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“Collective C2 in Multinational Civil-Military Operations”

Challenges in Utilising Key Leader Engagement in Civil-Military Operations

Topic 1: Concepts, Theory, and Policy

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ABSTRACT

To meet the demands of complex contemporary conflicts, civil and military actors need to work together. Reaching the population and acquiring their support is often vital to mission success. Key Leader Engagement (KLE) is an important element of C2 that the commander can use to achieve this. KLE is not a new phenomenon. Military commanders and diplomats have been meeting with important local officials for decades in different countries and mission areas. However, the nature of contemporary conflicts and the need for collaborative C2 have renewed the interest in this concept. This paper is based on a literature review and interviews with Swedish civil and military personnel who have conducted KLE during international missions. The paper gives a description of what KLE is and how it can be used in civil-military operations. It identifies common challenges associated with these activities and discusses how they can be met. The paper shows that there are inadequately developed procedures for conducting KLE and that these need to be further developed to enhance commanders' ability to perform C2 in complex operations. The paper argues that even though there are challenges, KLE is an important element of C2 in multinational operations.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The complexity of many contemporary conflicts is challenging. The conflicts often take place in fragile states where warlords, irregular forces, private armies and different criminal groups hold great power. Many of these wars take place amidst the population and are often linked to humanitarian emergencies.¹

These situations call for new Command and Control (C2) approaches and new mindsets to counter the non-traditional enemies that the forces are facing. Getting the support of the local population can often be a crucial factor for success.

There are many ways of influencing a population. Strategic Communication, Psychological Operations, media, or Key Leader Engagement (KLE) are some examples. The latter, KLE, is a way to influence a population by ways of important formal or informal leaders that are influential in their society. In order for a KLE to be successful it needs to be carefully prepared and executed.

Even though KLE is not a new phenomenon there is surprisingly little literature available. There is no well-recognised definition of KLE and there are differences in opinions regarding what KLE is and how it should be used.

1.2 Aim, scope and delimitations

The aim of this paper is to give a description of what KLE is and how it can be used by commanders in civil-military operations. It discusses how KLE is portrayed in current literature and presents experiences from the field. The paper summarises the main challenges and pitfalls and discusses how these pitfalls can be avoided. The study is based both on current literature on Key Leader Engagement (KLE) and interviews with personnel who have been involved in KLE activities.

In order to get a wide perspective from the interviewees, both civilian and military personnel who have had differing roles and responsibilities during their missions were interviewed. Due to the fact that most of the Swedish personnel who have recently been deployed to international missions have been stationed in Afghanistan, the paper's results focuses mainly on experiences from KLE in Afghanistan.

It should be noted that the authors of this paper have chosen to view KLE quite broadly, that is, some of the activities that are described in the results could be classified as relationship-building meetings or some other type of engagement rather than Key Leader Engagements. As far as we know there is no well-recognised definition of KLE that clearly distinguishes KLE from other similar interactions with stakeholders. Therefore, to minimise the risk of excluding valuable experiences by defining KLE too strictly this paper presents a broad interpretation of KLE, which is reflected in the results.

1.3 Study and paper outline

The study was divided into three phases – literature review; interviews; and analysis of results. In the *first phase* a literature review was conducted. The purpose of the review was to survey current literature on KLE to investigate what KLE is; how it is conducted; and what

¹ Nilsson, Hull, Derblom & Egnell (2008). *Contextualising the Comprehensive Approach – the elements of a Comprehensive Intervention*, User report FOI-R--2650--SE pp. 21-25.

pitfalls and challenges are emphasised in the literature. The review is presented in chapter 2 of this paper.

In the *second phase* semi-structured interviews were conducted with Swedish civil and military personnel to investigate what practical experiences they had from conducting KLE in the field. The method used for the interviews is described in chapter 3 and the results are presented in chapter 4 of this paper.

In the *third phase* the results were summarised and a gap was identified, i.e. the results did not show if and how KLE related to Swedish doctrine. Therefore additional interviews were conducted with military personnel who work with KLE and Information Operations (Info Ops). The purpose of the additional interviews was to gain a better understanding of when and how KLE was introduced in Sweden and investigate how it is currently viewed from an Info Ops perspective. The results from these interviews are integrated into chapter two.

The conclusions and recommendations of the study are presented in the last chapter.

2.0 THE NOTION OF KEY LEADER ENGAGEMENT

Key Leader Engagement (KLE) is not a new phenomenon. Military commanders and diplomats have been meeting with important local officials for decades in different countries and mission areas (see for example Hull, 2009).² However, the meaning of KLE is not universally understood nor documented within doctrines. Some argue that KLE is engagement conducted only by high ranking officials while others believe that KLE can be conducted by anyone on any level. The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the available literature on KLE and highlight some of the experiences that have been documented.

KLE is a component of C2 that the commander can use to influence key leaders or target audiences as part of an Information Operations (Info Ops) Strategy.³ There are many definitions of Info Ops. NATO defines Info Ops as ‘[...] 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.’ Sweden has a similar definition that focuses on coordination of activities to influence the adversary and other actors but the Swedish definition also encompasses protection of our activities on the information arena.⁴

It has been made evident to the authors while researching this report, that there is no well recognised definition of *Key Leader Engagement*. Nonetheless, there are some descriptions of what KLE can entail. For example, NATO specifies KLE activities to include:

- a. Bilateral talks of senior leaders with military and civilian counterparts at their level of influence;
- b. Speeches held at various occasions in the presence of the media and/or key decision makers;
- c. Featured interviews to selected media with wide influence; and
- d. Conferences arranged to discuss specific items of interest with influential characters.⁵

The Handbook continues, ‘[...]commanders and leaders at all levels are encouraged to conduct “engagements” with decision makers at their respective level (strategic, operational, tactical)

² Hull, J. (2009). *Iraq: Strategic Reconciliation, Targeting, and Key Leader Engagement*. Strategic Studies Institute.

³ Hull, p. 24.

