixture of truths and lies in order to create a permanent state of uncertainty.

The Taliban’s information warfare activities have often been described as information operations. However, the direct comparison of the Taliban non-kinetic activities with the NATO doctrinal concept of information operations, which involves coordinating information activities in military campaigns, is not well-founded. Even if the ISAF’s strategy was different from the Taliban information activities, the most common association between the two sides would be the use of a common technique: propaganda. The ISAF’s information operations were legitimate, and the description of the Taliban activities in accordance with the NATO terminology could confer them the same nature. Therefore, this issue leads us to use the term information activities to describe the Taliban strategy of informing and influencing public opinion.

Although they did not differentiate among the activities carried out, the Taliban resorted to techniques such as propaganda, contact with local leaders, the position and support of the local population, physical destruction etc. In NATO doctrine, these activities correspond to psychological operations (PSYOPS), Key Leaders Engagement (KLE), Presence, Profile and Posture (PPP), Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) etc. the Taliban perceived these activities as steps taken to create the desired effects and not as distinct activities.
In an attempt to intimidate or coerce, the Taliban used *night letters*, mostly handwritten, that were sent to well-chosen recipients with the intention of changing their behaviour. Most of the activities were based on face-to-face communication with local leaders or village elders, to persuade them not to support the ISAF or the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s (GIRoA) actions. The Taliban’s messages were also broadcast on the radio, on CDs or DVDs, which were available in markets and bazaars across the country. The Taliban information activities were not only limited to the Afghan population, but also targeted global public opinion, through international media, cable TV, satellites, the Internet, and various websites.

The Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) function was also implemented and through it the Taliban assured the local population of their support. Its purpose was to reinforce the message that they were better able to support the population than the ISAF or the GIRoA, especially in areas where the ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could not supply permanent troops.

A key issue that influenced the information environment was the perception of time. The Taliban had a distinct way of measuring time, and the exchange of information was very rapid. When it came to collateral damage, we can say that they took advantage of the mistakes of the NATO forces, because their representative in the international press was always one step ahead of the ISAF. They resorted to a mixture of lies and truths to put the ISAF at a disadvantage. By the time the ISAF completed the operation and took note of a collateral damage incident, the Taliban assured the local population of their support. Its purpose was to reinforce the message that they were better able to support the population than the ISAF or the GIRoA, especially in areas where the ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could not supply permanent troops.

The occurrence of events, the ISAF needed time to conduct investigations, confirm the occurrence of the mentioned events and approve hierarchically before appearing in front of the international press. This example can confirm the US military thinking in Afghanistan: “We’ve got the watches, but they’ve got the time” (Gant, 2009, p. 12).

Since the Soviet invasion of 1979, not much has changed in terms of the constant state of war. The Taliban maintained their position as *fighters for freedom* (AP Newx, 2021), as the US President Ronald Reagan called them, and tried to portray NATO troops similarly with Soviet military troops, as long as the memory of the invasion still lingered in the Afghan collective memory.

Because they did not wear uniforms, the Taliban could walk freely and unobserved among the villagers. Moreover, knowing the culture of the Afghan people very well and often quoting from the Qur’an, their messages received legitimacy and authority, while holding a lasting impact. At the same time, messages such as “The Taliban will be here when ISAF is gone”, “Afghanistan is the graveyard of Empires”, “The infidels are deliberately killing our women and children”, “ISAF soldiers are foreigners and GIRoA are their puppets” (Nissen, 2007, p. 7) etc., were effective in counteracting the ISAF and GIRoA messages. In the interval of 2001-2014, the Taliban carried out kinetic actions, which they later exploited for propaganda purposes. They even claimed that they had carried out actions that they did not but took responsibility for them for propaganda purposes.

As for the ISAF interventions in Afghanistan, most consist of manoeuvre-based kinetic operations. These operations were supported by Information Operations (InfoOps) and psychological operations (PSYOPS), but the main means used remained kinetic actions.

Unlike the Taliban, who did not distinguish between operational levels (strategic, operational, tactic) and did not limit their information activities to a certain level, the ISAF limited information operations only to operational and tactic levels. Some planners were even unfamiliar with the integration of those non-kinetic operations into military operations and the effects they could achieve.

Because the doctrine provided limited instructions or guidelines on the integration of information operations into unit operations, commanders had to configure them themselves. Therefore, to the extent that the commanders considered the integration of information operations in their operations necessary...
or important, they expressed their intention by setting objectives and only then their integration became important for their staff or subordinates.

