
Chapter 4: Assessment Tools

This chapter describes the procedures the Washington interagency should use to assess its performance during the planning, execution and transition phases of a complex contingency operation. The goal of the assessment is to identify strengths and weaknesses in interagency procedures so that those tasked with overseeing the next operation can build on previous successes and learn from previous mistakes.

The interagency assessment process has four components:

- collecting relevant information about what happened during the planning, execution, and transition phases of the operation
- analyzing the information and determining useful lessons to be learned
- distributing those lessons throughout the interagency;
 - integrating critical lessons into policies and procedures so they can help improve interagency operations during the next crisis.

The first two steps—collecting and analyzing information—are undertaken as part of the ExComm-led after-action review. The insights gained through this process are codified in a statement of “lessons to be learned” from the specific operation. The ExComm then distributes this document widely among those who took part in either the planning or the execution of the operation and in the interagency.

Although distilling lessons from past operations is an important process, it is an incomplete one. The real value of determining what went right or wrong in a given operation comes from ensuring that the lessons are integrated into the policies and procedures that members of the interagency will use to plan, execute and monitor the next operation. Therefore, this chapter will conclude with a detailed discussion of the lessons that the interagency has derived from past operations in the hope that they may influence future operations.

INTERAGENCY AFTER-ACTION REVIEW

After each complex contingency operation, the Executive Committee will charter an after-action review (AAR). An AAR is a guided discussion of an operation that enables its participants to discover for themselves what went well, what did not, and why. Specifically, this forum provides:

- observations of agency officials concerning key events and how these events were interpreted by key players within the interagency
- judgments on the quality of information and intelligence provided to the interagency concerning the situation on the ground

- candid insights into specific organizational strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives
- feedback and insights on the procedures used in both planning and execution
- details beyond those available in normal reporting

This information can be used to either validate current procedures and lessons learned, modify them, or propose new ones.

The AAR should focus on the success and failure of both specific policies and planning techniques to determine what went well, what went poorly, and how the performance of the interagency could be improved. However, the after-action review does not grade success or failure; there are always weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain. It is also important that the AAR not be used, or be seen as an instrument to lay credit or blame on individuals or agencies. The climate surrounding an AAR must be one in which everyone can openly and honestly discuss what actually happened in sufficient detail that everyone understands what did and did not occur and why. This is the only way that the lessons of these operations can be learned effectively and future performance improved.

The AAR should be run by the chair of the ExComm and should include at least all of the ExComm members. The key to the AAR is that everyone feels free to speak his/her mind, regardless of position, agency, or experience; no one person can see as much as the entire group. It may also be useful to include a small number of government experts who did not participate in the operation, but who are familiar with past contingency operations. These “outside” experts can often help identify strengths and weaknesses precisely because of their distance from the operation.

The ExComm will determine the structure of the specific AAR, but it should include the following key elements:

- introduction (ground rules and expectations)
- review of the pol-mil plan
- events in theater
- U.S. actions/responses
- specific lessons learned
- conclusions
- recommended changes to future implementation

The results of the AAR should be combined with other relevant reports and briefed to the Deputies. It is important that the briefing not only discuss weaknesses in the planning and execution of the operation, but also the strengths. Upon approval of the brief, it should be distributed widely among those who were involved in the operation and should be made available to the broader interagency.

LESSONS

The after-action review collects, analyzes, and distributes the lessons from the operation. However, the final step in the interagency assessment process is integrating appropriate lessons into the policies and procedures that will be used in the next operation. The AAR is only useful insofar as the lessons, both good and bad, of the past operation inform the planning and execution of the next one.

It is important to understand the distinction between a “lesson noted” and a “lesson learned.” The AAR identifies behaviors that should be repeated or modified. A lesson is not learned, however, until behavior changes. Obviously, one way to judge whether a behavior has changed is to observe the interagency in subsequent operations. However, it is preferable to disseminate and integrate the lessons before the interagency has to apply them in a real situation. This highlights the key role of interagency training, called for in PDD-56, which familiarizes members of the interagency with the lessons of past operations and provides them with an opportunity to “learn” these lessons before they have to plan and oversee an actual operation where lives are at stake.

