

## KEY LEADER ENGAGEMENT – CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

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**Abstract:** *In the information age, the strategic, operational and tactical levels are more interrelated than in the past, which demands a different quality of co-ordination and command and control (C2) across the levels of engagement. Today’s military operations to counter the complex challenges of the global security environment require consideration and integration of the information factor throughout all processes – analysis, planning, execution and assessment. Key Leader Engagement (KLE) is an important element of C2 that the commander can use to achieve this. These engagements can be used to shape and influence local leaders within the operations area or may also be directed toward leaders who may influence specific groups based upon military, social, religious, and traditional patterns. Military commanders and diplomats have been meeting with important local officials for decades in different countries and mission areas, but the new security challenges express the need for collaborative C2 have renewed the interest in this concept. This article is based on a literature review and my personal experience gained through ATALANTA Operation mandate, as FOPS Jn KLE. This project is the first attempt to empirically evaluate the impact of key leader engagements as part of naval operations. It gives a flavour of what KLE is and how it can be integrated in the Navy Doctrine, especially in the multinational operations where ROU Navy is frequently involved. Through this approach, I address not only the specialists, those who contribute to the development of operative and doctrinal documents, but also the ones that are continuously self-educated as part of the resilient leadership process.*

**Keywords:** *key leader; engagement; key leader engagement; resilient.*

*“The most hateful human misfortune is  
for a wise man to have no influence.”  
Greek Historian Herodotus, 484-425 BC*

### **Brief introduction**

Worldwide, the security environment is constantly changing, reflected in the growing interdependencies in international relations and the difficulty in delineating traditional risks and threats from asymmetrical and hybrid ones.

These situations call for new Command and Control (C2) approaches and new mindsets to counter the non-traditional enemies that the forces are facing. Getting the support of the local population or military actors can often be a crucial factor for success. The tool of any leader in achieving this goal is influence. Influence is at the heart of diplomacy and military operations and can be define as the act or power to produce a desired outcome on a target audience (TA).

Key Leader Engagement (KLE) is a component of C2 that the commander can use to influence key leaders or target audiences as part of an Information Operations (Info Ops) Strategy. As part of the Info Ops contribution to an operation it is vital that all key actors and their inter-relationships are identified. Having detailed knowledge of key leaders’ personalities, leadership styles, ambitions, motivations, objectives (short and long term), current stances, dependencies, psychological profiles and personal histories will be essential to provide the context to plan appropriate information activities. A vital component in all plans will be to recognise the complex, adaptive relationships and dependencies that exist between actors.

## A theory of Key Leader Engagement

U.S. Special Operations forces have used the practice of Key Leader Engagement in insurgencies and insurrections since the 1960s. The exact origin of the term is unknown, but it began to emerge around the time of the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions to describe the meetings that conventional military unit leaders were having with local tribal, religious and political/government leaders in their areas of operation. Later on, in 2009, EU (European Union) began to use the same concept in the Operation ATALANTA, updating its meaning until was integrated into the Cooperation Concept of Atalanta (COCOA concept) in 2018.

Key Leader Engagements incorporates elements of persuasive communications strategies, while retaining characteristics that transformed them in a unique and separate technique. Key leaders, by definition, have influence over a specific constituency or group in their societies. They also have credibility because of the emphasis placed on their expertise and position and gaining their followers' trust.

The key leaders that intervention forces choose to engage not only have influence and communicative power with target audiences, but they have a very basic and very powerful understanding of appropriate message content, delivery and reception. If military intervention forces develop relationships with those key leaders, the messages transmitted through them will be sent in a manner the intended audience not only understands, but is willing and able to accept.

While the use of key leader engagements is not particularly new, there are few studies that address the mechanics of key leader engagements and the factors that contribute to their success or failure.

From NATO perspective, in 2010 was one of the first attempts to define KLE: "*the planned and coordinated use of the senior leadership of the friendly force to influence key decision-makers/ opinion shapers/ influencers/ leaders in the assigned area of operations in support of the commander's objectives.*"<sup>1</sup>

Seven years later, the KLE definition was updated as follows: "*KLEs are engagements between NATO military leaders and the key decision-makers of approved audiences that have defined goals (such as a change in policy or supporting the Joint Force Commands or Alliance objectives). These engagements can be used to shape and influence local leaders within the operations area or may also be directed toward leaders who may influence specific groups based upon social, religious, and traditional patterns (for example, to solidify trust and confidence in NATO forces).*"<sup>2</sup>

In the national doctrine<sup>3</sup>, all you can find about this topic is less than one page and represent the translation of what is written in the NATO Bi-SC Information Operations Reference Book, Version 1, 05 March 2010, page 51, and it gives a short description of what KLE can entail. For example, NATO specifies KLE activities to include:

- a) Bilateral talks of senior leaders with military and civilian counterparts at their level of influence;
- b) Speeches held at various occasions in the presence of the media and/or key decision makers;
- c) Featured interviews to selected media with wide influence; and
- d) Conferences arranged to discuss specific items of interest with influential characters.<sup>4</sup>

From my experience perspective, I could state that the KLEs are the ad-hoc or planned meetings that high representatives of military forces conduct with influential local officials, socio-political leaders, and other persons of influence in a host nation population, or even with other military stakeholders that are operating in the same AOO. Military forces may conduct

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<sup>1</sup> \*\*\*, *NATO Bi-SC Information Operations Reference Book*, Version 1, 05 March 2010.

