

No better friend, no worse enemy: How different organisational cultures impede and enhance Australia's whole-of-government approach

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Since 1999, Australia has increasingly deployed the military in joint, combined, interagency environments as part of a 'whole-of-government' approach. Despite some successes, a number of barriers between the contributing agencies continue to interfere with attempts to synchronise disparate elements of national power into a unified national effort. The paper examines these barriers through the lens of Australian operations in Timor-Leste, the Solomon Islands and Afghanistan to determine how these barriers can be overcome and strives to broaden institutional perspective for members of the civil-military-police community.

The paper concludes that incompatible organisational culture is the most significant impediment to Australia's whole-of-government approach but argues that some differences in organisational culture provide the whole-of-government approach with its greatest strength. Differences in organisational perspective offer diversity in thinking, challenges the status quo, prevents groupthink and leads to superior outcomes. By raising awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of different organisational cultures in interagency operations, practitioners and planners will be better placed to overcome the impediment of different organisational cultures and instead leverage them to better synchronise the application of the national power.



Since the end of the Cold War, Australia and her close allies have intervened in conflict and disaster-affected states with increasing frequency.¹

Addressing the complex problems presented by these environments has required more than military force; it has demanded the full range of diplomatic, information, military and economic instruments of national power to deliver national strategic objectives.² The evolution of this 'whole-of-government (WoG)' approach over the past 20 years³ represents a shift in philosophy from the sequential to parallel application of national power to achieve national strategic endstates in overseas interventions. In Australia's case, the 2012 National Security Strategy and the 2013 Defence White Paper indicate that this trend is likely to continue.⁴

Australia's experience of WoG operations overseas has shown that a number of barriers between the contributing agencies interfere with attempts to synchronise disparate elements of national power into a unified national effort—particularly at the operational level. This paper will focus on

impediments to the success of Australia's WoG approach to operations that have been conducted in response to conflict or humanitarian assistance contingencies. After describing Australia's WoG approach and its success criteria, the paper then examines the key barriers to achieving success: incompatible organisational culture and structural impediments. The paper concludes that incompatible organisational culture is the most significant impediment to a successful WoG approach to operations but also argues that a degree of cultural difference between the agencies that contribute to WoG bodies is critical to a successful WoG approach.

Australia's WoG approach

Over the past 20 years Australia has pursued greater integration of diplomatic, economic and military elements of national power to address complex international missions. Deployments now comprise multiple specialist agencies rather than the military alone. 5 Australia's then Minister for Defence Science and Personnel Warren Snowden explained the rationale behind this approach in 2008, saying that Australia's response to future challenges would require 'a broader WoG approach—not just a military commitment to address the underlying causes of violence'. Minister Snowden was not alone in this assessment, and his opinion was echoed in the United States of America when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that '[America's] future military challenges cannot be overcome by military means alone, and they extend well beyond the traditional domain of any single government agency or department.7

Parallel with Australia's adoption of the WoG approach, implementation of similar approaches has occurred internationally—Canada incorporated the '3D' approach of 'Defense, Diplomacy and Development' within their national security policy;8 the United Kingdom adopted the 'Comprehensive Approach',9 and the United States established its Interagency Conflict Assessment Tool. 10 Critics of the WoG approach (and similar approaches of other nations), such as Frank Ledwidge in his book Losing Small Wars and Major General James Hunt in his article 'The 800-Pound Gorilla and Stability Operations', assert that the approaches actually have little value, that the approach is not a new development; they are generally written by one agency (often the military) with only a modicum of consultation afterwards, and that they overemphasise the process of cooperation rather than focus on achieving a meaningful national strategy.11

The goal of Australia's WoG approach has been defined as 'public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to international natural disasters and complex emergencies'. 12 Doctrinally, the Australian Defence Force recognises the WoG approach as one way in which to act collectively with other organisations in order to implement a 'comprehensive approach', the others being 'whole of nation' (including Australian industry and community) and 'whole of coalition' (including foreign partners and allies). 13 Historically, a WoG response in overseas interventions has drawn heavily on capabilities from the ADF, Australian Federal Police (AFP), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and Australia's intelligence agencies. An important distinction is that Australia's WoG definition excludes agencies that are not part of the Australian government itself. For this reason, although important, the particular barriers to collaboration between the WoG body and non-government organisations (even when acting as implementing partners on behalf of WoG agencies) are not considered in this paper.

