Kenyan traders demonstrate on 28 February 2023 in Nairobi against unfair business advantages for Chinese nationals in the country engaging in the import, manufacture, and distribution of goods. (Photo by Tony Karumba, Agence France-Presse)

The Exploitable Conditions Framework

Strategies for Sociocultural Research and Analysis

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History underscores how empires were built on exploitation from the Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America to the French and British in North America, from the British in India to the Russians in Siberia, among numerous other examples. Today, the concept of exploitation is useful for understanding and explaining how a range of contemporary actors—including statesmen, businesses, warlords, and governments—interact with an array of sociocultural conditions to achieve their objectives. When weaponized, exploitation is more effective and less costly than war for gaining an advantage over rivals or for rendering systems (e.g., governments, institutions, markets, resources) amenable to their interests. For example, for centuries, developed countries have been leveraging their influence in weaker countries to gain access to natural resources, solve infrastructure problems, obtain cheap labor, or steer or orchestrate ethnic and religious divisions. Manipulating societal contexts helps exploiters achieve their parochial objectives, including increasing instability, undermining local governance, accumulating wealth, increasing local access, and expanding their influence while decreasing the influence of rivals.

However, despite the centrality of exploitation to geopolitical strategizing, very little work has been done to delineate the parameters of exploitation. More can be done to identify and understand the arenas where it takes place to how it is expressed concerning the parochial objectives of the exploiters. The few attempts to examine exploitation have not related it to specific local conditions or the global competition for influence among rival actors. Thus, how actors exploit sociocultural conditions to advance their interests has largely been a matter of conjecture. When exploitation, local or national vulnerabilities, and global competition have been linked, it has been done by experienced analysts working within other analytic traditions in one-off assessments that did not fully explore the parameters of each factor.

Our approach is directed toward improving the Army's capacity for identifying critical sociocultural seams that will be relevant to their efforts to understand the operational environment (OE). Not every analyst employed by the Army can be equally skilled at understanding how actors leverage their proximal positions relative to weaker actors in pursuit of their parochial objectives, but neither do they need to be geniuses to apply our approach. We believe a different approach to sociocultural analysis is required from the fuller examination and understanding of inherent and evolving social conditions that lend themselves to domestic and foreign exploitation. The Army needs approaches developed to suit its needs—along with associated procedural rules—which can enable sociocultural analysis of the OE that is currently frozen by an undue focus on outdated or cumbersome methods.

The Exploitable Conditions Framework (ECF) links vulnerabilities to the activities of motivated actors. Linking vulnerabilities to the activities of motivated domestic and foreign actors can have an enormous impact on security and stability as well as on U.S. regional objectives. This approach is not isolated from more general sociocultural and social science-based analytic approaches. However, our emphasis is on first identifying the broad set of conditions that are potentially exploited, then verifying actor behavior about these conditions and their ultimate ends. While this article is directed primarily at Army sociocultural and intelligence analysts, we believe it can be useful to anyone interested in studying social phenomena—cultural, economic, political, environmental, educational, industrial, legal, medical, or otherwise—especially if their studies engage the intersection of domestic and foreign elements and security and stability.

What Is the Exploitable Conditions Framework?

The ECF will help analysts to understand, analyze, explain, and predict how, why, and when a global competitor will leverage its relative influence to gain an

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advantage over rivals. Furthermore, the more we know about disruption that the exploitation of OE conditions has on the OE, the more we can determine any impact on U.S. relationships and interests, and the interests and relationships of U.S. allies. Accounting for the connection between conditions and actors (e.g., various malign domestic actors, global actors like China and Russia) is a way of analyzing the U.S. access and influence.

The ECF outlines the logical pathway through which the internal frailties of a country enable domestic and particularly foreign actors to achieve their parochial objectives. The framework, which is user agnostic—meaning any actor type, including the United States, could exploit the conditions identified through it—was developed in response to a request from an Army unit interested in understanding the sociocultural conditions around the globe that contribute to instability—specifically conditions that U.S. adversaries would likely exploit to their advantage and to the disadvantage of the United States.

