



Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response in a Large-Scale Contingency Operation Wargame

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From February 18 to 21, 2025, CNA facilitated the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response in a Large-Scale Contingency Operation wargame in Honolulu, Hawaii. The event brought together 25 stakeholders from the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and its component commands, the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, and other elements of the Department of War (DoW), to explore the challenges and opportunities in executing civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) functions in the context of large-scale contingency operations (LSCOs) in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility (AOR).

This wargame, conducted as a tabletop exercise, allowed participants to explore a variety of plausible vignettes showcasing different operational environments, forces, and dilemmas for commanders in a near-future LSCO in the INDOPACOM AOR. Within the six vignettes, players explored the intelligence and planning that would enable commanders and staff in a future joint task force (JTF) to incorporate CHMR into operational planning, mitigate civilian harm during high-intensity operations, and assess the effects of operations on the civilian environment.

Why CHMR in LSCO?

CHMR is an adaptive, data-driven, and holistic approach to military operations in which risks to civilians are considered along with risks to mission and force. This approach enables the military to achieve operational and strategic objectives while mitigating civilian harm to the extent feasible. This approach is relatively new

and often misunderstood, at times evoking concern among military and national security stakeholders; perhaps the greatest concern is whether taking steps to better protect civilians compromises the military's ability to conduct its mission. In other words, *How can the military be effective when fighting with one hand tied behind its back?*

Operational data do not support this concern. The CHMR approach can, in fact, improve operational effectiveness, help the military attack the right target, and provide a range of strategic and operational advantages. Just as US warfighting has dramatically increased its lethality over the past 50 years through capabilities that improve precision—such as precision-guided munitions, intelligence and reconnaissance sources, and networked operations—the **CHMR approach ensures that lethality is achieved through improved precision, accuracy, and efficiency.**

Facilitated tabletop exercise

The core gameplay loop involved players identifying informational and organizational requirements within an abstracted JTF planning process that would allow commanders to make informed decisions and understand risk to civilians, the force, and the mission. After discussing requirements, players explored ways to integrate these requirements into existing INDOPACOM planning and battle rhythms and determine where existing or envisioned organizations could provide support, given the requirements of speed, scope, and scale of LSCO operations.

The vignettes covered a variety of operational contexts to allow robust discussion of AOR-specific challenges, explore the relevance of CHMR for future JTF commander decisions, and explore CHMR considerations across domains. Vignettes included explorations of maritime, air, and land operations; coalition and partnered operations; urban operations; and operations on or near allied territory. The vignettes were aligned with departmental planning guidance for scenarios in the AOR.

Within each vignette, players were asked to explore what information would allow the decision-maker to develop a CHMR-informed decision or action for each step of planning, starting with developing commander's intent and ending with evaluation and assessment. At each step, players were given a decisional input and asked to consider what information they would need for the next step. For example, players were given a commander's intent for a scenario, then they discussed what information would allow the planning team to develop CHMR-informed courses of action (COAs). (See Figure 1.) Players discussed what information would be required, what decisions the information would support, and where and in what form that information could be found and conveyed to the commander. Players also reflected on ways to enable INDOPACOM to support responses to reports of civilian harm within the vignettes and understand the ongoing effects of its operations given the assumed scale and speed of LSCOs.

After two-and-a-half days of scenario exploration, participants took part in a hotwash and briefed Commodore Paul O'Grady, head of INDOPACOM J-5 Strategy, on their top-level reflections.