<sup>2</sup> \*\*\*, *NATO ENGAGEMENT HANDBOOK*, Version 1.0, September 2017, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> \*\*\*, *Doctrina pentru operații întrunite a armatei României*, București, 2014, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> \*\*\*, *NATO Bi-SC Information Operations Reference Book*, Version 1, 05 March 2010, p. 51.

key leader engagements for a number of purposes, but the intent behind them is to establish cooperation with powerful leaders to further their mission objectives.

It should be noted that this definition and description of KLE is not set within the Romanian Armed Forces Doctrine. It has not been published in any formal document; rather, it is a proposed definition that could be used during a military exercise. However, in the absence of any formal definition it can serve as an indication of the Romanian Navy interpretation of KLE.

### **Planning and conducting KLE**

The planning of a key leader engagement varies depending on several factors such as purpose, previous meetings and number of participants that are engaged in the KLE. However, there are several aspects that are applicable to many KLE situations. In order to make communications work, the communicator must, first and foremost, be “in tune” with the receiver. That is, the messenger has to know the target audience well enough to be able to send a message the recipient both understands and is willing to receive. If the recipient lacks the requisite experience or linguistic skills to understand the message or misunderstands its intent, then the messenger will be unable to achieve his or her desired effect. The more you know about the key leader the better. It is essential to know the agenda beforehand so key messages and statements could be prepared to ensure that individuals are never caught hesitating or promising things that they should not promise.

First and foremost, we have to establish who is the proper person to engage with. The key leader could be formal or informal leaders that are powerful in a society and can influence a target audience in a way that is beneficial to our operation. Therefore, a crucial step must be taken to determine whether that key leader is worth the effort and to determine if it is likely that KLE will lead to desired effects. In order to make such determinations, stakeholders can be evaluated according to their assessed influence in the area of responsibility and our interest. Any interaction with a key leader can result in outcomes that are either beneficial or counterproductive. Hence, we need to carefully consider with whom we interact and how, in order to achieve the desired outcome.

During my deployment in the EU NAVFOR Operation ATALANTA (ATA), we worked on POI (Person of Interest) list. There were people from all levels in the society, from village elders to governors, to explain them that the piracy was not a healthy way of living; from chief of police to ministry of defence, to show them that de EU NAVFOR forces were there to secure their territorial waters; from captains of merchant vessels to agencies, to highlight the importance of compliance to the measures presented in the Best Management Practice (a manual addressed to merchant companies with measures to be implemented while transiting Red Sea); from CTF to Independent Deployers, to emphasize the good cooperation among forces; and from Diaspora meetings to SHADE conference, to underline the benefits of ATA. Depending on the level of engagement (OpCdr, DCOM, COS, FCdr) and our own forces’ scheme of manoeuvre, KLE Team (a senior and a junior KLE officer) advised by CJ2 (INTEL) comrades determined who the right person to be engaged was. There was also an Engagement Plan, updated each rotation of command and forces, an overview of the future engagement for a 4 to 6 months period, which has to be approved by the OpCdr on the JCB (Joint Coordination Board).

Once the key leaders we want to target have been identified as much information as possible must be gathered, for example, information about their religion, culture, family, ambitions, motivations and leader-ship styles. Inter-dependencies and relation-ships between different key leaders must also be identified.<sup>5</sup>

There may be many key leaders to target and it is important to keep track of all planned engagements. Within NATO, the Info Ops cell is responsible for coordinating the

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<sup>5</sup> \*\*\*, NATO AJP-3.10., *Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, paragraph 0128.