⁴ Försvarsmakten (2008), *Handbok Informationsoperationer 2008*, p.4.

⁵ NATO Bi-SC (2009), *Information Operations Reference Book (2009). Draft Version 1.3. 29 September 2009*, p. 55.

and create an influence that will be beneficial for the NATO goals and objectives'.⁶ From this description we can conclude that KLE can include a variety of activities to achieve specific mission goals and objectives. However, it is not specified in the Reference Book if all "engagements" that are encouraged to be conducted on all levels, are *Key Leader Engagements* or if they are to be classified as different kinds of engagements, e.g. tactical level engagements, operational level engagements and strategic level engagements. Some argue that KLE are engagements conducted only by high level leaders⁷ whereas others believe that KLE can be conducted on lower levels as well as long as the key leader you are engaging with has influence on a person or group of persons that you want to influence.⁸

Over the last years the benefits of using KLE to influence key actors has been brought to the fore during Swedish exercises (e.g. DAGNY II and CJSE 2010). Swedish personnel have also started using KLE within KFOR in Kosovo and ISAF in Afghanistan.⁹ According to Deputy Director Joint Effects Force Headquarter (FHQ) Nordic Battle Group (NBG)¹⁰ work is currently being conducted to develop a Swedish definition of KLE. During the exercise DAGNY II the following definition was used: 'KLE is a method whereby the commitment of our own commanders is applied in a systematic and organised way to affect key persons with influence in an area of operations'.¹¹ The document states that KLE is primarily conducted by the commander and his command group, including advisors, but when possible it can also be conducted by liaison officers.¹² It should be noted that this definition and description of KLE is not set within the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF). It has not been published in any formal document; rather, it is a proposed definition that was used during a military exercise. However, in the absence of any formal definition it can serve as an indication of the Swedish interpretation of KLE.

2.1 Who is a Key Leader?

Based on the literature that we have reviewed it is not entirely clear who the "key leader" is in KLE. Is the key leader our representative, e.g. commander, or is it the key actor in the mission area with whom we want to interact – or maybe both? The opinions seem to diverge. This will hopefully not be an issue once KLE has been properly defined. In the meantime, we have to accept that there are different appreciations of who the key leader is. Rightfully or not, when we talk about key leaders in this paper, we do not refer to our own leaders; we refer to the formal or informal leaders that are powerful in a society and can influence a target audience in a way that is beneficial for our operation.

Who is powerful in a society depends on both culture and personality. There are official key actors on governmental, regional and local levels. They have legitimate power. There are also unofficial actors with various sorts of power, such as economical power, expertise or power of the physical environment (for instance ability to provide or threaten security in an area). Key actors may be religious leaders, village elders and important employers, but also insurgents or spoilers of the peace process. KLE may be conducted with actors who have a varying degree of power. These actors may be supportive, neutral or opposing to the peace process and our

⁶ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 55.

⁷ SO PSYOPS FHQ NBG, face-to-face interview, Enköping, September 15, 2010; Deputy Director Joint Effects FHQ NBG, face-to-face interview, Enköping, September 14, 2010.

⁸ POLAD, face-to-face interview, Swedish Defence Academy in Stockholm, June 4, 2010.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Deputy Director Joint Effects FHQ NBG, face-to-face interview, Enköping, September 14, 2010.

¹¹ Author's translation, original text in Swedish: 'KLE är en metod för att på ett systematiskt och organiserat sätt genom egna chefers engagemang påverka de nyckelpersoner som har ett inflytande i ett operationsområde' (Försvarsmakten (2009). *Appendix 6 till Annex O, Presence, Posture and Profile och Key Leader Engagement*, Övningen DAGNY II, p. 2).

¹² Försvarsmakten (2009), p. 3.

presence in the mission area.¹³ In other words, key leaders are not limited to only “the good guys” or the official leaders in a society. Any person who is perceived as a leader by the population and who has influence on the target population is an actor that we need to relate to.

In order to be able to identify the key actors in an area, it is necessary to recognise the relationships and dependencies that exist between actors.¹⁴ Within the Swedish concept of *Harmonization of Efforts*, the operational environment is defined as a “social field, where actors interact in different ways, following rules that can be identified”.¹⁵ Our own units are part of this social field, and our actions may affect the balance between actors. Any interaction with a key leader can result in outcomes that are either beneficial or counter-productive. Therefore, we need to carefully consider with whom we interact and how, in order to achieve the desired outcome.¹⁶ Who should have this responsibility? It should probably fall on the commander of the operation, but he will require help to coordinate and synchronise all the KLEs. The next section describes how NATO has chosen to approach this.

2.2 Preparing and conducting KLE

It is not always easy to determine who is powerful and influential in a society. Hence, a crucial step in preparing KLEs is to identify the target audience and prioritise key stakeholders. Before engaging these stakeholders, one needs to decide if a particular engagement is worth the effort and determine if it is likely that it will lead to desired effects. In order to make such determinations, stakeholders can be evaluated according to their assessed influence in the area of responsibility and our interest to engage with the stakeholder. Actors high in both influence and interest are our main priority for KLE (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. NATO Key Stakeholder Analysis tool¹⁷

Once the key leaders we want to target have been identified as much information as possible must be gathered, for example, information about their religion, culture, family, ambitions, motivations and leadership styles. Inter-dependencies and relationships between different

¹³ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 17.

¹⁴ NATO AJP-3.10. *Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*. Ratification Draft 1. P. 1-10.

¹⁵ Försvarmakten (2010). *MNE. Harmonization of Efforts. Guides and Principles*. Draft 2.0, p. 3.

¹⁶ Curtis, J. (2008). P. 4.

¹⁷ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 52.

key leaders must also be identified.¹⁸ Gathering all this information is time-consuming and the intelligence cell (J2) has a vital role in this process.

