



UNDERSTANDING THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Last Updated: 10 July 2015

The [operational environment](#) is the composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander. The political, economic, and physical terrains of host nations present significant challenges to both US and host- nation air forces.

The greatest [foreign internal defense](#) (FID) environmental challenge is understanding the nature of irregular conflicts that can impact US national security interests and the security interests of important friends and partners. The first step should be to identify those threats for what they really are, the kinds of administrative and financial mechanisms that power them and the kinds of beliefs and ideologies that underpin their persistence and vitality among millions of the world's population. Even the way insurgency is fought has an enormous influence on the types of forces and weapon systems that can be successfully employed.

The global information environment contributes to the efficacy of these concepts. Commanders should apply as much vigor to [information campaigns](#) as other FID initiatives since these activities, as part of a broader strategic communication plan, can be a force multiplier. Strategic communication shapes perceptions at the global, regional and national levels. Air Force operations can play a significant supporting role in the US government to communicate policy and demonstrate US commitment.

The lessons derived from the classic models, or paradigms, of insurgency, small wars, and terrorism are crucial for building theoretical backgrounds for recognizing and analyzing both current and possible future manifestations of these types of conflict. Subjects should include political, economic, and military imperatives governing [internal defense and development](#) (IDAD) strategies as well as the basic concepts of insurgency, e.g., political mobilization, struggles for legitimacy, minimum violence, alternate centers of gravity, and the use of terrorism as a tactic of guerrilla warfare.

Accordingly, commanders who enter this arena should examine the individual characteristics of the conflict environment. Current studies and analyses should address the specific characteristics of current and emerging insurgency threats. Past insurgency models are not entirely sufficient to describe the impact when a local or regional insurgency is exported on a global scale against established or emerging governments

that foster, sponsor, or accommodate forces of change and modernization.

Social and Physical Conditions

Major environmental factors affecting FID planning and execution include physical and psychological pressures from hostile elements, social fragmentation, political instability, and economic impoverishment. Difficult terrain, physical isolation of population groups, and poorly developed infrastructures often impede counterinsurgency and FID operations. Airpower, because of its inherent flexibility, can overcome many of these obstacles.

Nations most susceptible to lawlessness, subversion, terrorism, and insurgency, and other threats to internal security are characterized by various forms of social, economic, and political fragmentation and by a lack of national identity within population groups who resist, or are denied, integration into the national community. Some actions that contribute to this fragmentation include political and ethnic alienation, separatism, and lack of accessibility to government resources by certain groups, poor income distribution among social classes, and disenfranchisement or lack of other political rights. Situations most likely to involve Air Force FID activities are prevalent in developing nations where public services, industrial infrastructures, and air support facilities are relatively underdeveloped by Western standards.

Difficult terrain, seasonal weather patterns, physical isolation of population groups, and poorly developed physical infrastructures often impede military operations. However, such obstacles also provide opportunities to use airpower in a variety of combat and non-combat roles. In many cases, air transportation affords the only reliable form of physical contact with civil-military elements in rural areas.

Terrain varies widely and can impact FID operations. Typically, rugged or austere terrain, adverse climate, and the scarcity of improved airfields affect not only the tempo, scale, and character of air operations but also the types of aircraft that can be employed.

In some regions, seasonal weather patterns dictate the timing and form of military campaigning. Major offensives supported exclusively by ground logistics may be restricted to prolonged periods of dry weather. During extended periods of heavy rain and high water, airpower offers significant advantages in rural administration, logistics, and tactical mobility.