Commander's Key Leaders Engagement Plan (KLEP). The KLEP contains information about planned contacts with relevant actors, objectives, main themes or issues to be addressed, desired effects and measures of effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

The Info Ops cell is also responsible for creating a so-called Influence Briefing Package (IBP). It is a summary of the most important information that the commander needs to influence a specific key leader in a desired way.<sup>7</sup>

Since it often takes more than one Key Leader Engagement to accomplish a desired goal, the KLEs need to be documented in a proper way. From ATA perspective, KLE Team was in charge with gathering the right information, tracking all engagements and preparing the briefing pack. In this respect, we had the Engagement Matrix which was an Excel document with all the KLE parties had ever been done since the beginning of the Operation. The Matrix included the date and venue, the place, the actors involved, names, position in the society, by whom they had been engaged, effects achieved during the meeting and other relevant information from the After Action Reports (AARs). That was our "Holly Bible" and was the milestone for each future KLE. Our LTT (Lines To Take) pack contained the introduction part (BLUF), the Target Audiences and their CVs, the background with the information exchanged during the last meetings, LTT – key themes or messages of influence, and the list of effects to be achieved. The LTT pack was revised by POLADs (Political Advisers) and was ready to be sent.

After the KLE has been planned, it is time to conduct the actual interaction. There are few key issues to consider when conducting a KLE, but there is not a standard procedure. It is important to create a good relationship and to bond with the key leaders at an early stage. It is imperative to initiate all meetings with small talk before discussing anything on the actual agenda. Since there are a lot of cultural aspects to consider during a KLE, it is recommended a cultural advisor (CULTAD) present both during the preparations and the execution of the KLE. The person who conducts the KLE must adapt as the meeting progresses and the person's competence is of essence.

Once completed, an AAR should be sent back to the OHQ (Operational Head Quarter). Influencing a person or group of persons is a time-consuming process and it generally requires many KLEs before a desired outcome can be reached. To ensure continuity and progress toward our desired goals it is essential to debrief and document every KLE. If possible, the commander and his note taker should personally share the information from the meeting with relevant actors in the staff. It is also important to store a written report stored in a database that easily can be made available at a later point in time. That is why each AAR was archived in the Engagement Matrix for preparing the next engagement.

### **Benefits of Key Leader Engagements**

The effectiveness of using KLEs could be the fact that they are focused on human beings who are subject to cognitive biases and identity affiliations that impact how they respond to the explicit and implicit communications techniques to which they are exposed. Conducting KLEs can mitigate the impacts of these biases, change how intervention forces and non-combatant populations identify and behave towards each other, and maximize the communicative power of face-to-face communications.

*KLEs can correct maligned misperceptions of intervention forces.* As an example, in 2018 a Somali dhow was boarded by an Indian frigate that was operating in the same AOO. The crew was forced to dive into the water during the boarding team procedures and the guns for their self-defence were confiscated. This event was preceded by a long period when ATA forces had "to correct" the situation. From fishermen to elders in every local communities had been stated that it was not ATA way of proceeding for the Friendly Approaches (FA – boarding

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<sup>6</sup> \*\*\*, NATO AJP-3.10, paragraph 0128.

<sup>7</sup> \*\*\*, NATO Bi-SC (2009), p. 53.

procedure ONLY with the foreign asset's captain approval). It was necessary to contact the Indian Navy high representatives, as well, and even teaching their boarding parties the "normal" way to conduct a boarding.

*KLEs change how different actors identify each other.* People develop their identities by comparing themselves with the other people and environmental factors they encounter and, in doing so, are able to develop perceptions of other identities. The reason why identities matter is that, in addition to shaping perceptions of other actors, they modify their behavior regarding those actors—individuals, for example, they will act differently towards those they identify as "friends" and those they identify as "enemies"<sup>8</sup>. Since key leaders in theory have the ability to impact the deeply-held beliefs their communities, the attitude and preferences of true key leaders towards an intervention forces could be a powerful incentive to change their preferences in favor of or against that force. By allowing important representatives to meet and correct misperceptions and misidentification through repeated human contact and interaction, KLEs can encourage both actors to begin a process of re-identification. The best example I could think off is the more than one successful decade of ATA mission, directed towards the disruption, prevention and suppression of piracy and arms attacks in the Horn of Africa.

*KLEs involve face-to-face contact.* The most effective delivery mechanism for communications is face-to-face contact. In many cases, effective face-to-face contact necessitates the establishment of some form of personal relationship from which participants can derive influence. Face-to-face contact is particularly effective because it leaves far less space for misinterpreting communication efforts than other forms of communication. Because it reduces the physical and psychological distance between messenger and recipient, the chances that the message and its important components will be lost in translation are greatly reduced. Another reason face-to-face contact might prove useful involves theories of inter-group contact. Contact theory studies the impacts of inter-group contact on changing the attitudes and, ultimately, the behavior of different groups towards each other. In this respect, ATA influence team organized once a semester, a meeting with Somali Diaspora in the UK. It was like a 4-hour dinner where the ATA team tried to convince a group of 20 Somalis about the piracy perception. That Somali group had relatives, friends and colleagues that received the same message the attendees had got during the meeting. The 4-hour effectiveness resulted from the fact that the messages was transmitted to the entire community.