Identifying a set of malleable sociocultural conditions that could interact to offer opportunities for exploitation should be of major interest to Army analysts and planners. As we demonstrate in this article, the identification of exploitable sociocultural conditions fits empirical situations and is understandable to experienced analysts and laymen alike. Most importantly, the framework provides relevant understanding, explanations, interpretations, and predictions.

When the Global Cultural Knowledge Network developed the ECF in 2019, the framework had twenty-four conditions.[1] In its current revised form, the framework has twelve conditions that conform to four key criteria: (1) they are sociocultural factors, (2) they are exploitable, (3) they are measurable, and (4) they are detectable at the operational level of war.[2] The four criteria suggest that analysis of the conditions must yield more comparable and potentially generalizable findings, even though they can be case sensitive. As with the initial framework and comparable approaches, an analyst using the framework may not need to bend data out of contextual shape to provide an assessment because the conditions and actors have inherent visibility and measurability.

Rationale for the Exploitable Conditions Framework

The objective of ECF is to help the warfighter anticipate the array of conditions within the OE that pose

vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities, if unattended, provide opportunities for foreign or domestic actors to advance their interests, the consequences of which may pose risks to security and stability in the OE and for U.S. regional access and influence. Through ECF, an analyst can identify conditions that are present in an area or region of interest and determine what conditions are inherently exploitable, then identify who is primed or postured to exploit those conditions and any possible effects of adversary engagement with these conditions on the stability of the OE and U.S. regional interests. Ultimately, an analyst can establish the logical pathway through which otherwise benign problems in the OE become destabilizing and its implications for the United States and its partners.

Seeing ECF in this way implies it is a conceptual framework for studying and analyzing the patterns of exploitation and exploitative relations in an OE. Like all conceptual frameworks, the ECF graphically and narratively explains the main issues to be examined—key conditions, key actors, and competing objectives—and their consequential relationships (see figure 1, page 37). The relational construct provides a clearer understanding of the consequences of the condition-actor relationship for the security and stability of the OE and U.S. regional priorities and objectives.

As a rule, framework building relies on a few general constructs that subsume a mountain of particulars.[3] Conditions such as "multiple sovereignties," "ineffective government," and "demographic pressures" are the labels we put on profound historical subjects containing many discrete events, activities, and behaviors. No matter how inductive in approach, any Army analyst should know how to group ideas and events that pertain to each construct into separate bins. Thus, each construct (e.g., multiple sovereignties) is a bin, and each bin comes from theory and experience. Setting out bins, naming them, and getting clearer about their interrelationships, including their connections to defined actors and a set of objectives, establish the foundations of a conceptual framework.[4]

During active analysis, binning—using the twelve ECF sociocultural conditions as frames or constructs—forces Army analysts to be selective (see figure 2, page 38). At the outset, selectivity requires analysts to decide which of the conditions are relevant to an actor context, which relationships among

EXPLOITABLE CONDITIONS FRAMEWORK (ECF)

Multiple Sovereignties
Areas not subordinate to the national government

"Technification" of Society
Mass adoption of disruptive technologies and trends

Environmental Threats
Stress caused by significant changes in the natural environment

Ineffective Government
The inability to provide for a society's essential needs

Cross-Border Encroachment
Spillover effects from proximity to sources of instability

Resource Scarcity
Demand for goods and services is greater than the available supply

Mobilizing Ideologies
Unifying belief systems that threaten the status quo

Demographic Pressures
Stress caused by significant changes within a population

OE EXPLOITABLE CONDITIONS — 2028 —

Economic Inequality
Substantially unequal distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity

Illicit Networks
Transactional systems operating beyond the reach of formal authority

Infrastructure Deficits
Inadequacy of systems and institutions that facilitate basic services

Divided Societies
Communities where competing values or identities create factions

