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Intermediate Objectives and Incremental Behavior Change: Relooking a Current Paradigm for DOD Foreign Influence Efforts

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In operations around the world, the Department of Defense (DOD) relies upon a simplistic approach to influence foreign individuals and groups to achieve U.S. military objectives—suppress a current negative behavior while simultaneously eliciting a new positive behavior. Consequently, current Joint and Service doctrine addresses the shifting of a selected individual or group from an undesired behavior to what is frequently a polar opposite desired behavior. The failure to address the required intermediate steps between the opposing behaviors is a significant gap that particularly affects operational planning and assessment.

This article proposes a simple planner process based on established military concepts and psychological principles to develop clear and measurable intermediate objectives that begins to address the previously mentioned gap. Since the Army Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Branch holds the bulk of DOD purpose-built organizations with the primary function of conducting influence activities, the discussion derives from an Army PSYOP perspective. However, there are implications for the Joint Information Function, Joint Operations in the Information Environment, Army information advantage activities, targeting, and other functional areas, but those discussions exceed the scope of this article.

Current Practice

In the current Army PSYOP Branch doctrine model, units typically conduct influence activities in foreign countries to move a selected individual or group from an undesired current behavior posing an obstacle to achieving military objectives¹ towards a desired new or altered broad behavior called a psychological objective (PO).^{2,3} Generic examples of POs include *increase support for the government*, *reduce incidents of illicit smuggling*, and *reduce interference with United States and coalition operations*.

While any given PO may be clearly articulated, achieving one is complex, focusing on group-centric behaviors requiring multiple supporting behaviors to be achievable.

Consequently, there are at least two supporting psychological objectives (SPO) associated with each PO.⁴ SPOs are the specific goals towards which influence efforts move a selected individual or group, called a target or target audience (TA), depending on context. Multiple SPOs represent specific related behaviors that together drive the achievement of a PO. Example SPOs address participation in the electoral process, voluntarily joining the military and law enforcement institutions, and other behaviors that collectively help achieve the broader PO to *increase support for the government*. Figure 1 illustrates the current model in simplified form.