We could state that the ISAF’s actions were under constant pressure, being forced to deliver the results of progress in Afghanistan, while the Taliban sought to attract and keep the population on their side, or at least to be neutral.

MEANS OF DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

At the risk of repeating ourselves, we remind that the intervention in Afghanistan was justified by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but as time went on, this theme did not resonate among Afghans. The difference was primarily in propaganda actions, which no longer focused on what the terrorists did to the Americans but on what the terrorists did to the Afghans. At the same time, the ISAF messages sought the support of the Afghan community to eliminate various threats (IEDs etc.) and emphasise the role of the Afghan government and military in ensuring a better life.

A few years later, in December 2009, President Barack Obama declared that the US forces would remain in Afghanistan and wage a “war of necessity” in order to stop Al Qaeda from re-establishing a new sanctuary to use to attack the USA again. “We must never forget: this is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans” (The New York Times). This message gained some credibility, as long as the issue focused on Al Qaeda and foreign terrorists, who had set up camps in Afghanistan. However, most Afghans have never seen a terrorist training camp and have not interacted with Al Qaeda at all.

The effort to label the Taliban as a terrorist has led to a loss of credibility, because the target audience did not consider the Taliban to be an international terrorist. At the same time, the Pashtu did not seem to accept the premise that the Taliban were dealing with the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, the continuation of the war on terror after the removal of Osama Bin Laden has forced most Al Qaeda members to flee the country, abandoning their camps. As a result, the justification for foreign occupation has become even less credible. In practice, the effectiveness/viability of the war on terror has gradually diminished. There have been more acts of terrorism in Afghanistan than ever before. The number of suicide attacks and the deployment of IEDs, resulting in mutilation of civilians, has increased significantly, as have the number of the troops, respectively the number of combat operations carried out.

The Taliban have begun to develop propaganda that foreign occupation is to blame, and as soon as foreign troops leave Afghanistan, there will be peace. It follows that we can speak of a war of ideas, since the Americans claimed to be in Afghanistan to suppress terrorism, and the terrorists claimed that foreign occupation was the cause of terrorism. For example, a few months after the counter-insurgent invasion of Afghanistan, PSYOPS units made a video in Dari and Pashto, graphics and Afghan music to spread the message of justifying their presence in Afghanistan. Analysing this example in terms of efficiency, those who watched the film did not understand the images of planes crashing into tall buildings, firefighters, well-dressed people running, rubble, dust, and so on. Moreover, many Afghan locals had never seen a television set, and many had seen pictures of New York City. All they understood was that something had happened. This indicates the failure of visual communication, because the target audience did not understand the images and did not associate them with the fight against terrorism. Most Pashtuns people had never seen a skyscraper and did not associate drawings and photographs from the World Trade Center with crowded buildings. At the same time, they had never seen planes and did not realize that those planes were full of innocent people.

Kinetic operations played a decisive role in the war in Afghanistan, but the ISAF needed to shift its focus to Info Ops, especially in terms of population support and confidence. The Taliban have had a very good understanding of this centre of gravity and have made considerable efforts to discredit the actions of the ISAF and the international community and to maintain the support of the Afghan people, while threatening the cohesion of the Alliance.

To disrupt communications and the air defence network, counter-insurgency forces used aircraft such as the EC-130H Compass Call, which conducted barrage jamming against the Afghan C2 jamming, and the EA-6B Prowler, which accompanied the attack aircraft to their targets. This has led to the rapid destruction of the Integrated Air Defence Systems (IADS), C2 systems and Afghan ground forces.

In an attempt to persuade Taliban combatants to surrender, pamphlets and radio broadcasts highlighted the capabilities of counter-insurgency forces and the futility of ongoing fighting, as Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders hid and left the battlefield. Radio has proven to be an effective means of transmitting messages, and US forces have continued to sponsor some stations in Afghanistan, especially commercial or government-controlled stations.

The leaflets and radio broadcasts were intended to persuade the Afghan people to provide information that could lead to the capture of Osama Bin Laden.
and Taliban leaders. Rewards were offered to those who provided information. At the same time, the leaflets provided information on humanitarian assistance (HA) operations that took place in parallel with combat operations. These products described the nature of humanitarian aid operations and how Afghans could benefit from them. The advantage of the leaflets was that they could be thrown from planes or helicopters beyond the patrol area. Given the low literacy, coalition forces used mostly suggestive images at the expense of text, an effort to illustrate the visual message. The Taliban did not have this advantage because they did not have planes. The leaflets contained messages such as “The US military is the friend of Afghan people”, “We are here to help” or “We know where you are” (Muñoz, p. 100), referring to Taliban leaders.