* None of the conditions are inherently more important than the others, although in certain circumstances some conditions may weigh more heavily in a country or region.
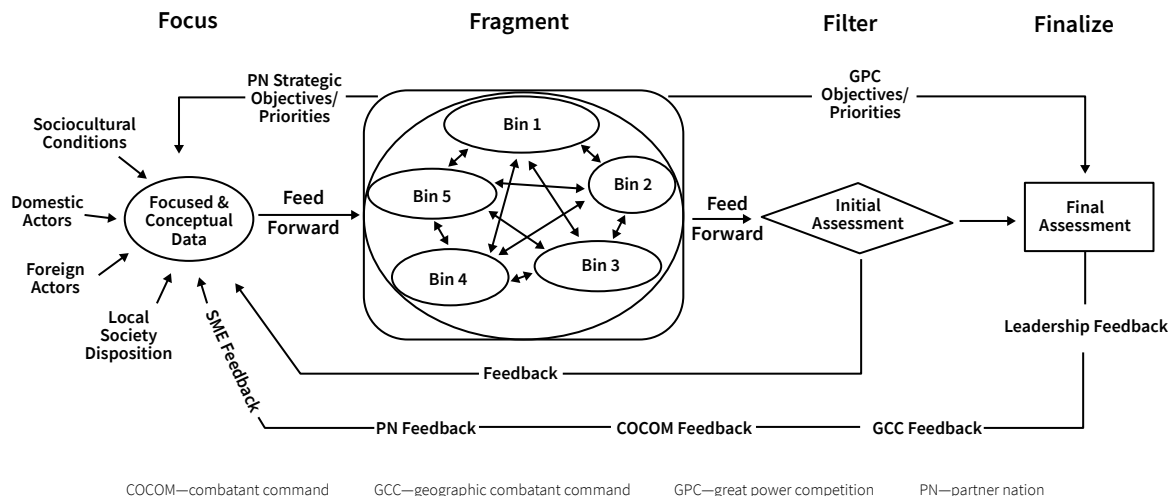
(Figure by Susan Littleton, TRADOC G-2 graphics specialist)

Figure 1. Exploitable Conditions Framework

conditions and actors are the most meaningful, what consequences are likely from the interaction of conditions and actors, and what additional information is required to advance the analysis. In addition, the framework also permits multiple analysts to work on a single project, in which case, ECF helps them to examine the same phenomenon in a manner that permits an eventual cross-case analysis.

Several important questions guided our development of the ECF. From a societal perspective, the ECF asks what societal conditions exist that pose profoundly undesirable challenges for populations and the state, the manipulation or steering of which could disrupt society's order. From a structural perspective,

the ECF asks what behavioral and relational logics, attitudes, and practices related to societal conditions are likely to shape the security and stability of the OE. From a competition perspective, the ECF asks what factors are likely to determine whether, how, and to what extent rival global powers manipulate OE conditions to their advantage—in other words, how might rival powers direct the societal conditions to affect the strategic competition options of the United States. These questions explore the diverse sources of competition within the OE, the OE's resilience to competition, and, most importantly, the inherent societal contradictions that increase opportunities for power competition in the OE.

Figure 2. Exploitable Conditions Framework Analytic Mode

Understanding Exploitability

The core concept in ECF is exploitation. Exploitability is the likelihood or the ease with which an actor, domestic or foreign, could make use of and derive benefit from a vulnerability. Critical to this definition is the concept of "benefit," or the gain to the actor from taking advantage of a condition. This benefit or gain can be measured at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels.

For example, an expansive body of work characterizes U.S. adversaries, particularly Russia and increasingly China, as engaging in activities to bolster their influence in areas where the U.S. historically held an advantage.[5] To achieve their objectives, these adversaries, with help from their partners and proxies including nonaligned nonstate opportunists, constantly search for ways to capitalize on OE vulnerabilities, especially in direct areas of interest where they hope to challenge or usurp U.S. influence.[6] Thus, within (and even nearby) any global area of interest, actors engage in specific behaviors to harness opportunities created by specific vulnerabilities, sometimes even creating distortions within those vulnerabilities to render them more exploitable.