Before examining impediments to the WoG approach it is necessary to define WoG success. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs describes coordination between agencies as existing on a spectrum from co-existence to cooperation (See Figure 1). Coexistence is merely de-conflicting activities and minimising competition while cooperation is meaningful collaboration, focusing on effective and efficient combined efforts. This paper asserts that a successful WoG approach is therefore not necessarily one that has the 'most' coordination (i.e. seamless cooperation) but rather an approach that is mature enough to provide a tailored solution—an architecture that provides the appropriate amount of coordination between agencies depending on their relative contributions and mandate on any given operation. Hence a successful WoG approach identifies a number of objectives for each agency which link the tactical effects into coherent WoG operational milestones to achieve national strategic ends. Finally, a WoG approach is successful if it achieves the strategic endstate provided by government. It is possible, however, for the strategy to be wrong. Empirical success of a mission is a complex interplay between the WoG mission and myriad other actors: the host nation, adversary groups, local populations, non-government organisations and many others. For this reason this paper concentrates on factors that impede a successful WoG approach, but does not conflate this with an examination of whether the mission itself was ultimately 'successful'.

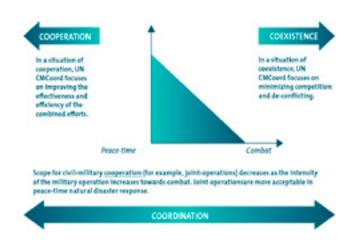


Figure 1 United Nations Spectrum of Coordination¹⁴

Impediments to the WoG approach

A number of impediments to the success of Australia's WoG approach to operations exist, undermining the effective synchronisation of the various instruments of national power into a unified national effort. The impediments to a successful WoG approach presented by cultural and structural differences between agencies manifest themselves differently at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. What those impediments are and their relative importance are viewed differently by different agencies, but common factors include a lack of a unifying national political direction and strategic narrative; a lack of permanent WoG institutions; the different agendas and mandates for respective agencies; organisational culture; and a lack of incentives to collaborate between agencies. 15 These themes can be broadly categorised as cultural and structural. This paper will address both categories in turn. Importantly, these factors are interconnected, in that structure is influenced by culture. Moynihan and Landuyt, writing recently about the linkage between culture and structure in public organisations, posit 'that bridging the cultural and structural perspectives requires treating them as connected and interdependent factors'. 16 Culture, in turn, is influenced by structural factors such as an agency's size, mandate and traditions.

Culture is the 'framework by which we view the world around us'. 17 and for both individuals and organisations it is a learned and shared behaviour that describes how we interact within our communities, regardless of their size. 18 Organisations develop their own cultural characteristics and can be said to possess an inherent organisational culture, which dictates how each will interact internally

with its members but also with other organisations and therefore presents both threats and opportunities for interagency cooperation within a WoG approach. As new members enter an organisation they undergo a process of 'socialisation' where they learn through both formal and informal mechanism what acceptable practice within the new organisation is. Organisations perpetuate their culture by recruiting and promoting individuals whose character traits align with the culture of the organisation. This creates the emergence of a dominant personality type which, when combined with the organisation's inherent culture, can create impediments to WoG cooperation. ¹⁹ Edgar Schien, in his seminal work *Organisational Culture and Leadership* describes organisational culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.²⁰

An organisation will thus develop a 'unique culture that is [shaped] by its [shared] structure, history and policies'.21 Organisational culture manifests itself in seven ways: innovation and risk taking, attention to detail, outcome orientation, people orientation, team orientation, aggressiveness and stability. 22 These differences in organisational culture create barriers to effective collaboration and reinforce agency differences rather than promote common goals. For example, when individuals are faced with cultural barriers in a new WoG organisation (into which they have not yet been socialised) they tend to find comfort in, and revert to, the normative culture of their parent agency. 23 Furthermore, the organisational culture of a contributing agency can permeate 'the deployed environment as civilian staff are organised according to each department's preferences and priorities'.²⁴ Examples of this include the continued demand by the parent agency for the continued use of domestic 'approval and reporting requirements' in a deployed environment. A second problem arises with agencies' insistence on tailored packages with respect to pay and conditions (such as deployment length and discipline standards). This reinforces the strong cultural link to domestic departments and imposes different standards between individuals from contributing agencies in a WoG approach. ²⁵ This reluctance to integrate horizontally between the various WoG departments inhibits the degree to which collaboration can be achieved, can lead to vertical 'stovepipe' reporting to parent agencies, and engenders distrust of other agencies in the WoG organisation. Schien asserts that individuals will 'resist ... change because we will