There is a set of agreed upon lessons derived from interagency experiences of the past few years and vetted within much of the USG. Not all of these lessons directly relate to PDD-56 mechanisms and procedures, but they are all important to keep in mind as the interagency plans for a U.S. response to a complex emergency. The rest of this chapter will discuss these lessons in detail (a quick reference list of the lessons can be found in Appendix D). The lessons are listed somewhat chronologically, beginning with factors to be considered when making the decision to intervene and ending with guidelines on transitioning leadership of an operation to another actor.

Deciding to Intervene

Although many factors contribute to the initial decision to conduct or participate in a complex contingency operation, any decision to act must be based on the following considerations:

- realistic assessment of the situation (with input from personnel on the ground)—its magnitude causes, dynamics, status of ongoing operations and degree of danger
- assessment of the U.S. interests at stake
- assessment of response options and whether the costs and risks associated with different courses of action are commensurate with U.S. interests
- participation/contributions of other governments and organizations
- identification of clear objectives, endstate conditions, and exit strategy
- acceptability of command, control, communication and intelligence arrangements
- prospects for gaining adequate political and financial support for the operation, both in the U.S. and from the international community

Each consideration will be given a different weight depending on the specific crisis; however, each should be considered during the deliberations that lead to a decision on whether and how the U.S. should become involved or increase its involvement.

Crafting an Integrated Strategy

Because complex contingency operations always involve more than just military operations, any successful strategy for achieving U.S. objectives in these operations must integrate all dimensions of the operation including, but not limited to, political, military, and humanitarian activities. Without integrated strategic guidance from Washington, there is little hope that the individual agencies of the USG in theater will be able to successfully coordinate their efforts.

This lesson led directly to the development of the integrated planning tools that are described in the previous chapter and were used in planning for U.S. operations in Haiti. This is an example of a lesson that clearly led to a change in behavior. Rather than a current weakness of the interagency, it reflects a strength on which to build.

Establishing Effective Integration Mechanisms

The tools and planning processes described in this handbook provide the mechanisms for integrating the efforts of disparate parts of the USG at the strategic level, but the Washington interagency must also ensure that similar integration mechanisms are established at the operational and tactical levels. Further, there must be procedures to ensure effective communication between these levels.

It is important for interagency members to understand the invaluable roles that specialized civilian and military assets can play in complex contingency operations. Coordinating mechanisms are needed at both the operational and the tactical level to ensure unity of effort. Success in complex contingency operations demands that all civilian and military organizations establish central coordinating mechanisms at all levels. Agencies need to establish these mechanisms before an operation to build effective civil-military relationships well ahead of an emergency.

Although this handbook is targeted only at developing appropriate strategic level mechanisms, lessons from past operations suggest that agency cooperation and policy integration must extend to lower levels, including field operations. While the full interagency structure need not be copied, it is crucial that integrating mechanisms exist at any level (operational, tactical) where key decisions are being made.

Determining Who Will Lead the Operation

One of the most difficult and important aspects of a complex contingency operation is coordinating the overall effort. The best way to ensure sufficient coordination is to assign leadership of the operation to one nation, international organization or alliance that has the requisite capabilities. This is especially true for operations in which there are significant military or security tasks. Identifying a lead actor also puts pressure on that actor to continually monitor and support the ongoing operation, or else risk being blamed for the

operation's failure. Of equal importance is investing the lead actor with the requisite authority.

For an operation that involves the potential for combat, the United Nations will likely not be suitable to take the leadership role because it currently lacks the necessary military, financial, and organizational capabilities.

An important corollary to this lesson is that when the United States commits significant numbers of troops, especially combat troops, to an operation, the international community will look to us to lead the operation. Therefore, when we commit significant numbers of U.S. troops, we should be prepared to lead the operation, alone or as part of an established alliance, and be held accountable for the results. If our interests do not support such a leadership role, then we should reassess our contribution and consider other means of support to the operation.

Building a Cohesive and Effective Coalition

Critical to the success of a coalition operation is ensuring coordination among all the member nations. While tactical-level consultation will take place constantly, high-level consultation should take place before a nation is accepted into the coalition, during the planning phase, and during the operation at regular intervals or whenever the situation on the ground changes significantly.