The above implies that ECF conditions are important but are irrelevant unless an actor uses or manipulates them to assert influence. Domestic and foreign actors transform conditions into opportunities for achieving consequential outcomes. ECF contextualizes this condition-actor relationship by zeroing in on the complications that actors introduce into an area. There are several reasons why analysts should prioritize this condition-actor exploitative relationship in analyzing, explaining, predicting, and measuring exploitability, including

- the increasing globalization that is shrinking space and time and connecting local communities to more powerful external influences, wherein increasing proximity creates opportunity and incentives for external actors to engage, even at the microlevel;

- a broader conceptualization of threats to include the spectacular increase in adversarial activities in developing regions with a strong historical connection to the United States that has the potential to unravel national governance, stability, and U.S. regional influence;

- developing regions are becoming arenas of global competition, which potentially undermines a historical U.S. foreign policy objective to insulate developing countries from the harmful consequences of great-power rivalry; and

- the metastasizing of grievances associated with otherwise common sociocultural conditions, the grafting of these grievances onto national reckoning, and the manipulative deflection of the real source of the grievance to implicate the United States or its partners to gain critical access and influence.

Central African Republic
Exploited to Become a Russian Client State

Russian mercenaries provide additional security for a convoy with President Faustin-Archange Touadéra of the Central African Republic, 16 February 2022. (Photo by Clément Di Roma, VOA via Wikimedia Commons)

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a prime target for exploitation from multiple actors—most notably Russia—because it possesses **several exploitable conditions including ineffective governance, divided societies, multiple sovereignties, and environmental threats**. As a result of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra brokering a deal for Russian arms, mercenaries, and a protection force in exchange for access to the country's gold and diamond mines, Moscow has been active in the country, culminating in its capture of the state.

The pretext for the deal was CAR's continuing struggles with itinerant groups who leveraged the exploitable conditions of divided societies, multiple sovereignties, and environmental threats to upturn security and stability. Thus, after numerous failed attempts to resolve the intransigent instability, Touadéra's regime buckled under Russian pressure to surrender the state to Vladimir Putin. A Russian, Valery Zakharov, became CAR's national security advisor, and the unfolding Russian capture of the Touadéra regime led France, CAR's longtime ally, to withdraw from the country, further advancing Russia's geostrategic interests.

Consequently, the Wagner Group, Russia's shadowy paramilitary force with links to Russian defense intelligence, deployed about two thousand mercenaries to the country. While their professed mission in CAR is to support the security and stabilization of the country, their actual goal and activities involve securing the mines and maintaining the Touadéra regime in power, even manipulating the 2020 elections to achieve this. In the process, Wagner operatives routinely abuse human rights, threaten UN peacekeepers, and harass opposing voices.

The exploitative relations between Moscow and the Touadéra regime have equally increased the governance burden on the citizens, worsening corruption and insecurity and undermining civil liberties. Apart from its cascading effects on governance and society, Moscow's exploitation of weak governance in CAR also highlights the fact that once an exploiter gains unfettered access into a sovereign country, their foothold is nearly impossible to remove, making Russia's exploitation of CAR consequential for the country and the regional balance of power for years to come.

Ineffective Government ● Divided Societies ● Multiple Sovereignties ● Environmental Threats

These concerns highlight two broad approaches for measuring the exploitability of a condition: the categorical approach and the contextual approach. The *categorical approach* calculates the exploitability of a condition by using a Likert scale that provides an exploitability rating.[7] The rating is the likelihood that an actor can find and use the vulnerability within a condition to undermine local or national governance, unravel security and stability, and degrade U.S. national or regional influence. Here, the analyst evaluates the likelihood of exploitation from "very unlikely" to "very likely." In this sense, all vulnerabilities related to a condition have categorical exploitability, and U.S. Army planners and decision-makers may use this approach to prioritize security cooperation, exercise, and military information support operations planning.

The *contextual approach* determines the exploitability of the condition based on information known about the condition. For example, the condition's pathway of social relations, path linkages to any number of actors, and heuristics (i.e., explanations or understandings derived from historical experience) can provide an understanding of how internal vulnerabilities might increase the exploitation of an OE condition with the potential to undermine the U.S. influence. Thus, analysts may use the contextual approach to assess the likely impact of exploitation on governance systems and U.S. influence.