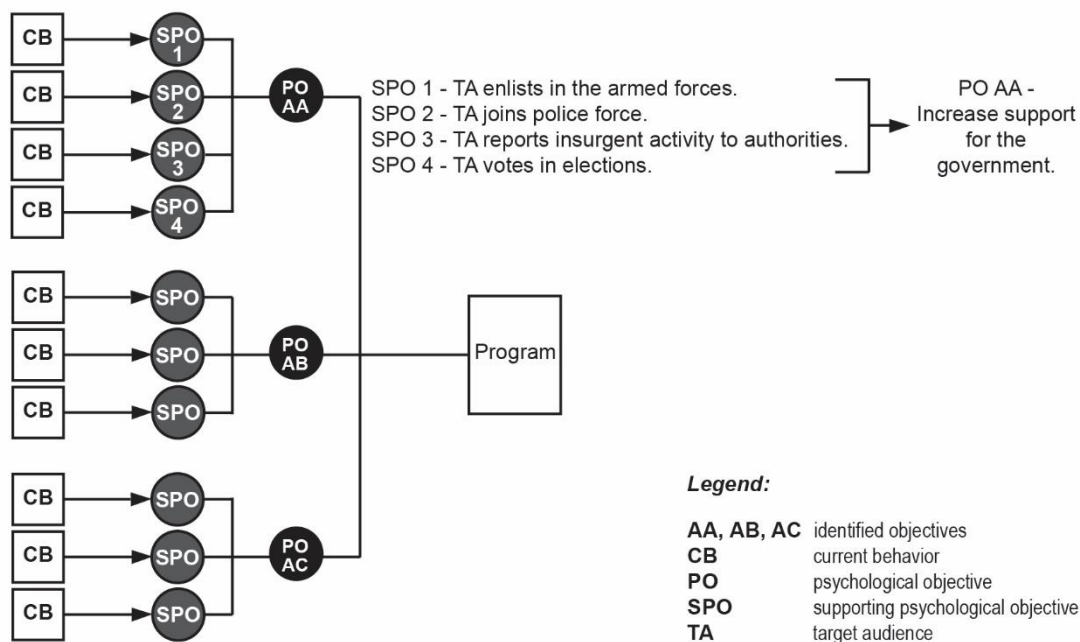


Figure 1 –

Current doctrine model with example POs and SPOs

There is a crucial missing piece in current practice that lies between the current behavior and the SPO—specific intermediate objectives required to move selected individuals and groups sequentially from an undesired behavior towards a completely different behavior. This gap directly affects assessment by hindering the identification of explicit and measurable indicators of SPO accomplishment that could lead to a more precise effectiveness measurement at any given time. The concept of intermediate psychological objectives (IPO) fills this void and enables continuous assessment.

Intermediate Psychological Objectives Explained

IPOs are a series of *sequential* behavioral goals that bridge the distance between a current undesired behavior and a desired behavior. More specifically, IPOs are observable and measurable behaviors that represent desired changes in a well-defined sequence like a line of operation.⁵ Thus, IPOs aid in the planning of specific actions and messages that move targets and TAs from one behavior to another in a series of steps rather than attempting to achieve a quick, profound change. Achieving a dramatic change in human behavior is extremely challenging and arguably more difficult to make enduring even if it happens to be achieved. Planners and unit leaders must continually manage expectations to emphasize that most efforts to change ingrained behavior

require a long-term effort to accomplish and be enduring, such as reducing institutional corruption in developing countries and decreasing blood feuds in tribal societies.

The Roots of Intermediate Objectives

The idea of developing intermediate objectives is neither new nor unique to military planning. Both Joint and Army doctrine discuss the concept in their respective keystone planning publications. Joint doctrine in particular states “Intermediate objectives should identify discrete, identifiable, and measurable conditions or effects”.⁶ The terms *discrete*, *identifiable*, and *measurable* precisely describe what each IPO should be for behavior change as well. Figure 2 depicts joint examples of intermediate objectives found in the last two iterations of JP 5-0.

