Navy Fleet-level Crisis Action and Deliberate Planning: Considerations for Foreign Humanitarian Assistance

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Warfighters in the Navy and Marine Corps likely have some familiarity with the differences—cultural, structural, and philosophical—between how they perform crisis action and deliberate planning when contrasted with non-military organizations. With respect to Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA), such a distinction is readily apparent. Indeed, within the humanitarian assistance space, one must consider the Navy planning process in contrast to the planning efforts of international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which employ the cluster system. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the key differences between these planning styles in the humanitarian assistance space.

Crisis Action and Deliberate Planning: A Navy-Marine Corps Perspective

One of the U.S. Navy’s greatest strengths is its ability to conduct crisis action planning. Such is the case because Navy leaders and their staffs—particularly at the fleet level, take great care in fostering both personal and professional relationships throughout their careers. By doing so, during periods where short-fused, critical response actions are necessary, they are able to harness the power of these relationships up, down and across the chain of command to employ the people, places, and things required to ensure timely response to a wide range of incidents and events within the fleet. Moreover, U.S. Marines are able draw upon their archetypal spirit of adaptation to complement crisis action planning. This confluence of steadfast relationships and time-forged adaptation yields proven, fleet-level capabilities in crisis action planning at the high tactical, to low operational levels.

While the strength of such fleet-focused, high-tactical, to low-operational-level crisis action planning resides in its informal personal relationships and tendency toward adaptation, this also presents an inherent weakness when faced with the requirement to also engage in deliberate planning. Such planning frequently requires the ability to draw upon formal (often legally-codified) relationships regardless of the personal history or temperaments of the actors. Within the humanitarian assistance space, deliberate planning also requires the ability to strictly conform to pre-established standards (such as the four core humanitarian principles discussed later in this article). These principles differ from the governing factors and guidance often considered by warfighters in Navy and Marine Corps planning.

The Cluster System: Planning in the Humanitarian Assistance Space

In contrast to the Navy Planning Process with its hierarchal approach to command and control, the humanitarian assistance planning process employed by non-military entities relies on a flat, consensus-based model referred to as the cluster system. This cluster approach, depicted in figure 1, serves as a mechanism for fostering partnerships among a wide range of disparate humanitarian actors, while ensuring common alignment with humanitarian principles.
Through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (ISAC), health, logistics, nutrition, protection, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, camp coordination and management, early recovery, education, emergency telecommunications, and food and security are the core elements represented in this action-driven process. However, despite the presence of the ISAC in this model, there is no specific directive authority managing how NGOs coordinate and respond.

![Figure 1 – The Humanitarian Cluster System](image)

**Planning Considerations: Differences in Philosophies and Thinking Styles**

In addition to the consensus framework found in the cluster system, the United Nations (UN), Office for the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has promulgated a set of universal humanitarian principles. These widely-accepted principles include the concept of humanity, which requires rendering aid wherever and whenever it is needed. This principle is combined with the tenet of impartiality, which mandates providing humanitarian aid regardless of nationality, race, religion, or political point of view. Neither of these principles is considered in the Navy Planning Process, in which analysis of adversary vulnerabilities comprises an important aspect of the intelligence estimate throughout the planning process.

In short, these humanitarian principles (i.e., humanity and impartiality), coupled with other humanitarian tenets such as neutrality and operational independence could require the literal care and feeding of an intelligence-derived adversary vulnerability, and would therefore be internally inconsistent with a warfighting organization’s mission requirements.
It is clear there are differences in terms of structure, culture, and values between humanitarian actors and the Navy enterprise. Historically, fleet operations have required independence and creativity, and successive attainment of rank has correlated with demonstrated prowess in a range of tactical assignments. This has led to cadre of senior officers who have proven to be capable planners at the high-tactical, to low-operational levels, yet are perhaps less-inclined at the high-operational, to low-strategic levels.

However, unlike crisis action planning, which relies heavily on, and provides incentives for content-driven tactical acumen, deliberate planning, especially in the humanitarian assistance space requires a different, more broadly contextual approach. Indeed, deliberate planning within this space necessitates the ability to “bring an outside perspective and accumulated wisdom and to test the consistency of management’s thinking.” Such approaches to operational-to-strategic complex thinking often compel a subordinate to challenge a senior in a way that, historically, neither time constraints nor command relationships readily afford planning staffs in the fleet.