Understanding Exploitation

ECF defines exploitation as the deliberate effort of a domestic or foreign actor, working alone or in collaboration with others, to gain an advantage from a condition by leveraging their proximity to the OE, manipulating local factors (e.g., relationships) connected to the condition, or steering the condition or the perception of it to gain benefits. Typically, the actor utilizes a range of resources, including elements of national power, to transform an otherwise benign but potentially combustible condition into a situation that benefits the actor. Exploitability means the environment can accept exploitation because the conditions are desirable to the actor or actors who desire to leverage them.
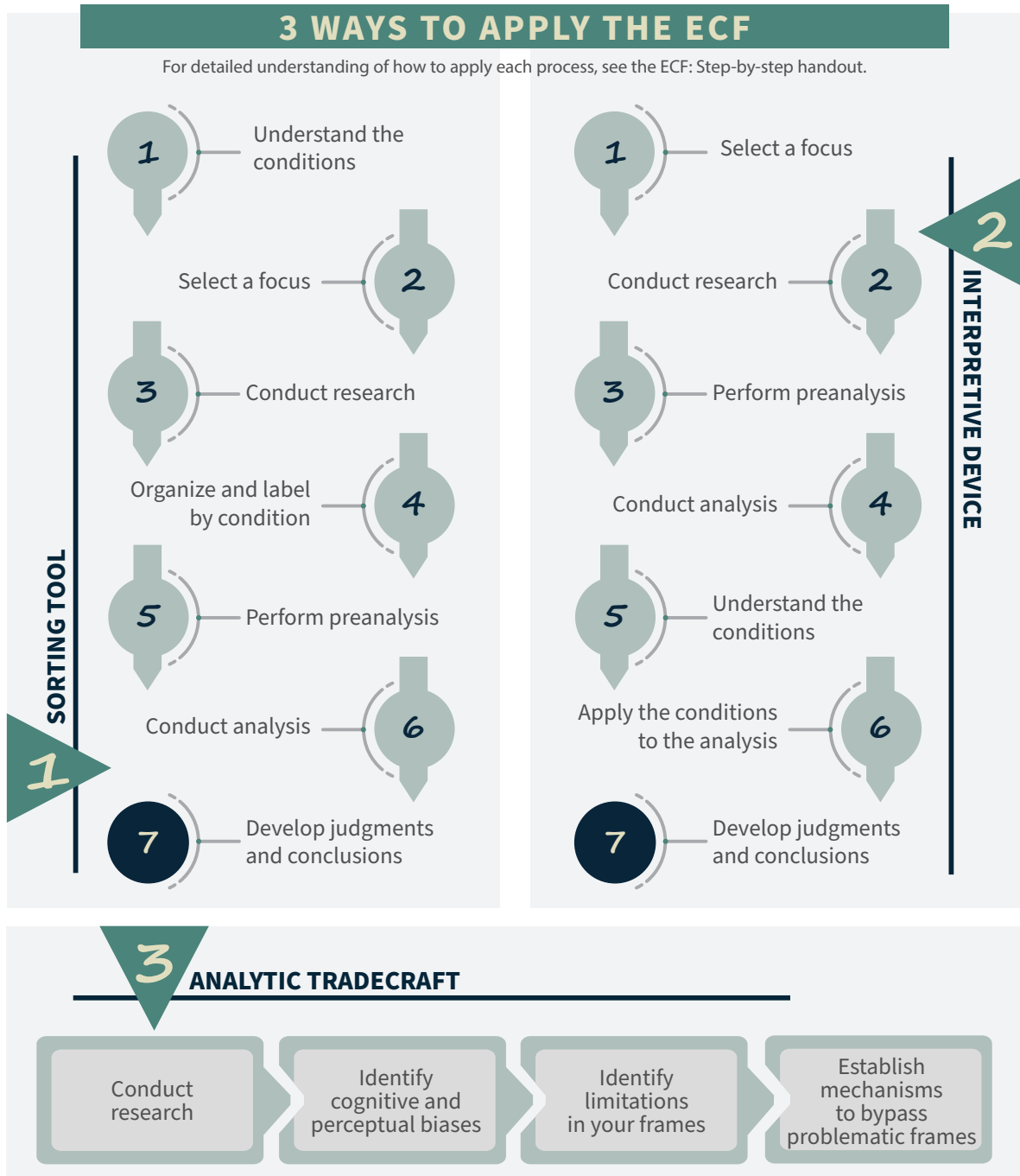
Understanding exploitability can help to explain exploitation, particularly the proximal relations between the actor and the condition that creates the pathway through which exploitability results in exploitation. Powerful domestic and foreign actors exploit vulnerabilities within conditions regularly to the extent that authorities fail to meet conventional minimum standards of effective governance. For example, motivated actors have exploited ineffective governance, multiple sovereignties, divided societies, and resource scarcity in the Central African Republic (under President Faustin-Archange Touadéra), Mali (under interim President Assimi Goïta), Somalia (under former President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo), and Sudan (under Lt. Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan) to unravel political governance and create insecurity and instability to their advantage.[8] Similarly, motivated actors have exploited ethnic and religious differences (i.e., divided societies) to degrade stability and prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from gaining NATO membership.[9]

