Integrating Operational Intelligence Groups across Nations

by

Dr Charles Vandepeer, PhD

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Military operations often take place in conjunction with coalition forces in deployed environments. Examining operations, and operational intelligence, should provide insight into best-practice performance, so long as actions and assessments are constantly being reviewed, evaluated and improved in a timely manner. Part of best-practice includes efforts to ensure that intelligence is integrated with operations and across coalition nations. Where it is difficult to distinguish between operations and intelligence, this might actually be an indicator of successful integration. Challenges to integration within operations and across nations include access and sharing of information, increased complexity and the ongoing overabundance of irrelevant information. Despite these challenges, successful operations do occur, indicating that (at some level) these problems are being addressed in practice. Arguably, the most valuable opportunity for integrating operational intelligence across nations is the potential for genuine critique by diverse groups with shared problems and similar goals. Every interaction represents an opportunity to identify assumptions, recognise mindsets and define what is both known and unknown. These challenges and opportunities apply equally to interactions across services, organisations and agencies.

Dr Charles Vandepeer, PhD

Dr Charles Vandepeer is a Senior Lecturer in Intelligence & Security Studies at Charles Sturt University and an Adjunct Fellow at the University of Oklahoma's Center for Intelligence & National Security. Charles is the author of *Applied Thinking for Intelligence Analysis* published through the Air Power Development Centre. His career has included service in the Royal Australian Air Force and as a civilian Defence operations research scientist. Charles completed his PhD at the University of Adelaide examining intelligence analysis and threat assessment within Australia, the United States and United Kingdom. Completing his undergraduate degree at the University of the South Pacific (Fiji), Charles gained first-hand experience in understanding the power and influence that cultures, mindsets and perspectives can have on how we interpret and interact with the world around us. His second book *Asking Good Questions - A Practical Guide* is currently with the printer.

Dr Vandepeer: What I want to talk about today is integrating operational intelligence. The reason I throw up this slide is simply to say I'm not approaching this from purely a theoretical perspective. Yes, I have deployed obviously in an environment like this, we have people with extensive deployment experience so it's just to say the approach is both practical and theoretical. And it's aimed to be useful. So that's where it's coming from. So I have given it some thought. If there are some things I touch on that you go, 'Well, that seems to be pretty obvious.' There's probably a reason I'm touching on it and emphasising that and we can explore that in the Q&A.

I know this is largely a military audience but we also have civilians in here. So the talk today is not simply about military operations. There are things to draw out of this for interactions across agencies, across services, across organisations that I think are important and provide us with an opportunity to exploit. We are not the biggest military. We are not the biggest country in the world. And I think we have an advantage to draw on learning from each other to actually produce best practice.

So what's operational intelligence? When we speak about operational intelligence, I think traditionally we can default to looking at [the] tactical, operational and strategic. [I am] happy to go with that for this talk. It's a commonly accepted and useful distinction in military operations and terminology. I guess the point to emphasise is, [from] people who'd be experienced, some of the lines blur so they're not hard and fast lines [between] tactical [and] operational, [or] operational and strategic. But it's not a bad place to start. So drawing on some of the publications that are out there, I looked at the US and UK and I think there's some key concepts for identifying [a] definition or concept of operational intelligence. And as I go through some of the quotes and I can give people references, I've got my email address, that people can hit me up [with] questions as well beyond this. So some of the things that stand out looking at [both the] US and UK, operational intelligence is described in terms of the provision of information analysis, to support planning, execution and conduct of operations with the intelligence used by commanders to assist in decision-making through better understanding. Operational intelligence is used to answer commander's information requirements, maintain situation awareness of adversaries and increasingly sociocultural factors to evaluate actions and possible implications of actions.

Going through the literature, there's a need, a recognised need for operational intelligence to be fully integrated into operational planning, into execution and into the assessment of efforts. The aim is to provide a holistic view of the operational environment and draw on interagency and multinational resources. So what have I got? I've got a definition. Because this is being recorded as a podcast, I'll read this out so bear with me as I read from a few of the slides. So operational intelligence, simply defined here as intelligence used in the planning, execution and evaluation of operations to provide commanders and operators with an ongoing understanding of a situation or environment to inform their decisions and actions. So we actually have an advantage in that we're engaged in operations.