There may be many key leaders to target and it is important to keep track of all planned engagements. Within NATO, the Info Ops cell is responsible for coordinating the Commander's Key Leaders Engagement Plan (KLEP). The KLEP contains information about planned contacts with relevant actors, objectives, main themes or issues to be addressed, desired effects and measures of effectiveness.¹⁹

The Info Ops cell is also responsible for creating a so called Influence Briefing Package (IBP). It is a summary of the most important information that the commander needs to influence a specific key leader in a desired way.²⁰ The IBP should contain information about the key leader's background, key themes or messages of influence and assessment considerations (e.g. issues to bring back to the HQ that are of relevance for reaching our objectives). To promote a successful outcome of the KLE the commander needs to know a number of things. Not only does the commander need information about the key leader and key messages to convey, he must also familiarise himself with cultural issues such as appropriate greetings, seating arrangements, meeting conduct and clothing. Therefore, the Info Ops officer should go through the IBP with the commander and if possible rehearse the KLE.

To support the commander during the KLE he should be given talking notes, e.g. key messages, controversial issues and outcomes of former meetings with the key leader.²¹ It is also good to have advisors present during the meeting and make sure that someone is responsible for taking notes to assure that the KLE is properly documented.

The next section describes some of the issues that may affect the outcome of a KLE that should be considered.

2.3 Issues to consider

There are some general rules of thumb and best practices for KLE based on experiences from KLE in international missions. For example, when a meeting is held amongst key leaders, the meeting should be led by the local key leader and not by the representative of the international force.²² When the local key leader leads the meeting we send a message that it is the locals that are in control and that we are invited by the host nation rather than acting as an intervening force.²³ This is a matter of respect, and for the same reason the rank of the person conducting KLE should correspond to the rank of the local key leader. However, it should be noted that these rules are not applicable to every situation; it depends on what message we want to send. For example, we may want to show that we are powerful and controlling the situation and if that is the case we should lead the engagements and use our highest leaders to outrank our counterpart.

Cultural awareness and knowledge of local customs is key to promote a successful outcome of the KLE. For instance, in the Iraqi and Afghan cultures, it is important to develop a relationship before key issues can be addressed.²⁴ This takes time, and may also require

¹⁸ NATO AJP-3.10, paragraph 0128.

¹⁹ NATO AJP-3.10, paragraph 0128.

²⁰ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 53.

²¹ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 114.

²² Curtis, J. (2008), p. 4.

²³ Curtis, J. (2008), p. 3.

²⁴ Hull, p. 36; Curtis, p. 8.

several interactions. The western approach of starting a meeting by immediately addressing the key issues may ruin the relationship completely.

One of the key elements of Info Ops is the notion that everything you do, or refrain from doing, sends a message, i.e. “you cannot not communicate”.²⁵ Therefore, it is vital to ensure that all actions, or inactions, convey the *right* message – the message we truly want to send. By having a clear profile and sending out a clear message we can influence the population in a positive way. In order for an engagement to be successful it is not enough to have a well formulated message. If our messages are to be believable our actions and behaviours must correspond with what we say. This includes keeping track on previous meetings and commitments. To create continuity and credibility it is important to know what your predecessor has said and done. Thus, not only the message, but the whole setting in which Key Leader Engagement is conducted needs to be considered.

2.4 Debriefing

Influencing a person or group of persons is a time-consuming process and it generally requires many KLEs before a desired outcome can be reached. To ensure continuity and progress toward our desired goals it is essential to debrief and document every KLE. If possible the commander and his note taker should personally share the information from the meeting with relevant actors in the staff. It is also important to store a written report stored in a database that easily can be made available at a later point in time. The debrief should include notes of attendees, content of discussions, notes of specific behaviours or statements, decisions or promises that were made, assessment of the outcome of the meeting and issues to prepare for next meeting.²⁶

2.5 KLE as part of the targeting process

Although KLE is not a new phenomenon, these engagements typically take place on an ad-hoc basis and are rarely fully incorporated into the operational strategy. In the paper “Iraq: Strategic Reconciliation, Targeting, and Key Leader Engagement”, Hull presents a more formal approach to using KLE, i.e. she wishes to demonstrate how KLE can be incorporated into the targeting process.²⁷ The paper is based on her experiences from Iraq in 2008-2009 where the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) Commander General Petraeus established a cell specifically designed to conduct KLE with other Iraqi insurgent organizations at the strategic level.

The US targeting process consists of four continuous steps – *decide*, *detect*, *deliver* and *assess*. In the first step the commander decides which targets should be included in the targeting process. In the next step assets are directed at the targets to locate their position. In the third step the commander assigns assets to deliver lethal or non-lethal measures and in the fourth and final step the effect of the delivery is assessed.²⁸ Hull argues that KLE should be included in the targeting process so it becomes a natural part of all operations. Instead of deciding which physical targets to focus on important leaders that are influential in a particular society are the targets. The commander decides which leaders to focus on; assigns assets to locate the leaders and approach them; and finally the effect of the engagements are evaluated.

²⁵ Ulrik Janssen, Lecturer Info Ops, Lecture at Swedish Defence College, March 16 2010; Irene Clement, HKV Info Ops, C J3 Info Ops Combined Joint Staff Exercise 2010, April 28.

²⁶ NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 54.

²⁷ Hull (2009), pp. 4-5.

²⁸ Hull (2009), pp. 17-18.

Hull argues that KLE targeting is all about people: ‘Conducting a KLE with a targeted individual is essentially the beginning of a relationship instead of a discrete event. That relationship can be used to achieve a variety of effects from which a commander can choose’.²⁹ Consequently, there are a lot of possible benefits from building relationships with important key leaders. This approach is also used in Information Operations to deliver messages to the populations. Nevertheless, building relationships is a process that takes a long time and it is not always easy to assess the effect of a KLE: there are rarely any immediate effects and those effects that do result from initial meetings are not always easy to identify and ascertain. Even though there are obstacles, Hull concludes that a lot can be gained if KLE is incorporated into a formalised process such as the targeting process. For example, a formal process forces involved actors to operate within a clear strategy and coordinate and focus efforts towards the prioritised targets.³⁰

2.6 KLE challenges and pitfalls in Iraq

Even though there are a lot of possible gains from conducting Key Leader Engagement (KLE) there are also some challenges that need to be overcome and some pitfalls to be avoided. This section outlines some of the challenges and pitfalls that mainly Hull identified in Iraq.