The idea, then, that one or more condition exists as vulnerabilities that offer opportunities for friendly or adversarial exploitation has major significance for analysis, theory, and policy. In terms of analysis, it explains accessibility (i.e., proximity to conditions), relevance (i.e., gravity or consequence), and efficacy (i.e., success or failure) of an adversary's effort to undermine local governance or to challenge U.S. influence. This gives analysts a mechanism for understanding and prioritizing threats arising out of local conditions based on the degree or extent of their exploitability. In terms of theory, exploitability contributes new insights into how adversaries prioritize conditions for exploitation at different levels of government and the specific steps they take to exploit conditions. Theoretically and practically, this exploitation presents significant consequences of undermining local governance, degrading U.S. influence, and advancing their parochial interests. From a policy perspective, understanding exploitation as a concept contributes to deepening understanding of otherwise opaque adversarial activities as threats to U.S. global influence and offers countermeasures that can mitigate threats and advance U.S. interests and influence.

Applying ECF to Military Analysis

ECF provides a practical means by which analysts can incorporate social science methodology and thinking into military analysis. As a framework for sociocultural analysis, ECF can be applied in one of three functional ways (see figure 3, page 41).

3 WAYS TO APPLY THE ECF

For detailed understanding of how to apply each process, see the ECF: Step-by-step handout.

SORTING TOOL — **1**

1. Understand the conditions
2. Select a focus
3. Conduct research
4. Organize and label by condition
5. Perform preanalysis
6. Conduct analysis
7. Develop judgments and conclusions

INTERPRETIVE DEVICE — **2**

1. Select a focus
2. Conduct research
3. Perform preanalysis
4. Conduct analysis
5. Understand the conditions
6. Apply the conditions to the analysis
7. Develop judgments and conclusions

3 **ANALYTIC TRADECRAFT**

Conduct research → Identify cognitive and perceptual biases → Identify limitations in your frames → Establish mechanisms to bypass problematic frames

(Figure by Susan Littleton, TRADOC G-2 graphics specialist)

Figure 3. Three Ways to Apply ECF

First, it can be used as an organizing tool to visualize vulnerabilities and destabilizing effects. For this application, ECF is used at the start of data collection and analysis to organize sociocultural data. In this way, the framework helps analysts to visualize and understand the OE through the lens of exploitable conditions. In particular, ECF can show how an area may be vulnerable based on its exploitable conditions.

Second, it can be used as an interpretive tool to make sense of exploitation in the OE. Here, ECF is used after data collection and analysis to make sense of the discovery. In this way, ECF illuminates conditions

more likely to be exploited, by whom, and for what purpose. This and the first application are useful ways to extend and expand the view of the OE and contribute to military decision-making.

Third, it can be used as tradecraft for grounding analysts in sociocultural analysis. As tradecraft, ECF is used as an analytic technique and standard that builds critical thinking skills to challenge assumptions and judgments, identify mindsets, stimulate creativity, and manage uncertainty about the exploitation of the OE. Regularly using ECF can enable Army analysts to structure thinking for grappling with and resolving difficult questions about vulnerability and build useful training scenarios that reflect real-world exploitation.

Inherent Value of the ECF

ECF is a simple framework that helps to reveal vulnerability and explain exploitation. It is a system of ideas offering (1) an encompassing image of society and (2) a way of thinking about the OE.