And we're often engaged in named operations and defined operations. And I think this is an advantage we need to take a fresh look at. So within the military context, armed forces deploy units, personnel, platforms, [and] equipment into specific geographic areas as part of named and defined operations. Now these operations can be anything from state-on-state conflict which in our recent history, fortunately, we haven't had much of that. [However], counterinsurgency, peace enforcement, [and] peacekeeping often occur with armed forces from coalition nations. Now, even from recent history, the degree to which operations have had clearly defined objectives and goals, can be open to debate. Nevertheless, from an intelligence perspective, the benefit of a defined operation is it does provide a kind of conceptual framework that intelligence analysts can bound a problem. It's not an answer for everything. It won't prevent surprise or tell you about threats. It's about assessed threats in this area, in this location, in this context. So that's one of the benefits of a named operation or a defined operation. In dealing with an overabundance of information, having a formal operation actually helps as it does provide a kind of a specific problem or question. It gives us the ability to actually make sense of the information, which is something that's really important.

Now in saying that, any analytic endeavour aimed at dealing with people based problems, multiple interacting groups and organisations is an extremely difficult undertaking. In addition, the challenge for intelligence analysis and intelligence analysts is the desire to be largely future focused to describe what will be, rather than what was, in order to assist commanders to make decisions and shaping, rather than just reacting to the operational environment. So there are challenges. But what a defined operation does is it bounds that problem.

The other thing is the word *operation* actually implies importance. Within bureaucratic organisations the act of linking personnel resources and assets to an operation, particularly a named operation, generally makes it easier to acquire, allocate or source. That's not saying it makes it easy, but easier. The other thing about military operations is they involve often high stakes, life and death decisions. Large scale coordinated actions with the possibility of enhanced or diminished international influence authority and power. As a consequence, governments and militaries tend to be invested in successful outcomes of operations. What this hopefully means is operations actually end up providing the opportunity to establish feedback loops to implement, review, adapt tactics, techniques, [and] technologies to achieve desired outcomes. Now the reason I've put up this slide is it's not graphic but it highlights the importance of operations. So this was HMS *Barham* in World War II operations in the Mediterranean. And what that slide kind of captures is the cost of getting things wrong in operations. The potential high cost, the loss of life just in that one action was in the hundreds.

In his book, *Engineers of Victory*, Paul Kennedy sought to identify how it was that allied nations were able to outperform their axis adversaries across numerous operational problems such as winning the Atlantic convoy battle, establishing command of the air and ceasing control of enemy held beaches. Now, I want to read out his quote in full because I believe it's one of the most important and insightful quotes I've certainly read in a number of years in terms of military and operational success.

> In some, the winning of great wars always requires superior organisation and that in turn requires people who can run those organisations. Not in a blinkered way, but most competently and in a fashion that will allow outsiders to feed fresh ideas into the pursuit of victory. None of this can be done by the chiefs alone, however great their genius, however massive their energy, there has to be a support system, a culture of encouragement, efficient feedback loops, a capacity to learn from setbacks and ability to get things done and all of this must be done in a fashion that is better than the enemies. That is how wars are won.

And what's interesting about this quote and Kennedy's work is he was looking at an environment [where] operations [had an] incredible pace of technological change of military systems. People [were] taking on new roles, new tasks, [and] taking on adversaries that had similar, at times, technologically superior capabilities to them. Interestingly, he finds it's the very human aspects of listening, learning, encouraging and empowering people across rank levels that appear critical to allied success.

