

RESEARCH BRIEF

Information Operations Increase Civilian Security Cooperation

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2019-130, "[Information Operations Increase Civilian Security Cooperation](#)," by Konstantin Sonin, professor at UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy; and Austin L. Wright, assistant professor at UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Winning over "hearts and minds" of civilians is often a key strategy for US forces
- ✓ The military frequently uses information operations designed to deliver messages to civilians, including those residing in enemy-held territory
- ✓ Though these programs are prevalent, little is known about their effectiveness
- ✓ This new research reveals that such programs can be effective, even when civilians may be neutral or even antagonistic to US forces

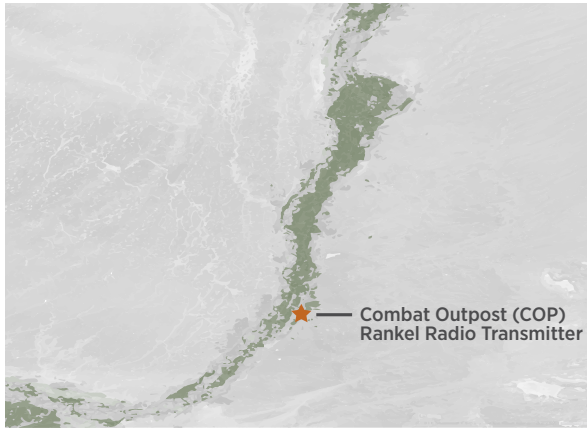
For modern militaries, the quality of local intelligence can mean the difference between success or failure. In a lengthy war, when troops are on the ground for long periods, combat extends far beyond the battlefield—troops must also campaign for the hearts and minds of local civilians. As Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it in 2010: "The battlefield is not necessarily a field anymore. It's in the minds of the people."¹

Given the importance of such "information and influence operations," it is imperative that military leaders are able to evaluate their effectiveness. However, there is precious little systematic evidence as to their usefulness. A new paper by Konstantin Sonin and Austin L. Wright, both of UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy, "Information Operations Increase Civilian Security Cooperation," addresses this gap by reviewing the efficacy of information campaigns by US troops in Afghanistan meant to increase civilian cooperation and, ultimately, reduce the occurrence of roadside bombings from improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

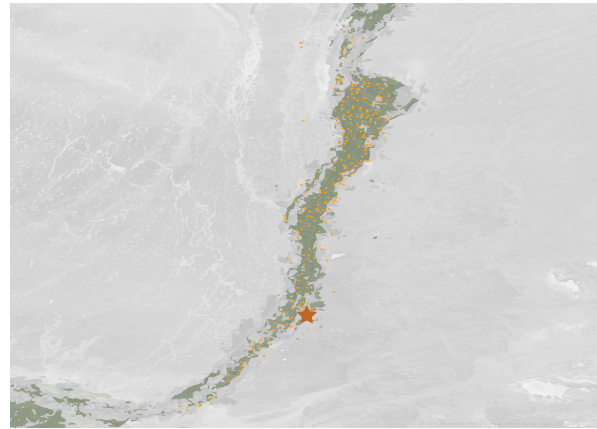
¹ Mullen, Michael. 2010. 156 Alfred Landon Lecture, Kansas State University.

Figure 1 • Findings from the US Military’s Radio-In-A-Box (RIAB) Program in the Garmser District of Afghanistan

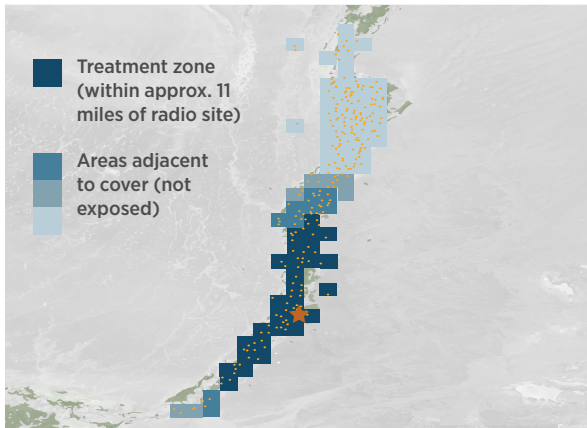
(A) Study Site: Garmser District, Helmand, Afghanistan



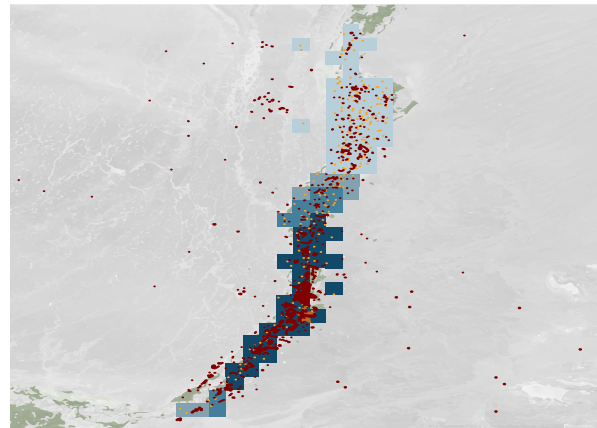
(B) Populated Settlements of the District (Orange Circles)



(C) Settlements and their Distance from Radio Site (Blue Squares)



(D) Combat & Intelligence Locations During Sample Period (Red Circles)



Their results suggest that such campaigns can be successful in changing attitudes and behavior among civilians, thus reducing the number of roadside bombings and improving battlefield outcomes.