ECF as image of society. ECF provides a perspective of the OE from its systems of shocks. A shock occurs when a specific sociocultural issue challenges or confronts an area's institutions and mechanisms for maintaining stability. Within the context of ECF, shocks are relatively sudden changes to the nature of key sociocultural conditions that make them vulnerable to exploitation. In this way, ECF can serve as an important monitoring, measuring, and alert system for stakeholders to detect and track changes affecting vulnerability—especially those resulting from exploitation.

The effects of exploitation may include the inability of a state's governance systems to channel resources to address needs and/or the unraveling of social structures and cohesion. This inability (to channel resources needed or to attend to state unraveling) may lead to insecurity and instability in the immediate area. There are three ways an analyst can monitor a sudden change in sociocultural conditions.

Monitor the change to the nature of a condition. This refers to a significant change in a condition that produces a more than proportionate effect. For instance, a significant change in mineral extraction laws may increase oil company profits and boost oil extraction activities but also invigorate active opposition to oil extraction. This can lead to a manipulated surge in militant activity that undermines oil production,

worsens insecurity, and threatens economic and political stability. Thus, the change in the condition (i.e., new oil extraction law) makes the effect of the conditions (i.e., resource scarcity and economic inequality) on society more consequential when exploited. For example, petroleum extraction in Nigeria, which may be analyzed under the broader ECF label of "Resource Scarcity," has witnessed at least three related shocks affecting multiple exploitable conditions:[10]

- The discovery of commercial quantities of oil in 1956 created a major revenue windfall and spurred resource control agitations (resource scarcity), led to a devastating civil war, and deepened suspicions and antagonisms among Nigerian ethnicities (divided societies).
- The pervasive and unremitted environmental degradation that is a direct outcome of oil production (environmental threats) has spurred civil agitation including the current Niger Delta militant violence (divided societies).
- The dramatic hike in oil prices in the 2000s magnified disparities in revenue generated from oil (i.e., billions of dollars) and the miserably poor conditions of the Niger Delta people (economic inequality), as well as the unmitigated devastation of the Niger Delta ecology (environmental threats).

Monitor the change to a government's mechanisms for absorbing shocks. This is the ability of the government to accept, manage, and neutralize the harmful effects of shocks (i.e., change to institutional capacity to address shocks or mitigate risks). For example, the failure of Colombia to overhaul its security policies to rely less on the military to enforce security in rural areas and enable a stronger civilian police force created a security gap that illicit networks exploited to advance their parochial interests, worsening gang- and drug-related insecurity in the country (ineffective government and illicit networks).[11]

Monitor the change to the reactive capacities of society. This is the ability of society—the people (e.g., individuals, groups, and communities)—to maintain cohesion and to continue to function at a previous capacity despite the change to a condition or its effects. Thus, how society reacts to exploiting a condition can worsen the impact of an exploited condition in an area. For example, communities across West African countries affected by climate variability suffer reduced

capacity for mitigating climate effects on their economy (ineffective government and environmental threats). As a consequence of their diminished reactive capacity, they have been easily manipulated to focus on the behavior of similarly affected neighbors (e.g., farmers, herders) and less on climate factors, which has deepened suspicions and antagonisms and increased hostility and violence (divided societies).[12]

Thus, establishing a baseline view of society is a common military action and an important starting point for monitoring exploitability. The ECF serves as a useful "lens" to observe society and its potential for disorder viewed through the actor-condition relationship. Further, the image may reflect the crystalizing of mutable conditions into immutable challenges and the analyst can observe and track this metamorphosis including its effects.

ECF as a way of thinking. More than a way of viewing society, more than a signaling system to alert stakeholders of important societal changes, ECF provides a way to understand the interplay of conditions and the people involved—a structure-actor nexus. Structures typically are seen as static and nearly immutable. However, the ECF conditions assume their force because of the behaviors of actors who can manipulate or direct a condition or a system of conditions to create a more complex challenge for society.

