

An Ocean Between Us: Civil Affairs from Shore to Shore

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There is much discussion of competition below the level of armed conflict in the "grey zone." Much of this competition occurs at sea or in the littorals. Somehow, recognition of the need for civil engagement within the littorals never seems to quite make it into these discussions, even though billions of lives and livelihoods depend on the oceans.

Rather than limiting our understanding of engagement in the littorals to humanitarian assistance, our CA forces need to recognize their role in ensuring access and freedom of navigation. While a Navy destroyer undertaking a patrol through a contested area is one form of freedom of navigation, that same destroyer's ability to port where it pleases is also a key part of freedom of navigation. All these are elements of the grey zone and depend on human-to-human engagements. Make no mistake: Civil Affairs Operations are irregular warfare.

There's an obvious gap in the employment of CA forces. In the minds of most commanders, as hammered into them by the Global War on Terror, CA forces do one of two things: facilitate humanitarian assistance following a disaster or follow in the wake of kinetic operations as the "apology force." This outdated model does not serve us well in the present, and will do even less in the near and far future. CA forces need to be trained and employed across the continuum from the beginning of Phase 0 to help shape and set the theater through major combat operations.

By envisioning their area of responsibility as strictly the areas beyond the coasts, the Navy is dangerously limiting themselves. Instead, the Navy and the joint force must adopt a "shore to shore" approach, which ensures access to the actual key maritime terrain. The shore influences the ocean and vice versa. Limiting our Naval services' understanding to one of these domains is dangerous. CA forces have a major role to play when it comes to ensuring access and setting the theater. No naval campaign could possibly be complete without in-depth consideration of civil-military operations and employment of civil affairs forces across the competition continuum.

Understanding that the waterways are defined by the land that borders them and vice versa will help put the U.S. and its allies and partners on a trajectory to compete in the future. Willing away the current and early-phase operations in anticipation of major conflict is not an option. The current CA force needs to be overhauled to ensure it can operate across the competition continuum in the maritime environment as well as many other named and unnamed domains.

As the Army needs to look beyond large-scale combat operations as the sole determinant of its force operational capacities and capabilities, the Navy needs to adjust its operational approach to recognize the importance of currently ongoing shore-to-shore operations among populated areas rather than putting all its focus on the anticipated naval battles that may or may never come.