Reducing violence through effective communication

On Oct. 7, 2001, President George W. Bush announced airstrikes in Afghanistan targeting Al Qaeda and the Taliban, in retaliation for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on US soil. Known as Operation Enduring Freedom, this campaign would wage until December 28, 2014, when President Barack Obama announced its closure. Over those 13 years, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on information operations, with little evidence of success. A 2012 analysis by the RAND Corporation found mixed results “at best,” for US information operations, followed by a 2018 report concluding that NATO countries underperform their

adversaries in the use of information operations. Another 2018 report suggested that absent a thorough evaluation of information operations’ impact, it must be concluded that such operations do not have their desired effect, especially in “enemy territory.”²

What does economics have to do with military strategy? While it might not be intuitive for many observers, economics has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of information in an economy, both its presence and its absence, with formative research by then UChicago professor George Stigler³, who would go on to receive the 1982 Nobel Prize in Economics based, in part, on his insights into the economics of information.

² Dell, Melissa and Pablo Querubin. 2018. “Nation Building Through Foreign Intervention: Evidence from Discontinuities in Military Strategies.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133(2):701-764.

³ See, for example: Stigler, George. 1961. “The Economics of Information.” *The Journal of Political Economy* 69(3):213-225.

Over time, an entire branch of microeconomics has dedicated itself to the economics of information, and Sonin and Wright apply the field's techniques to study the efficacy of one particular information campaign: the introduction of localized radio transmissions into enemy-controlled villages.

Such transmissions were part of the US military's Radio-In-A-Box (RIAB) program in the Garmser district of Afghanistan, an important region in the Afghan war that was held by Taliban forces until 2010 (see accompanying maps). The premise behind RIAB is that the military would place a radio transmitter near a village that would allow US forces to transmit information to local civilians. Given that not all villages were covered under the program, Sonin and Wright were able to evaluate the performance of those villages with an RIAB vs. those that did not. In addition, the authors corroborated their findings with a nationwide survey and investigation of military records and intelligence reports collected during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Much research over the last 20 years has focused on the prevention of sub-state conflict, or conflict within states (such as terrorism), which is the main source of death and population displacement in military conflict. Most of that work focuses on the origin of such conflict and means of prevention. Sonin and Wright advance this research by demonstrating that targeted influence campaigns can lead to welfare-enhancing outcomes, even in adversarial environments. The authors' key contribution is to demonstrate how information operations can shape attitudes and costly behaviors in areas where such messaging is considered least effective (those regions under enemy control). Further, their work reveals how such operations can improve the welfare of those exposed to the messaging (in this case, by reducing exposure to active bombs).

This positive result is derived from the authors' analysis of trends in civilian tips about the location of bombs, civilian turn-ins, and bomb neutralizations for 180 days before and after radio transmissions. Prior to the advent of radio messaging, there was no distinction among daily activity in all areas; in other words, areas that would later experience RIAB messaging looked the same as those that would not receive messaging (in effect, the control group). After transmissions begin, however, civilian cooperation

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and bomb clearances increase substantially in villages with radio access, whereas settlements without access remain unaffected.

Importantly, the authors' findings suggest that information operations can increase cooperation among civilians, effectively increasing security and welfare by the removal of roadside bombs. Further, there may be other benefits, as this analysis only captures the benefits of radio messaging as it applies to IEDs, and it is likely that there are other benefits to such civilian cooperation; however, those implied benefits are not captured in the analysis.

These findings of violence reduction stand in contrast to previous research that suggests how information operations can be used to reinforce existing prejudices and incite violence. These new results also suggest that efficient interventions can be effective even when there are risks for civilians to participate, and the civilian population is distrustful of the intervening actor (in this case, coalition forces).

The authors checked their findings against other methods, accounting for changing troop presence, movement, and operations. Their findings were also reinforced when incorporating national-scale data.

Conclusion

By linking exposure to military information operations with civilian cooperation, Sonin and Wright advance our understanding of the impact of messaging on civilian attitudes, even when those civilians live in areas under the control of rebel forces, and also when civilian attitudes about the messenger (in this case, coalition forces in Afghanistan) are mixed or even antagonistic. In this case, involving the military's Radio-In-A-Box program, where the military hoped to reduce the number of IED bombings, the results were positive. This promising result could be further supplemented by future research on the best methods to disseminate information, for example, and to perhaps include social media and other communication outlets. New research could also evaluate civilian attitudes toward peaceful resolution and post-conflict reintegration of rebel soldiers.

CLOSING TAKEAWAY

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