It is a challenge to *synchronise KLE efforts* with other actors in the area.³¹ There were a lot of KLE activities taking place in Iraq and even though some coordination occurred on an ad-hoc basis there were no formalised mechanisms to synchronise the engagements. Since many of the engagements had similar goals, synergies could most likely have been achieved if the activities had been better integrated.

Since building relationships is vital for successful KLE, *lack of continuity* was a major challenge. The rotation cycle (6 months) was way too short which made it difficult to build and maintain good relations with the key leaders. Hull recommends that engagement cell personnel should be assigned for periods of at least 2 years (with regularly scheduled leave periods).

A third challenge that was identified was *lack of capability*. The personnel that were responsible for the KLE did not have sufficient training, e.g. they had no training in diplomacy or negotiation and they had little or no knowledge of the Iraqi culture and way of living. Hull concludes that there is a need for improved training that better prepares the personnel for the tasks that they face in the field.

One important pitfall that Hull identified was related to the *dimension of time and expectations*. Military personnel are generally trained to focus on desired effects and they were often impatient and expected instant effects, i.e. after one single KLE. In Iraq it is important to give the process of building a relationship a lot of time – something sometimes informally referred to as a “three cups of tea” ritual,³² where people are expected to share at least three cups of tea on different occasions before a relationship has been sufficiently established to discuss the core of the matter. KLE personnel must come to realise that creating trust is essential and it takes time. Many long meetings will be needed before a desired effect can be expected. Whittaker also emphasises the importance of building trust. Differences in

²⁹ Hull (2009), p. 22.

³⁰ Hull (2009), p. 40.

³¹ Hull (2009), pp. 31-33.

³² Mortenson, G. & Relin, D. (2007). *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time*. Penguin 2007 ISBN 978-0-14-303825-2.

key leaders' leadership styles demand the person conducting the KLE to be flexible and be able to use a variety of techniques in order to gain trust and friendship³³.

Another possible pitfall is related to *legitimacy*. KLE personnel must be very careful when they choose who to interact with. If a key leader has close connections to insurgents and criminals the international force may be perceived to support non-legitimate actors and lose credibility in the area. Therefore it is important to gather a lot of information about the key leaders you are about to engage with and consider what implications the engagement may have.

3.0 METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Swedish civil and military personnel to investigate what practical experiences they had from conducting KLE in the field.

3.1 Participants

In total, eight persons were interviewed.

Six persons were interviewed in the first set of interviews. All the interviewees had held a position that required them to interact with key personnel in a mission area during their deployment. Most of them had been deployed to several missions in different parts of the world, but five out of six had most recently been deployed to Afghanistan. Due to this, the results section is mainly focused on experiences from Afghanistan.

The interviewees with experience from Afghanistan represented different organisations: Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SAK) and Ministry for Foreign Affairs (UD). In Afghanistan the interviewees worked as: Political Advisor (POLAD); Development Advisor (DEVAD); Head of Tactical PSYOPS Team (Chief TPT); Secretary-General for SAK; and Chief of Provincial Office Sar-e-Pol.

The sixth interviewee was Head of Operations in the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). He has been employed by the UN for more than 30 years, with vast experience from peace keeping missions in different parts of the world, such as Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and different missions in former Yugoslavia. In the results section, his interview is used for demonstrating contrasts and similarities between experiences in Afghanistan and other mission areas.

During the last phase of the study, two persons were interviewed. They were military officers working with Information Operations (Info Ops) in the Nordic Battle Group (NBG) 11 (F) HQ - one as Deputy Joint Effects Director and also Head of NBG 11 Info Ops, and the other as a staff officer in Psychological Operations (PSYOPS). Both of the interviewees had extensive experience from working with KLE from an Info Ops perspective and were very familiar with how KLE had been introduced and developed in Sweden.

3.2 Material and Procedure

All interviews were semi-structured in nature.

³³ Whittaker, J. C. (2010). *Starting a Partnership Through Logistics Key Leader Engagement*. Army Logistician. March-April 2010. Pp. 29-31.

The first six interviews were conducted with one person at a time by both authors present as interviewers. One of the interviewers asked all the questions and the other person took notes and kept track of time. The participants were asked questions about which key leaders they had interacted with; how they prepared, conducted and documented the KLEs; issues to consider for successful KLEs; and what challenges and pitfalls they had identified during their engagements. Each interview took 1-2 hours. To minimise the risk of misinterpretations all interviews were audio-recorded and after the completion of each interview the interview protocol was sent to the interviewee for approval. The interviews were conducted between May and August 2010.

The two supplement interviews were conducted individually by one of the authors. The focus of these interviews differed from the previous six interviews. Since both of the interviewees had worked extensively with KLE from an Info Ops perspective and were very familiar with how KLE had been introduced and developed in Sweden; they were asked questions regarding the definition of KLE and to what extent it was implemented in Sweden. One interview took 45 minutes and the other took one hour. After the completion of each interview the interview protocol was sent to the interviewee for approval. These two interviews were conducted in September 2010.

4.0 SWEDISH EXPERIENCES OF KLE

The results presented in this chapter are based on six interviews with personnel recently involved in international missions that required a lot of interaction with key personnel in the mission area. Most of the interviewees had been deployed to several missions in different parts of the world but the majority (five out of six) had most recently been deployed to Afghanistan. Consequently, the results focus primarily on the interviewees' experiences from Key Leader Engagement in Afghanistan.

4.1 Conducted Key Leader Engagements

During their deployments, the interviewees conducted several Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) with different key leaders in the mission area. The engagements had different purposes and the way in which KLE was conducted varied. Most of the interactions were conducted as face-to-face meetings in small groups or with one single actor. Email or phone was only used when a relationship had already been established with an actor. Some larger KLEs were also conducted, so called *shuras*.