### **Building a resilient Navy through Key Leader Engagements**

According to my research and experience, KLE should be a vital part of every naval operation. It is a way to reach target audiences that we otherwise would not reach and also a way to prevent problems before they arise. It is a way to mitigate the lack of capabilities through the cooperation with other military forces. It is the friendly diplomatic way that leaders could interact with each other.

Most of the theories outlined here suggest that the forces that use key leader engagements as part of their operations are likely to achieve more success than those which do not. It is possible that, like any weapon, key leader engagements must be used against appropriate targets and in the right quantities in order to achieve their desired effect. There should be a correct number of engagements over a given time frame that the naval forces must use in order to achieve a desired impact across an area of operations. Insufficient or lack of using KLEs will have no significant effect because people's trust will not be gained, the identity transformation will not be obtained, and, eventually, no cooperation will be achieved. From another point of view, conducting additional KLEs or saturating specific key leaders with more visits beyond a point of diminishing returns may effectively wear out a unit's welcome or create a

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<sup>8</sup> A. Wendt, *Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics* article published in *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1992, p. 397.

version of fatigue or indifference. Ignorant or incompetent commanders are unable to employ either coercive or persuasive operational techniques with any degree of nuance and, thus, are likely to simply use KLEs at random. Ignorant or incompetent military units might, furthermore, use KLEs in large quantities, mistakenly believing that more engagements would amplify their effect.

Sometimes the naval force could use different practices in the course of their engagements to improve their efficacy. For example, naval forces sometimes use the practice of making promises or committing some kind of support to a key leader to obtain the key leader's reciprocal support for their activities. On the surface, offering such commitments appears to be useful because they establish a basis for continued goodwill between key leader, constituency, and naval force. Otherwise, if left unfulfilled, failed promises damage relationships with key leaders. The norm of reciprocity provides one explanation for how offering promises can impact a cooperative relationship. KLEs involving promises can positively influence key leaders and their constituencies as long as those promises are continuously kept. Failure to keep promises or follow through on commitments could not only reduce the efficacy of those engagements, but the legitimacy and credibility of the naval force and the key leaders it engages.

Resilient Navy could gain the KLE success on how frequently an intervention force meets with the key leaders in its areas of operation. It is important to engage with a single key leader as many times as possible to achieve the maximum effect, but it is also possible that repeated interaction could be detrimental on the long run. As previously presented, key leader engagements allowed the naval force and key leader to correct misidentifications of each other. If the majority of the interactions are positive, the reidentification process will take less time. Negative interactions may be harmful to the relationship in the short run, but, if the overall relationship has normalized as positive or productive, the impact of any negative interactions would only be temporary.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The results from the literature review and my personal experience show that even though there are challenges in conducting KLE in multinational operations there are several possible gains for the commander. It is a way to reach target audience and a way of preventing problems by managing them before they arise. KLE is a means to send a message, a way of influencing and building relationships.

In order for the KLE to be successful cultural awareness is imperative. Not only should the person in charge of the KLE have access to a cultural advisor but he should also know the basics of the culture he is working in. What may seem like a small detail can be vital when you are trying to build a relationship and by knowing the culture the most common pitfalls can be avoided. Hence, pre-deployment training needs to include cultural awareness training for those who are about to go on a mission.

I emphasised that careful preparations, including rehearsals, are of essence. It is crucial to consider what one wants to gain from a specific engagement and also prepare key messages to convey to the key leaders. Media/Intel training can be a good way of practicing statements and minimising the risk of deviating from planned courses of actions. However, preparing the KLEs is a time-consuming process that requires input from many persons and functions.

Considering the amount of effort each KLE requires, it is important to prioritise, synchronise and document all KLEs. The AARs from the KLEs are fundamental to create continuity over time. ATA experience has suggested the importance of archiving all those engagement AARs in an Engagement Matrix.

It may require many long meetings to accomplish a goal. That is why patience is also of essence. The engagements must be allowed to take time and discussions must be allowed to sometimes deviate from the agenda without causing frustration – because that is part of the process.

The study has shown that there is very limited literature available on KLE. The meaning of KLE is not universally understood and KLE is not fully developed within doctrines, neither in NATO nor in Romania. There are also differences in opinions regarding what KLE is. In retrospect, I may realise that some of the engagements that I prepared the LTT pack for, were not KLEs, but should probably be classified as common meetings or regular liaison/cooperation. However, I strongly believe that a KLE should be developed, updated, planned and executed in accordance with the means, ways and capabilities and that cooperation is perfectly integrated into KLE process.

Although more research is needed, I can conclude that the rightfully used KLE is a valuable component of C2 that the Naval Forces commanders can apply in the naval multinational operations, but also could be a high valuable tool for all continuously self-educated leaders as part of the resilient leadership process.

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