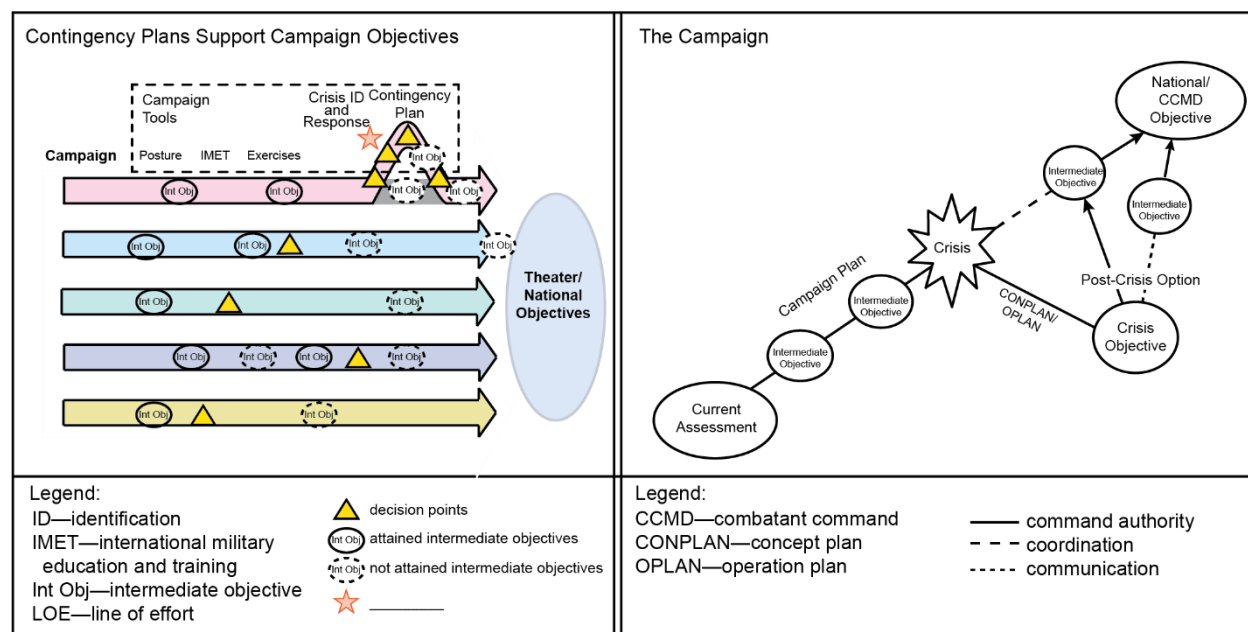


Figure 2 – Example joint usage of IPOs (From JP 5-0, 2011 and 2017)⁷

Essentially, intermediate objectives (and associated conditions/effects) are multiple time-or condition based objectives that are between initiation of the campaign and achievement of campaign objectives. Accordingly, at the strategic assessment level, intermediate objectives are criteria used to observe and measure progress toward campaign desired conditions and evaluate why the current status of progress exists. – JP 5-0 (2020)

Combatant command campaign plans include intermediate objectives derived from Global Campaign Plans, Transregional Campaign Plans, Regional Campaign Plans, and Functional Campaign Plans. For a Joint Force Commander, intermediate objectives contribute to achieving national objectives that, in turn, lead to achieving military end states. More specifically, intermediate objectives help joint planners “... assess progress toward the longer-range objectives established by the [National Defense Strategy], [National Military Strategy], or [Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan].”⁸ In combatting terrorism, counterdrug, and other operations where an end state is elusive or simply unachievable, intermediate objectives help quantify progress towards objectives.⁹ This

last point speaks directly to the type of long-term perspective required for influence activities where there is no identifiable end to a conflict.

For the Army, intermediate objectives directly correlate to a line of operations. “Lines of operations connect a series of intermediate objectives that lead to control of a geographic or force-oriented objective. Operations designed using lines of operations generally consist of a series of actions executed according to a well-defined sequence.”¹⁰ As FM 5-0 describes them, Army intermediate objectives align more with a yes/no answer to any assessment of achievement rather than something quantified, but the underlying concepts of discrete objectives and use of a well-defined sequencing towards an end state fully align with both the joint concept and use of intermediate objectives in an influence context. Figure 3 illustrates the Army concept of intermediate objectives and sequencing.