So what do operations do? We talked about their high profile and [the] potential high consequence nature of operations. So what it suggests is, the intelligence we see supporting this operation should actually be best practice. Operations should provide us with the opportunity to witness the proper application of intelligence. So whatever operations we're on, notionally that should say, this is best practice, there should be feedback loops, there should be review. There

should be in-depth analysis; there should be discussion, debate because of the high consequence profile of these operations often deployed with coalition partners. Now, to what extent nations are currently exploiting these opportunities, I would suggest remains open to question. Certainly there's the issue of secrecy that surrounds intelligence. However, some concern should be raised when that layer of secrecy gets peeled back. The recently released US [Dept of] Defense report into allegations of manipulation in intelligence actually provides us with a recent insight into the performance of intelligence in support of Operation *Inherent Resolve*.

Can I just get a show of hands who has actually read that report? It was released last week. Kudos to you. It's 198 pages. I would strongly recommend that people take a look at that, irrespective of your rank level, read through it. The report itself argues against the accusations of manipulation but some of the insights are quite telling and quite troubling. Anyone who doesn't believe that intelligence analysis is in large part a social process, needs to read that report and look at the deep divisions and severe differences in perception that existed between analysts and analysts and between analysts and the hierarchy. Indeed a number of recommendations at the end of that report, tie in quite interestingly to Kennedy's observations. A couple of the recommendations include things like: they should actually implement after-action reviews, professionally assess intelligence production, provide feedback and identify ways to improve. Remember this is looking at intelligence that was being used to provide support to operations. Another recommendation: provide follow up on after-action reviews. And another one looked at analysis of alternatives. Multiple courses of action encouraged comparison and evaluation of reports.

Now I'll touch on doctrine a bit later but the interesting thing when people think of doctrine and evaluation of courses of action at the analytical and hierarchy levels, often what was happening, according to the US Report, was there was only one course of action for the enemy being considered which is interesting. Doctrine says, [one should consider the] most likely and [the] most dangerous. And even that, people can argue is not enough. In actual practice, they were looking at one. What was interesting was, in an age of technology, and immense amounts of data, the key issues within this report turned out to be things like poor feedback on analysis, a lack of transparency between rank levels, perceptions of a lack of empowerment and concerns about towing a party line. People and communication and not technology, that was interesting.

So why do we need to integrate operational intelligence? I'd argue there's two kinds of aspects to this. One is actually integrating operational intelligence into operations. And the other is integrating intelligence across nations. Now it might be that we see really good integration of intelligence across nations such as the Five-Eyes community but they're not necessarily integrated with the operations themselves. Alternatively, we might see deployed nations highly integrated between intelligence and operations but not talking to their coalition partners.

I want to highlight another aspect of operations that's worth taking away. Deployed forces are not their entire nation or their entire military capabilities. When nations deploy military forces into a theatre of operations, they're deploying part of their entire military and defence capabilities. By the nature of many overseas operations, military forces are often deployed into unfamiliar environments in which they can easily find themselves numerically inferior to actual and potential adversaries. This leads to the idea that you are only what you can get into the fight. And that applies, operationally and it applies to intelligence. The point is usefully demonstrated with the US experience in Somalia as part of Operation *Restore Hope*. In describing the 1993

Battle of Mogadishu in which 19 US personnel were killed and two Black Hawks lost, a former US Ranger provides quite a telling insight into his feelings at the time. And I'll quote,

> We were kind of angry that it had come down to this. We were sort of on the defensive. We had, I mean, we were the Rangers. We had Delta Forces; we had the 160s, which is 160th Special Aviation, up in the air. There's no way that these guys could've got us on their retreat. It's crazy.

What's interesting about that is time and time again in operations and conflicts, when things go wrong, we see this perception and reality hits. And so when it comes to operations, increasingly we find intelligence as providing support from a deployed area. So, not necessarily in the area of deployment; it might be that we have ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] assets that are providing ubiquitous surveillance over the top of an area. But again, is it in the fight? If intelligence is there collecting and it's not tied into operations, then it really doesn't matter and it doesn't have an impact.

And so I'll make a couple of points 'cause I think they're important and they might again seem obvious but I want people to think about them. To collect doesn't actually mean to know. Collected information is not automatically analysed information. Analysed information is not automatically integrated information and to display doesn't mean to understand.