Other means of transmitting messages were newspapers and magazines. They were distributed in crowded areas such as schools, restaurants or shops. But even there, the illiteracy rate was high, and those who could read enjoyed a certain status and could influence others.

Social networks and the Internet have played a key role on both sides. In June 2009, the Associated Press announced that US forces in Afghanistan had launched a Facebook page, a YouTube channel and Twitter.

As part of the communication effort, these means “would help the military reach those who get their information online rather than via printed materials” (Ngo, 2009). The main purpose of these sites was to “counter Taliban propaganda, which is said to frequently publish statements about how many American soldiers were killed by Taliban force, or how many civilians were allegedly killed in air raids. This is information war, which, according to some American officials, the military forces are losing” (ib.). The Taliban relied on the Internet to spread ideology and propaganda, and those who obtained information on the Internet were obliged to pass it on. But the Taliban’s work was not limited only to the local population. It could also be directed at the foreign audience in order to gain support for their cause. Even if unplanned, intrusions and misleading on Afghan and Taliban radio networks by special forces helped guide the planes to their targets. Special Forces posed as Taliban combatants on the radio, convincing the Taliban forces under attack to provide feedback, to provide target corrections for airstrikes, with the Taliban reporting how far and in what direction the bombs were exploding. The Special Forces used that information and corrected the trajectories of the bombs that attacked those positions. However, not only bombs but also humanitarian supplies fell on Afghanistan in areas identified as lacking food since the attacks began. Transport planes were throwing plastic containers with rations provided by coalition forces to prevent famine among the Afghan population. Leaflets were also distributed in those areas describing what those containers held. Even though they were rare, billboards were placed to reduce the insurgency.

The daily press releases and press conferences were to inform the Pentagon and the leadership of the previous day’s action, and examples were given of coalition-led attacks that were successfully completed. A weak point regarding the press releases was the long time until their completion and approval. For example, when a platoon operating in a certain area was involved in an event, the platoon commander would draw up a report describing what had happened. This report went through the entire chain of command, until it reached the IO officer at brigade level, who wrote a press release, in English, in which he informed the upper echelons about the occurrence of the event. However, the passage of the report through the entire chain of command often led to a loss of clarity, of the context of production and even the loss of timeliness. Sometimes, tactical commanders minimised the event just to stop involving the entire chain of command in its operations.

While kinetic operations could easily defeat the Taliban and Al Qaeda troops, the conditions for success in Afghanistan could be set by influence operations.

PSYOPS has been most successful in face-to-face communication, being considered the best way to spread information, through meetings with jirgas’, hiring key leaders and establishing relationships with representatives of the Afghan media. Once they heard directly from the soldiers that they were there to help and provide security and that their only goal was to defeat terrorism, the message gained credibility. This PSYOPS function made the soldiers feel like ambassadors of goodwill. The role was to counter Taliban propaganda, which was seen by most Afghans as negative. At the same time, the Afghan audience was not homogeneous and the key audience for counterinsurgency targets was Pashto, which accounted for about 42% of the Afghan population and included areas where Taliban insurgency was strongest.

CONCLUSIONS

The difference between the ISAF and the Taliban in the information warfare has led to a tactical and normative asymmetry that has worked well for the Taliban, at least in the communications sphere. This advantage has made them effective
influencing the local audience and international public opinion. It seems that the Taliban were more effective in information activities than they were in tactical activities, therefore arguably, they did not strive to win the battles at the tactical level. Rather, they sought to inflict as much damage as possible to undermine both the ISAF’s credibility and the International Community’s objectives in Afghanistan. They tried to dominate the information field by any means, while the ISAF interacted differently with the media, being constrained by legal, political, ethical considerations in disseminating messages.

For counter-insurgency forces to cope in Afghanistan, they had to win the information warfare, and one of the prerequisites was to win the support of the population. For that to happen, it had to be recognised at all levels in NATO that the information warfare or the battle over perceptions was as important, perhaps even more important, than the physical engagement of forces and materiel. In other words, it was about gaining the trust of the local population and not about physical destruction.

The information battle was asymmetric, characterised primarily by the way the Taliban conducted information activities and how the ISAF conducted their Info Ops. From here we can draw the following conclusions:

- ISAF conducted kinetic operations, which were supported by information operations, while the Taliban conducted information activities supported by kinetic operations.
- ISAF sought to prove their capabilities using Info Ops, while the Taliban used intimidation and coercion to convey messages.

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