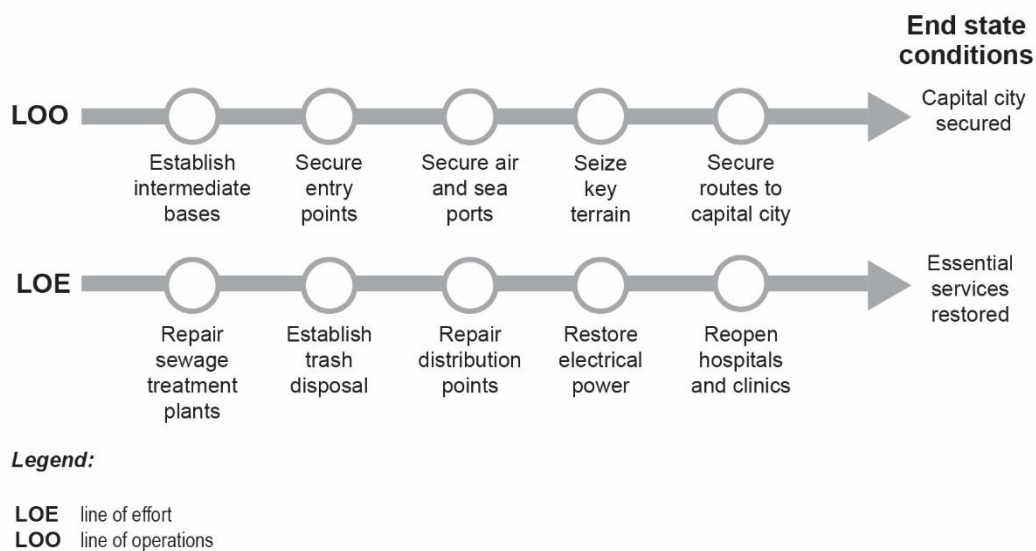


Figure 3 – Sample line of operations and line of effort (From ADP 5-0)¹¹

Intermediate Objectives in the Influence Context

Figure 1 illustrated how several SPOs support achievement of a single PO, but otherwise only link to each other by supporting the same PO. Each SPO represents a separate and distinct influence effort for an influence-focused series¹² that may or may not target the same TA as another SPO under the same PO. In contrast, IPOs link in a clear sequence from a current behavior to their respective SPOs and incrementally move a TA towards a specific desired behavioral response. Figure 4 depicts the concept of the relationship between the three types of objectives in context with current behaviors. The number of IPOs shown is notional and only intended to illustrate sequencing.

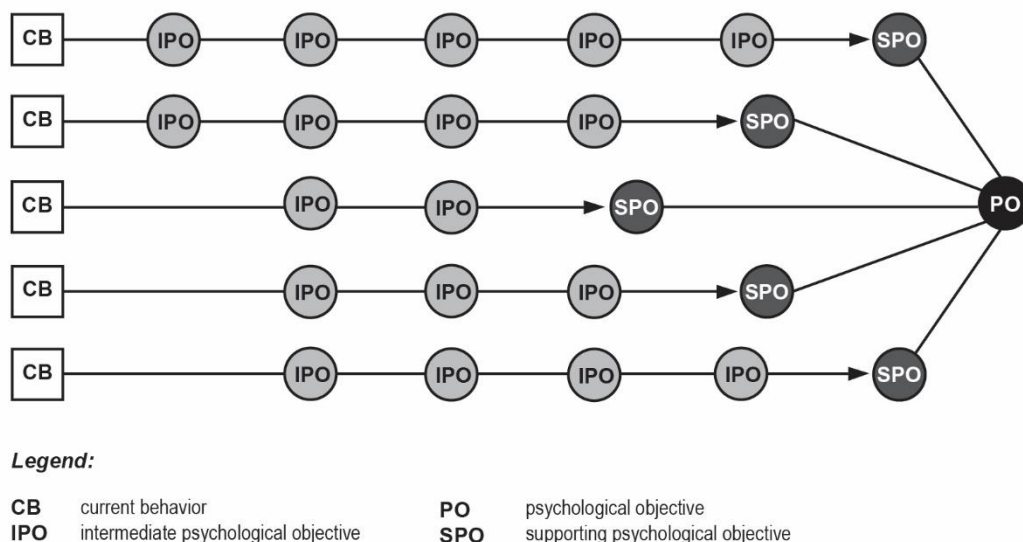


Figure 4 – Conceptual relationship of the types of objectives

An important difference between SPOs and IPOs is that SPOs *collectively* contribute to PO achievement while IPOs *sequentially* achieve a SPO. Consider that out of the five notional SPOs shown in figure 4, if only four succeed it could still be possible to achieve the overarching PO. However, if any one of the IPOs in a given line fail to happen, then it is unlikely the associated SPO is achievable. Progress towards the SPO likely halts with that failure, which will require analysis to determine why it occurred and if it can be overcome. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the sequential nature of IPOs using notional examples.

Key to developing IPOs for influence purposes is breaking down the required sequence of behaviors between a current behavior and a SPO. This part of the proposed approach likely requires a new analytical model with personnel having to determine precisely what those behaviors are. In any case, this task requires the use of strong, measurable verbs that clearly articulate the desired behaviors as IPOs. Use of such measurable verbs differs from SPO development in that IPO development more closely resembles backwards planning. Planners compare the current behavior with the desired behavior and then identify the required intermediate behaviors working backwards towards the current behavior. For example, before a person can vote, they must register. Before they make the effort to register, they require the motivation, willingness, and a permissive environment that allows them to go to a place of registration. Figure 5 provides notional examples of sequential progression for IPOs that address increasing local populace participation in the electoral process as part of the PO *increase support for government*.