So in terms of operations, there are probably three questions that I find are useful. And these questions actually cut to the heart of intelligence analysts' egos but then I think they're important to ask and pursue. So is the intelligence being produced actually useful? The default position is 'yes, well of course it is'. Well, that's fine, so follow it up. If it's useful, who's using it? Find the people who are using it. How are they using it? And how can it be improved? If it's not useful, why not? And what needs to be done to make it useful? If we think this doesn't apply, last year I was having a chat to a senior military intelligence officer who was telling me [about a time] when they went to a unit that was providing intelligence support, lots of reports, I actually asked the question, 'So who's actually using it?' Now because it was a computer-based system they were able to identify that [it was] not many people. But somebody, one person, was actually reading everything, so they thought we need to go and talk to this person to actually find out why they're using it, how they're using it. The disappointment of course was when they tracked down that person, they find out that it was actually the person in charge of the unit who'd asked the original question. The benefit of that was they were then able to adapt the intelligence to actually support operations to what was required. But it requires asking the question and pursuing the answers.

So what about some examples of integration efforts where things appear to be working? I'd suggest one of the most discussed and obvious examples of integration of operational intelligence is something like intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance or ISR into coalition operations. Airborne ISR platforms and sensors have been used to provide real-time and near real-time support to commanders or operators in the planning, execution and evaluation stages of operation and tactical missions. To cite just one example, air force has recognised that ISR is operations, rather than just an enabler of operations. And the requirement is for intelligence and operational workforces to think, act and operate in an integrated manner. Interestingly, ISR has become such an integral part of many operations that it raises questions about whether operations are driving intelligence or intelligence is driving operations or in fact intelligence is now operations. This blurring of lines between operations and intelligence can arguably be seen as a real sign of

success. And I'd argue, it provides an indication of a more successful integration of operational intelligence. And it also perhaps provides us with a criteria for determining how integrated operations and intelligence are. If it's difficult to divide them or break them in two, that's actually probably a good thing.

So what about integrating operational intelligence across nations? I would suggest that shared operating concepts can also be seen as a measure of successful integration. As a specific example, the concept of pattern-of-life analysis, which developed post–Second Gulf War where we looked at persistent 24/7 surveillance of an area using multi-sensor ISR assets to determine adversary actions behaviours and identities, was actually broadly accepted across the Five-Eyes Community and beyond. So this shared application of doctrine actually provides us with a shared language, so whatever information is coming in, we have a shared language to talk about. Now of course with any doctrine, uncritical acceptance of it risks making some poor decisions. But again, we [should] look at operations that actually can provide us with a valuable insight into what is actually happening, not what should be happening in theory.

It was interesting and [what was] published in the unclassified version of a review into the US attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières Hospital in Kunduz [Afghanistan]. They too were using pattern-of-life analysis, which paints a certain picture. Interestingly in the investigation, it came out that in that context, pattern-of-life analysis was being measured in minutes of surveillance, not 24/7 coverage. And what operations do is they tell us pretty well how's this [is] being applied and what can we learn from that.

One of the other challenges for intelligence is analysis across the border and it doesn't matter whether you're in the US, the UK or Australia; we lack empirical research into what actually happens. What is analysis? Is it sitting at a computer? Is it the discussion you have with the person beside you? Is it that snippet of news that you see? Is it the blog you review? Or is it the final actual PowerPoint slide? I'd suggest there's a lot of thinking that goes into it and the relationships and the discussion but believe it or not, we actually have very little analytic empirical evidence of what's going on that we can learn from. It's a bit hard to improve performance if you don't actually understand what the performance is. And that's from an objective point of view, that's from somebody standing back and watching. And interestingly, that was raised by a previous Director of National Intelligence in the US. He said, 'We have no empirical evidence of this'.