Therefore, it is important to understand the structure-actor interaction and its consequences. ECF helps the analyst anticipate the complex interaction between a condition and an actor by forcing the analyst to ask deliberate questions about the relationship. For example, if an analyst has a bin labeled "Resource Scarcity," and within it is a subhead called "behavior," the analyst is implicitly asking questions about behaviors concerning resource scarcity. Suppose the analyst has a two-way arrow from the "Resource Scarcity" bin to the "Divided Society" bin. In that case, they are questioning how people who manipulate resource scarcity (or are affected by it) are creating divisions in society and, reciprocally, how divisions in society affect the behavior of those who manipulate resource scarcity (or are affected by it). Questions such as this help to operationalize ECF and are a critical task for analysts working with ECF to understand the fundamentals of this structure-actor interaction.

Notably, then, it is not merely the nature of a condition that produces insecurity or instability; rather, it is the manipulation of the condition by motivated actors that leads to insecurity and instability. For example, the condition of "Divided Societies" is not inherently disorganizing and may not produce disorder. It becomes disorganizing and produces disorder when actors exploit the difference to advance their parochial objectives. This weaponization of difference, as Russia has done in the Central African Republic, hinders the transformative quality of difference for improving political processes, creating constitutional and institutional safeguards against authoritarianism, and permitting justiciable resolution of political disagreements.[13] Instead, suspicions among divided groups are worsened, insecurity and instability deepen, and Russia's regional objectives are entrenched, limiting U.S. influence.[14]

Situating the framework in this way means analysis must account for the two broad strains within ECF: the condition itself and the exploitability of the condition. Both are discrete and very different social facts that interact to create instability. We can think of the conditions as material social facts *and* how the conditions are exploited as nonmaterial social facts. While the analyst must be attuned to the material conditions, they must be similarly prepared to address the nonmaterial aspects, including actor interests, strengths, ideology, and resources.

Summary and Conclusion

ECF is a deductive model that begins with some orienting structures or frames (i.e., the conditions), extracts questions, and then starts to line up the questions with the appropriate analytic and sampling frame (e.g., actors, events, and documents can be sampled). In other words, ECF provides the analyst with preferred analytic "bins" to easily make the relational arrows as they construe, understand, explain, or predict social phenomena in the OE. Analysts use ECF to explicitly decide which questions are most important and how they should get the answers. Analysts can make a better analysis of the OE when the analytic framework and associated questions, cases, and instrumentation are explicit, instead of implicit. Thus, ECF permits and facilitates better analysis of the sociocultural landscape of the OE and saves the Army time and resources.

When analysts are presented with a set of requisite conditions, which infer some a priori notions about the factors that have the greatest explanatory and predictive power, they only have to focus on operationalizing the conditions through carefully considered research

questions. These questions will determine whether the conditions are present or absent in the OE, who is exploiting (or likely to exploit) them, and whether that had an impact on the security and stability of the OE or U.S. influence. How and why any number of actors exploit a condition is important because they bring into sharp relief the sociopolitical relations through which a condition is transformed from a benign state to a disorganizing or destabilizing state.

ECF is emerging as an explicit constructive frame in military and defense analysis. However, analysts in different fields and within the Department of Defense have always thought about the OE as a specific universe of form, structure, and interactions, including the sociocultural universe. Their efforts to understand the universe that the military operates in, however, must change as this universe changes its fundamental character. Old ways of knowing must give way to new ones. ECF represents a new way of thinking about and conducting sociocultural analysis of the OE during a time of increasing competition among peer and near-peer global powers as well as regional and local powers, and as the arenas of contestation are increasingly shifting from old centers to new ones.

Sociocultural analysis, therefore, should emphasize social conditions that lend themselves to exploitation and propose ways that the Army can mitigate risks resulting from the potential exploitation of a condition to U.S. interests and Army missions across the OE. Each condition is a conceptual scheme that allows analysts to describe important social processes, at least for a time until these processes change fundamentally. ECF provides, in essence, a set of eyes for seeing the sociocultural reality of the OE and, equally significant, for understanding this reality at a given time and place. ∎

Notes

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7. Based on a five-point Likert scale comprising of (1) very unlikely (very unlikely to be exploited), (2) unlikely (unlikely to be exploited), (3) neutral (neither likely nor unlikely to be exploited), (4) likely (likely to be exploited), and (5) very likely (very likely to be exploited).

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SMEs

Blended Learning

Methodologies

Frameworks