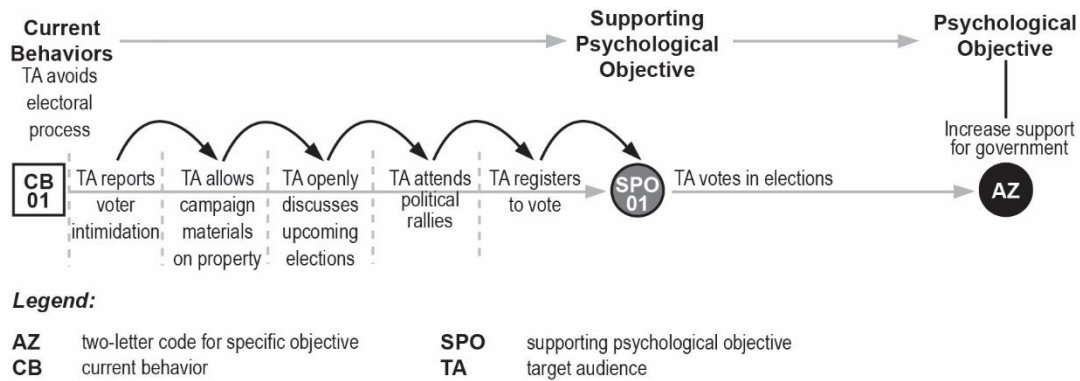


Figure 5 – Example sequential IPO progression

The number of IPOs required, and the time required to achieve them depends on how close the current behavior is to the desired behavior articulated in a SPO. As the TA reaches each IPO, it moves further along the path towards the SPO. In the end, planners should have the minimum number of necessary and distinct IPOs that bridge the gap between a current behavior and a corresponding SPO. Figure 6 depicts an example where a TA actively participates in an insurgency against an U.S.-partner government. The notional IPOs represent incremental behavior changes leading the TA (the insurgents) away from the undesired behavior (waging an insurgency) towards the notional SPO *TA reintegrates into society*.

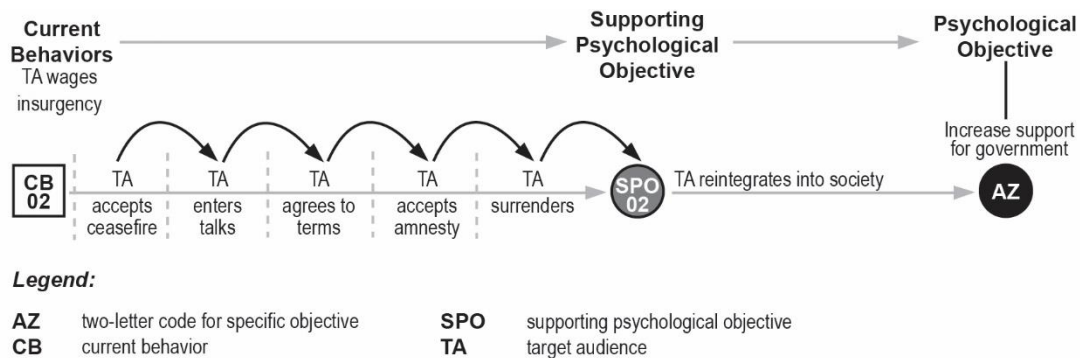


Figure 6 – Example IPO progression in a COIN scenario

In figure 6, the current behavior (CB02) is *TA wages insurgency against the government*. The intervening IPOs serve as incremental changes in behavior that lead to the gradual adoption of the SPO as a desired behavior. If any one of the intermediate behaviors in the sequence fail to occur, then it is unlikely that SPO 02 will occur. The insurgents (or even many of them) could accept and abide by the ceasefire and even enter talks, but if they do not agree to the terms of a peace negotiation, then the TA could simply revert to actively waging an insurgency. In a similar manner as depicted in the SPO 02 line, other current behaviors can be charted out to identify the required intermediate behaviors. However, there is an important caveat to any influence effort in an insurgency scenario. If the local-national government does not work toward addressing the root causes of the insurgency (mass poverty, inequalities, oppression,

etc.), then all the influential messaging in the world will likely have little effect on those fighting the insurgency.