The *Secretary General (SG) for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SAK)* primarily interacted with different governmental representatives (to discuss contracting); governors (to discuss SAK activities in their district); and individual organisations (to discuss specific activities that were of interest for that particular organisation).³⁴ The Secretary-General of SAK explained that it is important to remember that all interactions with key leaders affect the power balance between different leaders. Since SAK is a humanitarian organisation that is primarily engaged in health care and humanitarian aid, they have to be cautious of with whom they meet with in order to maintain their perceived neutrality. However, he also stated that the ability to affect the balance of power between different actors can be used as a tool; 'talking to a specific actor or building a specific well can be a way of building peace in that area'.³⁵

³⁴ Secretary-General SAK, face-to-face interview, SAK office in Stockholm, June 15, 2010.

³⁵ Ibid.

The *political advisor (POLAD)* conducted a large number of key leader engagements during her deployment in Afghanistan. One of the POLAD's main tasks was to uphold relations with key actors and stakeholders in Afghanistan and follow the political development in the country. The governors in the different provinces were central key leaders that the POLAD met with on a regular basis. On average, the POLAD met with the governors once every month but it could also be more often, for example before an election or if an incident had occurred that needed to be discussed. The POLAD stated that there were several actors that were of importance for the POLAD, or - depending on the purpose - someone else from the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT),³⁶ to regularly meet with. She mentioned the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), religious leaders and village elders as examples of central key actors. These actors were important key leaders because they could influence a large portion of the Afghan population. The POLAD generally conducted KLEs with only a few persons at the same time. She explained that personality and social skills were vital in order to achieve a successful dialogue with the key leaders. She often felt that it was beneficial to be a woman and to present herself as representative of the Swedish embassy in Kabul rather than the military PRT.³⁷ The POLAD stated that it is essential to match the levels of the key leaders in the interaction. Therefore, by mentioning that she represented the Swedish embassy she established a certain level for the interaction, thus improving the prerequisites of getting access to high level key leaders.

The *Tactical PSYOPS Team's (TPT)* task was to influence target populations. Therefore the TPT was interested in interacting with actors who were able to influence a target population. Such key leaders could include police commissioners, religious leaders, village elders and governors, among others. However, since matching ranks is an issue that should be considered, the TPT did not conduct many KLEs themselves. Rather, they supported high ranking officers of the PRT in their meetings with different Afghan leaders. For example, the head of the TPT supported the preparations of a large KLE (shura) that was conducted with village elders, religious leaders and police commissioners. He aided in writing the speech, preparing key messages and coordinating the speech with the police commissioner (who hosted the meeting). During the shura, the TPT personnel observed how the speech of the PRT officer was received by the audience.³⁸ After the shura the TPT was responsible for spreading the information about the shura to the population, for example, in the ISAF newspaper.

The *Head of the Provincial Office in Sar-e-Pol* interacted with several stakeholders in the province, for example, government and provincial representatives, ex-commanders, head of security personnel and religious leaders. He conducted regular meetings with government officials and the chief of security police but explained that it was more difficult to get access to unofficial persons such as ex-commanders and religious leaders. However, he stated that the chief of security police was an important key leader that sometimes could help establish contact with the unofficial leaders.³⁹

The *development advisor (DEVAD)* interacted with government representatives and the governors in the different provinces to discuss development activities in their areas. Beyond that, the DEVAD interacted a lot with local and international development organisations, other donor organisations and other key personnel that were deemed important to the PRT.⁴⁰ The development advisor was normally not involved in many key leader engagements per se

³⁶ISAF has established PRT:s in different parts of Afghanistan. SwAF is responsible for a PRT based in Mazar-e-Sharif. The area of responsibility comprises four provinces in north Afghanistan - Balkh, Samangan, Jowzan and Sar-e-Pol.

³⁷POLAD, face-to-face interview, June 4, 2010.

³⁸Chief TPT, face-to-face interview, Enköping, May 31, 2010.

³⁹Chief Provincial Office Sar-e-Pol, face-to-face interview, Enköping, August 16, 2010.

⁴⁰DEVAD, face-to-face interview, Swedish Defence Academy in Stockholm, June 28, 2010.

since his or her job was to focus on the development in the country. However, the development process is a crucial issue in multifunctional operations. The DEVAD can be a valuable asset to the commander of the PRT, as an advisor, both during the preparations and executions of KLEs when development issues are expected to be raised during the meetings.

To summarise, the interviews show that the interviewees interacted with a number of different key leaders during their deployment in Afghanistan – both official and unofficial leaders. With whom they interacted varied depending on the purpose of the KLE. Who to target for a KLE will probably vary from mission to mission. However, the interviews support the notion of that government officials will always be targeted key leaders, since all of the interviewees identified governors and/or governmental representatives as important key leaders. This also included the *Head of Operations in EUMM Georgia*. He stated that he primarily interacted with different political actors to find possible openings to the conflict or to discuss different security related issues.⁴¹

4.2 How to identify key leaders and coordinate efforts

It is not always easy to determine who is a key leader in the Afghan society. Leadership shifts frequently in Afghanistan and it can be problematic to identify the individuals that have actual influence on the population. The interviewees were asked to present their view on this topic. The SG SAK claimed that identifying the actual key leaders was much more difficult than actually conducting the KLE.⁴² Key leaders could both be official and unofficial leaders, and the signals that indicated who the key leaders were could be very subtle. Consequently, SG SAK believed that the difficulty lay in identifying the leaders that have the populations' support. 'Once you have managed to do that, the rest is quite easy. If you know the Afghan culture a KLE is not very different from any other type of meeting'.⁴³

The Chief TPT and the Head of Provincial Office Sar-e-Pol had different experiences than SG SAK. The Chief PO Sar-e-Pol stated that he selected the key leaders himself, based on information that he received from the military system. He found it fairly easy to determine if interaction with the key leader was valuable or not.⁴⁴ The Chief TPT presented a similar view. He believed that it was quite uncomplicated to identify key leaders because he focused on well-known individuals in the society (like religious leaders, mayors, police commissioners and governors).⁴⁵ Whether or not these leaders had actual influence on the population could vary from time to time.