So what are the challenges of integrating intelligence across nations and with operations? Yes, security remains an issue but within a Five-Eyes Community, less so, [as] information is shared. Now there'll always be information that's not shared. And that will to a degree impact on trust between coalition partners depending on how important the information is seen to be. Technological challenges of dealing with a huge amount of information also present themselves. These are not going to go away. However, I would suggest going back to a quote from 1989, by Russell Ackoff. He was looking at computer based management systems and his observation I thought was quite insightful all these years later, particularly when it applies to some of the challenges facing intelligence. And Ackoff's argument was that the misassumption is that management's most critical information need is for more relevant information. He said, 'This is false. Management's most critical need is for less irrelevant information.' And what we often lack with technologies is that ability to determine what is actually relevant and irrelevant.

So as we head into areas of automation of information, perhaps the best we can hope for from information technologies is that we end up with a kind of situational awareness that is maybe being able to tell who is what and who is where. The human aspect of it, the intelligence analyst side of it, [the] situational understanding, [the] So what? What does it mean and why is it happening? I would argue that that will remain inherently human going forward. The challenge I guess is if we expect analysts and we want to integrate analysts simply so we've got more analysts to evaluate more information in coalition operations, I can assure you we will run out of analysts long before we run out of information. So Josh talks about a senior defence official who talking to a bunch of intelligence officers, made the following observation. 'You always believe the solution to our knowledge deficiencies is more collection. I believe the solution is more thinking.' And I'll come back to this because I think it's where Australia can have a distinct advantage.

I guess part of the ever challenging context of an endless supply of information appears to be an attitude that the answer of final clarity might come from just a little bit more information, so we keep on searching for the dot to connect. However, such an approach does not accurately reflect how we understand situations. If the next dot does not support the existing or prevailing wisdom, then it's actually more likely to be disregarded. Now it might be the single piece of information [that] might prove useful for an individual target, but at a campaign and operational level, it is better [to] more broadly understand that information which I would argue is critical. Now again, we're dealing with information overload. But this is where operations provide us with an advantage, because we talked about finding out what 'is', as opposed to what 'is ideally'. So what is happening on operations? Well, information is being taken and applied and used. Decisions are being made, assessments are being made, not [by] using all the information available, but by using some of the information available. So some of the questions that we might be able to answer by looking at operations more deeply is: how much collected information is actually being used by intelligence analysts in supporting operations? What is the minimum amount of information analysts require to provide useful intelligence and what is the nature of such information? What's the maximum amount of information that analysts can deal with before they begin to ignore it? When does more information hinder judgments and decision-making? And how much information is enough to make sound operational decisions? Now answers to these questions are contextual. They will depend on the situation and the operations. But interestingly, the answers are there if we pursue them. And operations provide us with what's actually happening.

So what are some of the opportunities going ahead? I'll put up two quotes and you'll see how these tie in. The first one by Peter Drucker is the observation that, 'My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.' And the second one is by Will Rogers. 'It's not what we don't know that hurts; it's what we know that ain't so.'

So one of the things that's come out of recent enquiries and investigations into intelligence in the United Kingdom and the United States, including things like the Chilcot Report, is the lack of genuine debate, dissent and critique within intelligence and defence organisations. Good news somehow always makes it to the top. Bad news has a bit more trouble getting there. Interestingly, reading Chilcot and his observation that when senior people from the PM down were going into Iraq to look at progress, they were often surprised how the situation on the ground, post the invasion, didn't really match the reports that they were getting back home. And it reminded me of an observation by Churchill on World War I. His observation was, 'The issues with some things that went wrong or battle plans that went wrong, was often that the decision

maker had a far rosier picture of the situation. Not necessarily 'cause they wanted a rosy picture, but because that's what they got'.