Integration into Staff Processes

An important question about integrating IPO development into staff planning processes is: who does it? Also, once developed, which entity approves them and at what echelon? In general, since IPOs derive from existing, approved SPOs and directly tie to the actual efforts to change behavior, IPOs should be a series-level item. Series developers identify IPOs for each SPO linked to a specific TA from the approved list. If developers find that existing approved TAs fail to address a current behavior/SPO linkage, then planners use the chain of command to request approval of additional TAs to fulfill the need. As for IPO approval, since they are part of series development, they should also be included in series approval packets under the appropriate approval process established at echelon per authorities.

Key Issues

There are two key issues identified with implementing the use of IPOs. First, aside from general difficulties associated with influence activities, there are the innumerable internal and external factors that also affect IPO achievement or even promote the maintenance of current, undesired behavior(s). Figure 7 illustrates several of the potential factors affecting if and to what extent the target(s) engage in the desired behaviors. These factors and others should be part of any analysis process but must also be part of a subsequent effectiveness assessment.

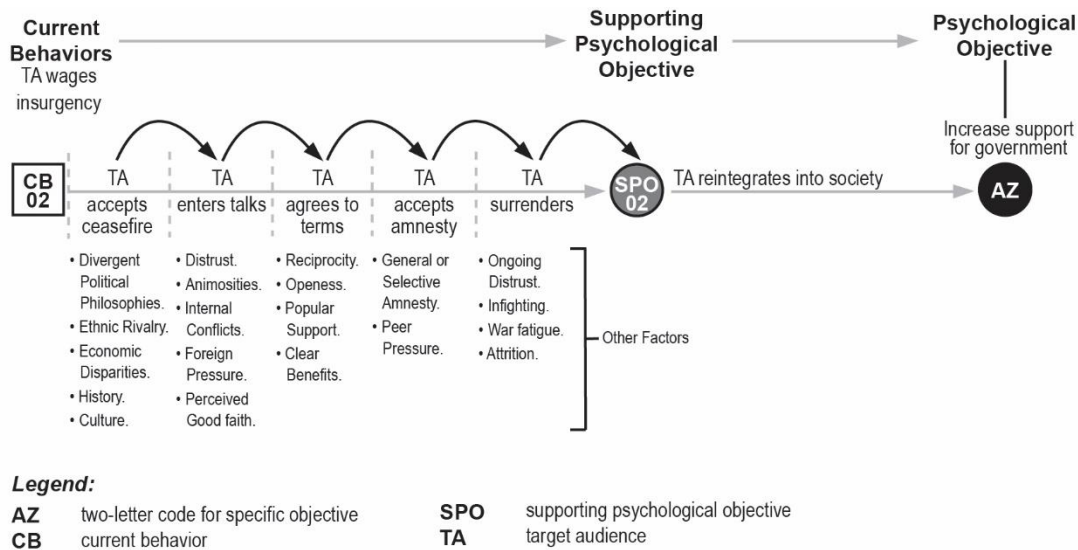
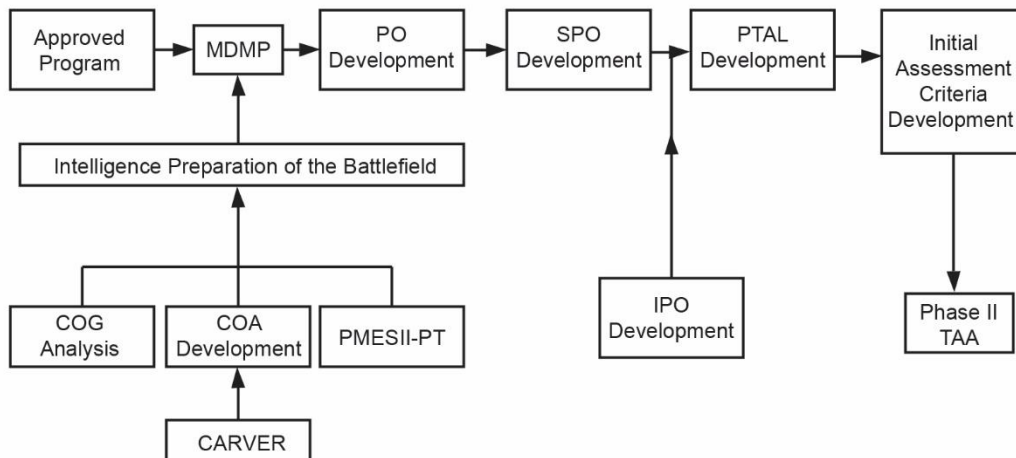