The results show a difference in opinion regarding how difficult it was to identify key leaders in Afghanistan. One possible explanation for this difference could be access to information. To be able to identify key leaders in a complex society one needs to have access to a lot of up-to-date information, which may be easier to manage for a large organisation like the Armed Forces. The Head of Operations of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia felt that identifying key leaders was very dependent on the issues that are to be discussed, for example, a political issue or something completely different. He believed that it can be difficult to profile the actors' political interests and it is problematic if leaders change a lot.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Head of Operations EUMM Georgia, telephone interview, June 15, 2010.

⁴² Secretary General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Chief PO Sar-e-Pol, August 16, 2010.

⁴⁵ Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁴⁶ Head of Operations EUMM Georgia, June 15, 2010.

4.3 Coordinating KLEs

None of the interviewees had experienced any difficulties in coordinating the key leader engagement activities. They stated that it came naturally. The purpose of the engagement, the content of the agenda and type of key leader that was to be engaged determined who was responsible for the KLE, e.g. matching ranks was an important issue that was always considered. However, it should be mentioned that the interviewees stated that there was no formalised structure for how to conduct and coordinate KLEs which may explain why no one experienced any friction. The experiences from Iraq show that they too lacked formal mechanisms or structures to coordinate KLE activities. They found it difficult to synchronise the different KLE-efforts in the area (even though they believed that synergies could have been achieved if they had coordinated the activities).

4.4 Benefits of KLE

According to many of the interviewees, KLE should be a vital part of every operation. 'It is a way to reach target audiences that you otherwise would not reach and also a way of preventing problems before they arise'.⁴⁷ Key Leader Engagement was a way of creating trust and good relationships with the Afghans which was essential for both the legitimacy of the operation and the safety for the personnel. 'The better the relations, the lower the risk of having one's own forces attacked'.⁴⁸ However, SO PSYOPS argued that the KLE may not *always* be conducted to create trust and good relations. 'It depends on what message you want to send and what you wish to achieve. Sometimes it can even be the very opposite – that you want to show force and distance yourself from certain individuals'.⁴⁹ 'KLE is a means to receive information, spread a message and a way of building peace'.⁵⁰ 'It is a way of influencing the Afghans without having to use weapons, which is the effect we are hoping to achieve'.⁵¹

Even though there are several benefits of KLE there are also situations when KLE should *not* be conducted. For example, POLAD stated '[...] you should not conduct the KLE if you think there is a risk of the engagement being used for political purposes or activities that support insurgents'.⁵² The Secretary-General of SAK raised a similar concern. 'Since many actors in Afghanistan may have official positions in the government but still is involved in illegal activities it is important to be careful not to empower the wrong actors'.⁵³

4.5 Preparing KLEs

The planning of a key leader engagement varies depending on several factors such as purpose, previous meetings and number of participants that are engaged in the KLE. However, there are several aspects that are applicable to many KLE situations.

The Secretary-General (SG) for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SAK) stated that it was important to go through protocols from previous meetings and identify possible ways ahead. He also said that it was essential to know as much as possible about the key leader he was about to meet with.⁵⁴ POLAD was of the same opinion – 'the more you know about the key leader the better'. She believed that it was vital to have knowledge about the actor's

⁴⁷ Chief TPT, face-to-face interview, Enköping, May 31, 2010.

⁴⁸ POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁴⁹ SO PSYOPS FHQ NBG, September 15.

⁵⁰ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁵¹ Chief PO Sar-e-Pol, C PO Sar-e-Pol, August 16, 2010.

⁵² POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁵³ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁵⁴ Ibid

personality, agenda and behaviour. She received information from a lot of sources, e.g. the military system, diplomatic networks and local contacts.⁵⁵

The Chief of PSYOPS emphasised the importance of knowing the agenda beforehand so key messages and statements could be prepared to ensure that individuals are never caught hesitating or promising things that they should not promise. He also said the KLE needs to be rehearsed beforehand and that available expertise like POLAD, GENAD and DEVAD should be used. Interpreters and cultural advisors were vital in this process to make sure that the key messages were received as intended by the population.⁵⁶

The interviewees' opinions and experiences from preparing KLEs in Afghanistan are consistent with the preparation process that is prescribed by NATO. There are similar experiences from Georgia. The Head of Operations of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia believed it to be beneficial to have a profile and some background information of the actor. He was aided in the preparations of the engagements by two or three specialists. He emphasised the importance of extensive preparations: 'it is essential to know what we want to achieve, how we are going to act, what we can accept and what we cannot accept. The things we cannot accept are called red line'.⁵⁷

4.6 Conducting KLEs

When the KLE has been planned it is time to conduct the actual interaction. This section describes the strategies that the interviewees used. Many of these strategies may mainly be applicable to the Afghan culture but the intention is to use these as "good examples" that can be modified to be used in different settings.

POLAD used different strategies for different actors depending on their personality. Generally she thought it was important to create a good relationship and to bond with the key leaders at an early stage. She said that it was beneficial to be talkative and have the ability to talk about anything and everything because in Afghanistan it was imperative to initiate all meetings with small talk before discussing anything on the actual agenda. 'It was vital to let this part of the meeting take time and be patient'⁵⁸. The importance of allowing time for small talk and certain opening phrases was also expressed by SG SAK. He emphasised the need to be culturally sensitive and conduct the engagement in an "Afghan way", that is, the meeting had to be initiated with talk about family etc. before the actual purpose of the meeting was brought to the table. He also said that it was useful to know a few phrases in Dari so he could greet the key leader in his own language, something which he argued can "remove many barriers". He emphasised that basic language skills can also help determine if the key leader finds any of the questions unpleasant.⁵⁹

Other aspects of cultural sensitivity were raised by several of the interviewees. For example, religion is fundamental in Afghan culture and one way of acknowledging that is to include prayer in the start up phase of the meeting. The Chief PO Sar-e-Pol believed that 'it was important to emphasise that ISAF were not there to change or influence their religion'.⁶⁰ It was also mentioned that it was imperative to show respect for elders and to look people in the eye and not let the eyes wander. 'If possible they had to take their shoes off and sit on the floor but one must not turn the sole of the foot towards an Afghan'.⁶¹ Since there are so many

⁵⁵ POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁵⁶ Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁵⁷ Head of Operations EUMM Georgia, June 15, 2010.