In the absence of such senior-engagement opportunities, fleet staffs tasked with deliberate planning often draw on their collective experience (which more often is heavily weighted toward tactical acumen as previously discussed) or to return to their academic origins, which for many Navy and Marine Corps officers means harking back to the natural sciences (e.g., physics, mathematics, engineering). Such fields are generally linear, deductive, and draw heavily upon quantitative methods and systemic processes—all of which can be employed effectively at the tactical through low-operational levels, where variables can be readily identified, trends and patterns can be replicated, and the use of stochastic modeling can be applied. This includes using computer-based modeling and simulations to inform deliberate planning. Some events in the humanitarian assistance space, such as natural disasters fit nicely within this deliberate planning approach.

**Deliberate Planning and the Challenge of Complex Emergencies**

If deliberate planning were limited to natural disasters, Navy fleet staffs would be well equipped to contemplate such events given their natural sciences-inclined backgrounds, attendant quantitative or systemic thinking styles, use of information technology for data validation, and prowess in fostering personal relationships to garner necessary resources to offset any gaps identified in planning, when planning documents move from the Commander’s shelf into the execution phase of fleet response.

However, beyond natural disasters, a substantial growing—proportion of events within the humanitarian space include complex emergencies—incidents “in a country, region, or society where total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict” has occurred, and where the use of international response is necessary. Although complex emergencies possess quantitative variables such as water, food, fuel, and shelter requirements, there are also myriad co-occurring qualitative variables (e.g., perception of corruption, confidence in the host nation to provide aid, indigenous feeling of safety, etc.). This large number
of both quantitative and qualitative variables exceeds even the most robust predictive equations and algorithms, and requires a less linear, more inductive approach to deliberate planning.

**Final Thoughts: Considering the Cluster Approach to Deliberate Planning in the Humanitarian Assistance Space**

Although challenging in terms of thinking style and time constraints, Navy fleet staffs tasked with deliberate planning impacting the humanitarian assistance space (especially when considering complex emergencies), are highly encouraged to familiarize themselves with the cluster coordination approach, and should also seek to apply similar methods such as inductive thinking, soliciting outside perspectives (such as the cluster elements previously mentioned). Moreover, they should familiarize themselves with the core humanitarian principles and legal constraints impacting operations within this environment. The use of broad, exploratory table-top games and simulations can greatly aid fleet staffs in their ability to think inductively about issues of foreign humanitarian assistance.

Lastly, as a direct resource available to support fleet planners, the U.S. Naval War College, College of Operational & Strategic Leadership’s Operational Level Programs houses the Civilian-Military Humanitarian Response Program (HRP). Since 2012, HRP continues to foster an ever-growing number of meaningful relationships with humanitarian actors from a variety of entities within the cluster framework. Beyond focused events such as workshops and experiential simulations, peer-reviewed scholarship, and educational outreach, HRP actively engages in fleet-level exercises and assessment activities to support crisis action and deliberate planning efforts impacting the humanitarian assistance space.

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1 Per Joint Publication (JP) 3-29, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance “consists of Department of Defense activities conducted outside the US and its territories to directly relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation.” (2014, p. ix).
2 Fleet planners should consider the humanitarian assistance space is akin to the operating environment where one would be focused on humanitarian mission response
3 For the purposes of this article, adaptation is defined organically as “action to prepare for and adjust to new conditions, thereby reducing harm or taking advantage of new opportunities.” (National Climate Assessment, 2014) in *Climate Change and American Policy: Key Documents, 1979-2015* (John R. Burch (Ed), 2016, p. 218).
4 Sphere Project Handbook (2018)
5 UN-CMCoord Field Handbook (2015, p. 11)
6 *UN-CMCoord Field Handbook* (2015, p. 15). Although promulgated by UN OCHA, these four core humanitarian principles undergird the entire humanitarian enterprise. They are referenced in UN Resolutions, included in the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct, cited in the missions and mandates of various organizations, noted in various best practices documents, and included in a number of donor agreements.
7 *ibid*
See Naval Operational Planning (NWC 5-01 Rev A, Chap. 4)

UN-CMCoord Field Handbook (2015, p. 19)


UN-CMCoord Field Handbook (2015, p. 11)