Figure 7 – Example factors affecting possible adoption of IPOs

Second, while the development of IPOs makes quantification of specific behaviors simpler in theory, there is still the matter of how exactly would success in achieving the SPO be measured? In the above instance where the TA surrenders, would a simple, raw percentage of insurgents that surrender indicate the degree of success? For example, out of 10,000 insurgents, if 50%+1 (5,001) surrender, then does that constitute success? A deeper analysis of this question is the next step as part of an overall look at influence processes to improve assessment.

Conclusion

This article introduces a revised approach to move a TA sequentially from a current undesired behavior towards a new desired behavior. This approach contrasts with the current model that seeks to substitute one behavior for another. This updated approach comes into use within the Army PSYOP influence process [an internal methodology] during planning. More specifically, series planners would conduct the task “develop intermediate psychological objectives” with approved SPOs, then going through each SPO in turn and developing the required number and sequencing of IPOs. This revised process is necessary because SPOs require higher approval prior to use and deconfliction with the highest operational PSYOP unit. Planners would waste time and effort to develop IPOs for several SPOs only to potentially have numerous SPOs and their subordinate IPOs rejected. Figure 8 depicts when IPO development occurs in the planning phase.



Legend:

CARVER	criticality, accessibility, recuperability, vulnerability, effect, and recognizability	PMESII-PT	political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time
COA	course of action	PO	psychological objective
COG	center of gravity	PTAL	potential target audience list
IPO	immediate psychological objective	TAA	target audience analysis
MDMP	military decisionmaking process		

Figure 8 – IPO development in the context of Phase I: Planning

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End Notes.

¹ Objective – the clearly defined, decisive, and attainable goal toward which an operation is directed. (JP 5-0)

² The psychological objective (Army) and the MISO objective (Joint) are similar in terms of definition. The difference between the two is that Joint doctrine derives the term MISO objective from a single function. For Army PSYOP forces, the use of psychological objective also applies to deception and other influence operations and activities the branch executes that are separate and distinct from MISO.

³ (Army) A PO is “a short statement of measurable response that clearly reflects the specific desired attitude or behavior change of a selected foreign relevant actor or group.” (Draft FM 3-53, (U) Psychological Operations Forces (CUI). 2022) Note: definitions are not CUI.

⁴ (Army) A SPO is “a specific behavioral response purposely triggered in a selected individual or group to achieve an associated psychological objective.” (Draft FM 3-53, 2022)

⁵ For more information on lines of operation, refer to ADP 3-0, *Operations*. July 31, 2019.

⁶ JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*. December 1, 2020. Pg I-19.

⁷ Figure 2 left side, JP 5-0 (2017), pg II-22; Figure 2 right side, JP 5-0 (2020), pg V-2.

⁸ JP 5-0 (2020), pg I-9, I-19.

⁹ JP 5-0 (2020), pg II-4.

¹⁰ ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process*. (2019), pg 2-13.

¹¹ ADP 5-0 (2019), pg 2-13.

¹² Series – all actions and products developed in support of a single supporting objective and single target audience combination. (Draft FM 3-53, 2022).

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