⁵⁸ POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁵⁹ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁶⁰ Chief PO Sar-e-Pol, August 16, 2010.

⁶¹ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

aspects of Afghan culture to consider during a KLE it is recommended to have a cultural advisor present both during the preparations and the execution of the KLE.

On a more general note, one of the things the Chief PSYOPS found useful was to have a list of statements and arguments prepared that can be used to respond to expected demands. For example, if the key leader wanted him to build a well or a mosque it was good to have a well-prepared response telling the key leader that it is not his task and then focus on what he *can* do. However, Chief PSYOPS also mentioned that the person who conducts the KLE must adapt as the meeting progresses and the person's competence is of essence.⁶² The Head of Operations EUMM Georgia had similar experiences from Georgia. He stated that he needed to bear in mind the current EU strategy at all times because he was not allowed to deviate from it. He also said that it is important to listen to the key leader and try to identify things that the actor wants that can be accommodated. 'By giving the key leader something positive a good relationship and a good climate for continued negotiations can be created'.⁶³

4.7 Documenting KLEs

Since it often takes more than one key leader engagement to accomplish a desired goal, the KLEs need to be documented in a proper way. According to Chief PSYOPS this was not done during his time in Afghanistan.⁶⁴ POLAD stated that all meetings were documented but unfortunately she believed that it often is difficult to find these reports because they tend to disappear in the system. Chief PO Sar-e-Pol believed that the documentation process worked satisfactorily – all reports were passed on to the intelligence cell. He found it more troubling to take the information to the next step, that is, to go from just "collecting information" to actually doing something in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ SG SAK said that the experiences from key leader engagements were often passed on orally or just documented as plain meeting minutes.⁶⁶ None of the interviewees used special templates of any kind to document the interactions.

4.8 Common pitfalls and challenges

There are huge cultural differences between Swedes and Afghans. Many Swedes find it frustrating to spend a lot of time at the beginning of every meeting talking about everything but the issues that are on the agenda. However, the POLAD emphasised that it is fundamental to allow this time and not rush through the meeting. 'One must respect the Afghan culture and build trust and good relationships with the Afghans'.⁶⁷

In this process of building relationships with the Afghans the Secretary-General for SAK believed that it is important to make sure that an Afghan never loses face. 'Even though you may know that a person is lying you must never accuse him of doing so openly in the meeting. Instead you should show him in a subtle way that you know that he is not speaking the truth but in a way so that he will not lose his face'.⁶⁸ The SG SAK also believed that social skills are highly valued in Afghanistan and the person conducting the KLE needs to be polite and respectful, not interrupt other persons who are talking and never lose his or her temper.⁶⁹ The Chief of Provincial Office in Sar-e-Pol presented a similar view. 'It is imperative not to

⁶² Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁶³ Head of Operations EUMM Georgia, June 15, 2010.

⁶⁴ Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁶⁵ Chief PO Sar-e-Pol, August 16, 2010.

⁶⁶ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁶⁷ POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁶⁸ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010; POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁶⁹ Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

give orders and act in a dominating way. Instead, you should be perceptive, listen to their needs and try to give them responsibilities so they can influence their own situation'.⁷⁰

Due to the importance of religion in Afghan culture one must remember to show respect for their religion and never make the population think that you are there to change it. There may also be other aspects that are fundamentally different from the western culture and therefore are subject to potential pitfalls. 'In some African cultures, religion is not very important; instead you need to understand the occult traditions'.⁷¹

There are some challenges associated with the preparations of a key leader engagement. For example, the SG SAK felt that it can be very difficult to identify the actual key leaders and decide who to interact with.⁷² It is also imperative to consider the implications of every interaction that you are planning. 'Everything we do sends a message and it is vital that we send the message we want to send'.⁷³ DEVAD believed that it is important not to spread information about an upcoming KLE too widely during its preparations because if the information reaches the wrong people, e.g. insurgents, it may affect the safety of the people attending the meeting.⁷⁴

Another challenge is language. It is difficult to conduct a meeting in a language that you do not understand. 'You are in the hands of the interpreter. It is vital that you find an interpreter that you can trust so you know that he or she translates your messages in a correct way'.⁷⁵

One aspect that may sound self-evident - but still is worth mentioning - is the fact that one must only give promises that will be kept. 'It is not uncommon that a key leader puts you under pressure and wants you to make promises; however, you must never give false expectations or promise things that you can not keep because then you will lose your credibility'.⁷⁶ It is important to remember that it is OK to say no. You should always focus on informing the key leader of your tasks and responsibilities. 'Many key leaders will probably ask you to do things that are not your responsibility, for example build a well. It is then important to say no and explain that a task like that should be directed to someone else'.⁷⁷

In summary, there are many challenges and pitfalls that need to be overcome in KLE. Some of the pitfalls identified in this section may be specific for Afghanistan; others may be applicable in several countries and cultures. For example, the study has shown that it is central both in Iraqi and Afghan cultures to develop a relationship before key issues can be addressed. The western approach of starting a meeting by immediately addressing the key issues may ruin the relationship completely. The literature review and the interviews show that establishing trust seems to be of essence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Georgia. The Head of Operations in EUMM Georgia emphasised that it is necessary to ensure that the key leaders you are interacting with understand that you have honest intentions. 'They can generally respect differences in opinions as long as they perceive us to be sincere'.⁷⁸ Similar experiences have been presented both from Iraq and Afghanistan.