Before including a nation in a coalition, the lead actor should assess the political will and military capability of the potential participant. If possible, when a prospective contributing nation does not possess the will or the capability to effectively contribute to the objectives of the operation it should not be included in the coalition. In cases where such nations are included despite these factors, the commander of the operation should be careful to assign tasks to that contingent commensurate with their will and capabilities.

Once a nation has joined the coalition, it is critical to obtain its agreement on the key elements of the operation. Specifically, the lead actor must ensure that there is advance agreement on:

- mandate, objectives, and concept of operations
- command and control arrangements
- civil-military contributions to the operation
- rules of engagement
- resource contributions of each participant

Not only must all coalition members agree on the major elements of the operation, but also there must be regular consultations to ensure that, as the situation changes, the coalition remains united in its course of action. Without this agreement, the effectiveness of the operation will decline, and in some cases the independent action or inaction of a coalition member could undermine the overall effort.

Gaining Political Support for the Operation

Securing and sustaining the support of Congress and the American people is critical to the success of U.S. participation in any complex contingency operation. Congressional and public affairs strategies are critical elements of any integrated strategy.

U.S. officials should consult with Congress on all aspects of the operation preferably before it begins and regularly once the operation is underway. Also, U.S. officials must clearly explain to the American public the U.S. interests at stake in a given operation, the objectives sought, our strategy for achieving them, and the risks and costs associated with U.S. intervention. This must be done not only at the outset of an operation, but also whenever significant changes on the ground or in the strategy occur.

This is not to imply that the USG cannot act without the prior approval of the Congress or the American people. However, in the end, for any operation in which the U.S. sends its citizens into harm's way or expends significant U.S. resources, the American populace and their elected representatives need to understand why the United States is participating in the operation and what we expect to accomplish.

Continually Reassessing the Operation

Once the operation is underway, the interagency must continually reassess the operation to ensure that mission execution remains consistent with our overall objectives and strategy. There is a tendency within the Washington interagency to focus solely on the "crisis of the moment." Consequently, an operation that receives intense scrutiny in the planning phase and in the opening days of execution may receive only minimal oversight as soon as it appears to be proceeding smoothly. *This is not acceptable.*

Whenever U.S. citizens are put in harm's way, the USG must ensure that policy issues are surfaced and resolved in a timely manner and that the operation receives sustained, high-level oversight. This requires that operations on the ground be transparent to key policy makers, and that when conditions on the ground change significantly, the interagency fully assesses the impact of such changes on its overall objectives, strategy and means for implementing the strategy. In addition, if there are shifts in the strategic-level guidance for the operation, these changes must be communicated as clear decisions to those in the field through the appropriate chains of command. At the same time, the interagency must be aware of the limits of its oversight and avoid micromanaging the operation. Too much oversight can be as detrimental as inattention.

Active monitoring of the operation is in many ways the hardest task for the Washington interagency, given the competing demands placed on most of the high-level participants involved in overseeing the operation. However, active monitoring is critical to ensuring that the operation proceeds smoothly and that the inevitable changes in the operation receive appropriate attention.

Executing a Smooth and Seamless Transition

An operation is not complete until it has successfully transitioned its tasks to the host nation or a follow-on operation. Planning for the transition must be done simultaneously with planning for the overall operation.

When the operation completes its initial phases, the USG must focus on ensuring that any follow-on operation will be able to adequately perform its missions. Recruiting for the subsequent operation should begin as soon as possible, even while recruiting for the initial operation. At least the key headquarters staff for the follow-on operation need to be identified early and should begin training as soon as possible. After training, this staff should work closely with the staff of the ongoing operation prior to the official handoff.

- There are special requirements for a transition to a UN operation. A smooth transition from a coalition operation to a UN operation requires:
- carefully worded UN Security Council resolution language governing the transition
- early selection of the Special Representative of the Secretary General and UN Force Commander
- commitment of significant time, effort and resources to help the UN plan for the follow-on operation

If the U.S. is contributing to a follow-on operation, then our contribution must be carefully tailored to ensure that we provide only what cannot be provided by other nations or contractors. The danger in staying on to contribute to the successor operation is that the U.S. may continue to be seen as the leader of the operation and be held accountable for its results.