Players in the wargame increasingly viewed the CHMR approach as an asymmetric advantage and key warfighting enabler in the context of a LSCO. The following four imperatives were particularly apparent in the wargame:

1. Operating and maintaining forces from a large standoff distance limits practical options and

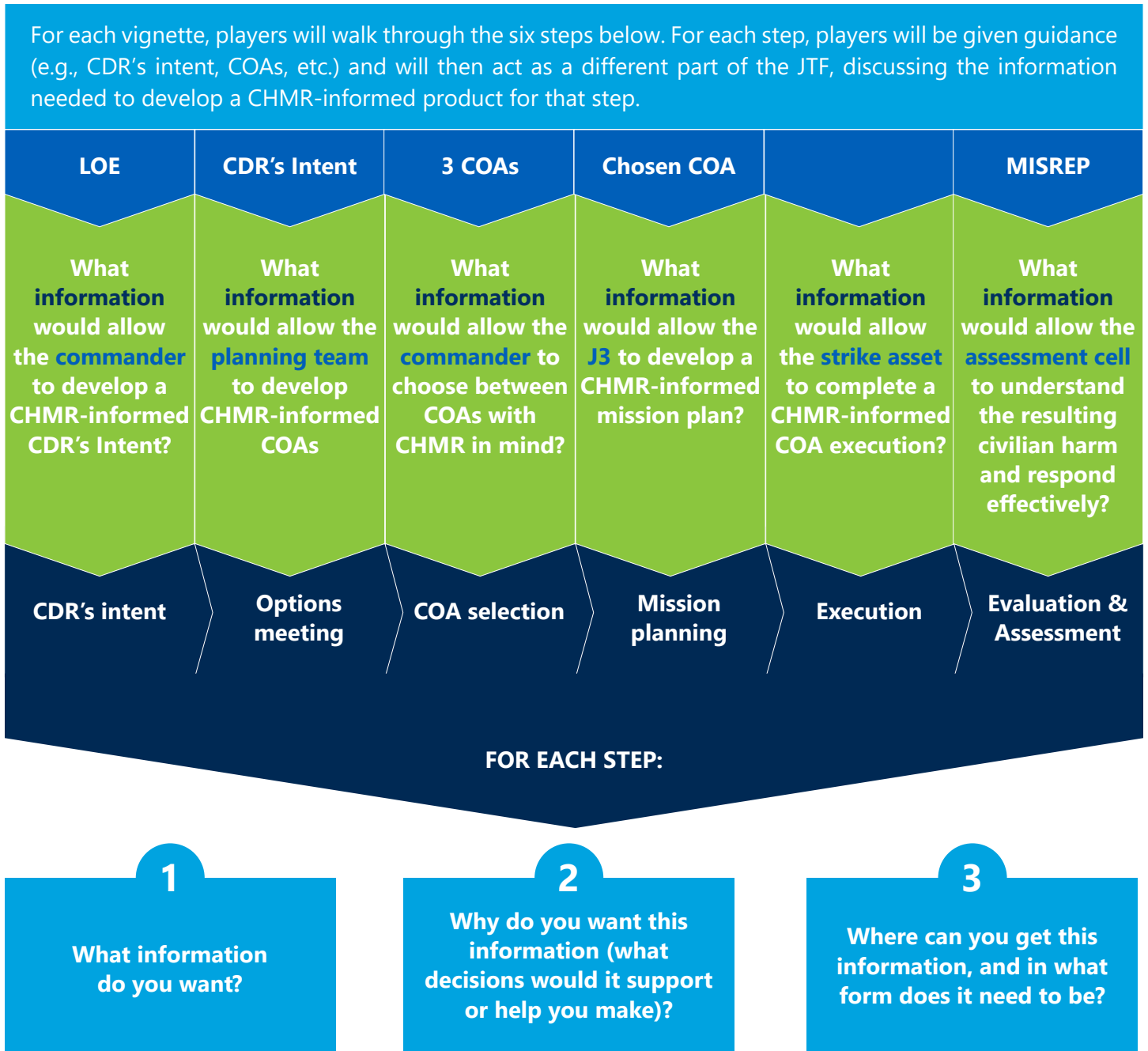
strains the availability of platforms and munitions. **The CHMR functions modeled in the wargame enabled more effective management of munitions and platforms by promoting precision and accuracy of targeting to achieve desired effects**, including in degraded or contested informational environments.