⁷⁰ Chief PO Sar-e-Pol, August 16, 2010.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Secretary-General SAK, June 15, 2010.

⁷³ Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁷⁴ DEVAD, June 28, 2010.

⁷⁵ POLAD, June 4, 2010.

⁷⁶ DEVAD, June 28, 2010.

⁷⁷ Chief TPT, May 31, 2010.

⁷⁸ Head of Operations EUMM Georgia, June 15, 2010.

5.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from the literature review and the interviews show that even though there are challenges in conducting KLE in multinational civil-military operations there are several possible gains for the commander. It is a way to reach target audience and a way of preventing problems by managing them before they arise. KLE is a means to send a message, a way of influencing, without having to use weapons – it can be used to show strength or to build relations.

The experiences of the interviewees are largely in harmony with the literature review, although the information gained from the interview study is richer, more substantial, and of course from a Swedish perspective. The literature review revealed that there may be valuable gains from integrating KLE into the targeting process. Even though this topic was not explicitly discussed with the interviewees it is our belief that KLE would benefit from such integration. KLE was integrated to some extent into the targeting process during a Combined Joint Staff Exercise (CJSE) in Sweden in April 2010 and also during the (F)HQ exercise Illuminated Summer in September 2010. However, if this is to be made possible the term KLE must be carefully defined so it does not include all types of meetings - otherwise the process will be overwhelming.

Both interviews and literature emphasise that building relationships and trust is a vital part of KLE. One must influence a key leader so that he or she in turn influences the population in a favourable way. But building relationships is not easy, especially in a system where the personnel rotate every six months, as is normally the case for the Swedish Armed Forces' mission personnel. Further more, in order for the KLE to be successful cultural awareness is imperative. Not only should the person in charge of the KLE have access to a cultural advisor but he should also know the basics of the culture he is working in. What may seem like a small detail can be vital when you are trying to build a relationship and by knowing the culture the most common pitfalls can be avoided. Hence, pre-deployment training needs to include cultural awareness training so that the people who are about to go on a mission understands the culture and potential consequences of cultural clashes. However, everything can not be learnt from a book. To truly understand the norms and culture of a society you need to be closely integrated into it.

Even though cultural awareness is important it is hardly the only thing that affects the outcome of a KLE. The interviewees emphasised that careful preparations, including rehearsals, are of essence. It is crucial to consider what one wants to gain from a specific engagement and also prepare key messages to convey to the key leaders. Media training can be a good way of practicing statements and minimising the risk of deviating from planned courses of actions. However, preparing the KLEs is a time-consuming process that requires input from many persons and functions. NATO has a prescribed process that can be used as a starting point but it probably has to be adapted based on Swedish preconditions, e.g. the profile and size of the staff.

Experiences from both Afghanistan and Iraq show that the documentation of the KLEs needs to be improved. No standardised methods were used and the reports seemed to get lost in the system. The reports from the KLEs are fundamental to create continuity over time. NATO has suggested templates to be used for debriefing and reports. Sweden can use these templates as a good starting point and adapt them so they become useful in our KLEs.⁷⁹ The results also show that there is little or no coordination of KLEs. Considering the amount of effort each KLE requires it is important to prioritise, synchronise and document all KLEs.

⁷⁹ The SwAF has started the process of developing national principles for KLE.

Last but not least the personalities of the individuals conducting key leader need to be considered. In a culture like Afghanistan, the person in charge of key leader engagement must possess a great deal of social competence and be prepared to give a lot of him- or herself, e.g. to be talkative and talk about family and friends rather than going straight into the agenda. Patience is also of essence. The engagements must be allowed to take time and discussions must be allowed to sometimes deviate from the agenda without causing frustration – because that is part of the process. It may require many long meetings to accomplish a goal. However, key leader engagement is an important tool to help achieve our goals. It is a non-lethal way of influencing a large population. If we do not influence the will, capability and understanding of the larger population - to help them help themselves - we will never be able to create a sustainable peace.

The study has shown that there is very limited literature available on KLE. The meaning of KLE is not universally understood, there is no well-recognised definition and KLE is not fully developed within doctrines, neither in NATO nor in Sweden. There are also differences in opinions regarding what KLE is. Some argue that KLE is something that can only be conducted by high leaders⁸⁰ whereas others believe that KLE can be conducted by anyone on any level - as long as the activity corresponds with the mission strategy. There is even confusion regarding the term KLE. Who is the “key leader” in KLE - our representative, our counterpart or both? This paper has chosen to have a broad view of KLE. However, in retrospect, we realise that some of the interactions that are described in the results chapter of this report are not KLEs but should probably be classified as common meetings or regular liaison/cooperation. That is not to say that these activities are less important, but the purpose and preparations required may differ. Before a KLE can be conducted, it may be preceded by several relationship-building interactions on different levels. However, if KLE is too broadly defined, e.g. if all meetings were to be classified as KLEs, a tremendous amount of work would have to be undertaken to prepare, conduct and document all these meetings.

We can conclude that rightfully used KLE is a valuable component of C2 that the commander can use in multifunctional operations. However, more research is needed. What constitutes a successful KLE? How do we measure the effects? Who should be responsible for preparing, conducting, synchronising and documenting KLEs? There is a need to develop the concept of KLE and clearly relate it to existing doctrine. A clear definition of what KLE *is* - and what it *is not* - needs to be developed. KLE requires resources and it is important that these resources are used in a proper way. We need to specify how and when it should be used, and also by whom. Finally, we then need to assure that our mission personnel are well prepared and confident in how to use KLE as a powerful tool to help create a sustainable peace.

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⁸⁰ Representatives from the SweAF (HQ Info Ops Section) stated that Sweden is working under the assumption that KLEs are conducted by high leaders. If interactions on lower levels are included too, the number of KLEs to plan, conduct and debrief become vast.

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