So what does integrating operational intelligence across nations offer us? I think it offers us part of a solution to addressing this issue of lack of dissent and debate. And I think it gives us some context to where Australia could play a leading role. Within bureaucratic and organisational situations, dissent, disagreement, critique, [and] even asking questions can be difficult. However, when we get together as different nations, different services, or different organisations, the nature of questioning challenges [the status quo]. Getting back to Drucker, we're able to ask the obvious question. 'Why do you do that?' 'I don't understand what that means.' 'What is the process you're using?' It's not because we're being smart-alecs. It's because we have a genuine desire to know. The benefit of that in operating and coalition environments is those kind of questions are accepted and expected and they give us two opportunities. They give us the opportunity to actually understand how our partners, our people in fellow services or organisations, are thinking about the problem. 'How are you thinking about the problem? And why are you thinking that way?' But when it comes to explaining ourselves, they actually provide us with the opportunity to critically examine our own perspectives. When you have to explain something and justify why you're doing things a certain way, it actually taps into a deeper level of questioning and critique than might otherwise happen. If you're working alongside somebody who you're employed with, you're in the same service and organisation; you can assume a lot. But as soon as you start working in coalition environments, a lot of these assumptions go out the door. And what that gives us [is] the opportunity to identity maybe what ain't so. It gives us the opportunity to identify our own assumptions. Identify maybe where we've got things right because we've had another look at it, rather than just assuming.

Andrew Hill and Charles Allen illustrate the value of learning from what they call anomalies. And I'll read you their quote.

> Recognising that organizations are adept at ignoring inconvenient information, strategic leaders must also acknowledge that as humans we prefer information that reinforces our understanding of the world. We ignore or explain away observations that contradict our basic assumptions. Every war game simulation, conflict that involves other nations and adversaries, an examination of strategy, even in fiction, is an opportunity to discover an anomaly. When things are different we're far more open to learning. Operations are usually different to what we're doing.

Working in a coalition environment is usually different to what we're doing; these are anomalies that we can take advantage of, we're actually prepared for learning.

So given Australia's size, there's certain things we will struggle to do as a coalition partner or as an ally. There are certain scale and size issues that we simply can't compete with. But I would argue that there are areas we can, with deliberate and dedicated effort, genuinely become world recognised leaders and performers in within this intelligence space. Again, it's not about PR, it's not about diplomacy or spin, it is about performance. During World War II, in the supporting British Armed Forces, a small group of 200 operational research scientists were assigned to assist, identify problems and develop solutions. This small group relative to their uniformed peers had an incredibly disproportionate impact on operations and British successes. That whole approach of critical thinking was taken up by the United States and by Australia and Canada and became an entire field of research. I would argue that Australia can produce a similar level of critical thinking within smaller analytic teams. How do we learn?

How do we establish feedback loops? How do we effectively suck the marrow out of learning from every operation? I think it gets back to Paul Kennedy's quote on how to win wars and I see it as an opportunity for us. Can we outlearn our adversaries? Can we outlearn our adversaries–I would hope we can. I will say one thing and finish on this. My concern is [from] statements [I hear] like, 'yep, we're already doing this'. A few years ago, I might have taken that at face value. My concern now is a few aspects. One is, when investigations actually occur, like we've seen at Kunduz or like the Chilcot Report, when we peel back the layer of secrecy, we find that maybe things aren't going as well as we thought. Maybe we aren't learning as well as we thought. But operations do provide us with that advantage.

Recently, last year I was involved with assisting a government agency, I won't say whether it was at the council, state, or federal level, who's similarly running a project. And when I was brought in to look at that, I asked a few questions and the answer was, 'No, it's going well. There's no problems here.' Unfortunately the result was things didn't go well and there's now a formal investigation into the results of that performance. So the face value, everything's going fine, actually fills me with a bit of a sense of concern. The other thing is, where's the empirical research into what we're doing? Where is the empirical research saying? 'Well actually this is how analysis works and this is how we can improve.' And the other thing I would argue is where are our coalition partners and where are our allies banging on our doors trying to work out how come the Aussies do so well? I think if we start to see that, that will tell us that we're doing well. In the absence of that, I do get concerned. The benefit though is we have operational experience, we have operations ongoing and if we're willing to identify, admit mistakes, learn and establish feedback loops, then I think we could actually lead the world [in] intelligence analysis and interoperating, and integrating operational intelligence into operations.

Note: Words in square brackets [ ] have been added to the transcript during the editing process for clarity.