2. The principles of war emphasize momentum: leveraging speed and maintaining constant, exhaustive pressure to gain and maintain the initiative. **The CHMR approach promotes precision of effects while also mitigating the effects of civilian harm and adversary information operations (IOs) that can interrupt momentum at critical moments.**
3. Players expressed that commanders cannot manage unidentified risk. **The CHMR approach can enable effective identification and management of risk to force, mission, and civilians, thereby giving the commander a greater range of options and a better understanding of trade-offs.**
4. Our allies and partners are an asymmetric advantage we bring to LSCOs; therefore, interoperability with them at both the operational and policy levels is vital. **Players saw partner engagements that incorporated the CHMR approach and the execution of CHMR functions as a way to advance practical interoperability** and maximize the effectiveness of a coalition force while avoiding breakdowns in cohesion and momentum.

Opportunities

During the wargame, players helped identify opportunities for INDOPACOM to promote operational effectiveness and efficiency as it prepares and plans for a potential LSCO in its AOR in light of INDOPACOM's challenging posture as a standoff force. These opportunities include steps to be taken by the JTF commander; the Civilian Environment Team (CET), a team that works within INDOPACOM to support a better understanding of the civilian environment;

Figure 1. Wargame structure



Source: CNA.
 Note: CDR = commander; J3 = operations directorate.

and the Civilian Harm Assessment Cell (CHAC), a cell responsible for assessing and tracking instances of civilian harm (INDOPACOM does not currently have a CHAC); as well as CHMR interoperability with allies and partners and refinements through cycles of learning.

The JTF commander's role. A JTF commander can take specific steps to fully leverage CHMR functions and expand the JTF's options for achieving its objectives. Guidance from INDOPACOM can incorporate these steps and include opportunities to rehearse them in upcoming exercises, experiments, and wargames.

The CET. The CET can help identify and manage risks and find win-win opportunities that enhance effectiveness and efficiency. During the game, players were clearly interested in information the CET could provide regarding a wide range of operational and planning decisions made by the JTF and other echelons once they realized how such information improves decisions and operational outcomes.

The CHAC. Players acknowledged the adversary's intent to use the issue of civilian harm (both actual and fictional) for IO purposes, which could reduce momentum and increase friction within the coalition. Players realized that the CHAC can be a valuable tool to help counter adversary IO and enable learning for greater effectiveness over time.

CHMR interoperability with allies and partners. With allies and partners as an asymmetric advantage in a LSCO, players understood that DoW should build CHMR interoperability with allies and partners to realize that advantage fully. This interoperability can be promoted through engagements with allies and partners focused on CHMR functions and benefits, including plans for combined actions, information and analysis of the civilian environment, and civil defense options.

Cycles of learning. During the wargame, players expressed a new appreciation for the benefits of CHMR functions and how operational decisions and plans can be improved. This exercise was the first experience



“Players had a new appreciation for the benefits of CHMR functions and how operational decisions and plans can be improved—highlighting significant opportunities for continued learning, refinement, and innovation.”

some players had with the CHMR approach, and it was the first analytic wargame on CHMR and the first deep examination of CHMR functions within a JTF in a LSCO. As such, there are ample opportunities for further refinement and learning. Players discussed how observations and findings from this wargame can begin a cycle of learning and adaptation in which they can identify practices and requirements that can be refined in exercises (e.g., Pacific Sentry), simulations, or subsequent wargames to spur innovation.

Next steps

This quick look summary provides an overview of the wargame. By the end of May, we will provide a final, classified report that leverages our analysis and provides recommendations for INDOPACOM and DoW. Those recommendations will include the following:

- Specific steps commanders can take to enable a CHMR approach to LSCOs
- Ways the CET can be resourced and placed to better support the demanding information requirements of a LSCO

- Steps for the CHAC to support the commander and command in stride in terms of countering adversary IO and otherwise learning from and responding to civilian harm in a LSCO
- Best practices for a strategic communications strategy and playbook to support an INDOPACOM JTF in a LSCO
- Actions INDOPACOM and DoW can take now with allies and partners for CHMR interoperability
- Ways to support CHMR functions at different echelons, including how INDOPACOM and other combatant commands can support critical CHMR functions in a JTF involved in a LSCO.

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