not want to deviate from our group'. ²⁶ The net result can be an adverse effect on the desire of some agencies to engage with others, to share information, to participate in planning and contribute to a unified effort. This is likely to remain the case until the shared structure, history and policies of the new WoG organisation are adopted by its members, 'unfreezing' or displacing their loyalty to their former organisation. ²⁷

Three aspects of incompatible organisational culture—different organisational language, different approaches to hierarchy, and incompatible processes—present particularly acute impediments to the success of the WoG approach.

First, agencies have a common lexicon which facilitates communication internally but which can confound outsiders. The ADF, for example, places a strong emphasis on institutional indoctrination and reinforces a common language through extensive and structured professional development in common processes and doctrine. This results in a vernacular that is extraordinarily impermeable to those who operate outside the military. The same is true for other agencies such as the police—although all agencies develop their own vernacular over time. The military's emphasis on jargon is driven by the extensive use of a common lexicon and doctrine 'to facilitate effective communication even in conditions of crisis [and may] not necessarily [be] conducive to WoG operations ... '28 In contrast, civilian agencies are generally more heterogeneous, in that they 'recruit laterally ... [offer] dissimilar training ... with less [structured] professional development' and therefore have a wider language with fewer 'terms of art'.²⁹ An example of 'a people divided by a common language' is the different meaning of the word 'security' within different organisations.³⁰ Security is a term used frequently in complex operations by different agencies, but may refer to a military over-watch position to protect installations, a reliable food or water supply for a village, or the freedom to pursue one's livelihood.31 This paper argues that language aids in the transmission of information and binds organisations together. Conversely, it can be a significant barrier to a successful WoG approach through ostracising those who have a different understanding of the language, which impedes horizontal integration throughout the WoG body.32

Second, cultural differences with respect to hierarchy impede a successful WoG approach. This can be observed by comparing the ADF's hierarchically orientated structures with those of other agencies. In the ADF, unity of command is sought over all actors within an assigned area of operations—this is accepted as one of the 'principles of command'. ³³ In contrast, other government departments foster less rigid structures and place greater reliance on

collegiate decision making.³⁴ For example, even though agencies such as the ADF and AFP 'appear quite similar, adopting ... uniforms, hierarchical rank and command structures' there are significant differences in their cultural approach.³⁵ Police favour consensus, negotiation and conflict management, '[exercising] autonomous responsibility at all levels, with accountability through the law to the community'.³⁶ This contrasts with the military approach of allocating responsibility in a hierarchical manner with accountability through the chain of command as it serves as an instrument of national power.³⁷ Differing cultural approaches to hierarchy is one of the significant differences between militaries and civilian departments and is a contributing factor to a clash of organisational cultures that can impede a successful WoG approach.

Third, the problem of ensuring the success of the WoG approach is intensified by differences in internal organisational processes. Shanahan identifies that 'the ability to synchronise the efforts of different government agencies that come from entirely different and separate operating cultures, answering to different ministers and with their own funding lines, will not be easy to achieve'. 38 For example, due to the ADF's mission and culture, 'institutional processes remain optimised for warfighting and only ad hoc amendments are made to adjust [for the differing demands] of peace support operations'.39 The result is that the ADF is predisposed to focusing on a mission as dialectic, and has a tendency to reduce problems to relatively binary propositions (victory/defeat, enemy/friendly), often at the expense of understanding the complexity of the issues from the perspective of an affected population or other government agencies.40

An example of different processes that impede a successful WoG approach is the different cultural approaches to planning by different agencies. On the one hand, the ADF's large size allows it to execute operations while retaining a residual capacity to prepare military plans for future operations. This duality is essential in an organisation with a wide range of capabilities, held at high states of readiness for rapid expeditionary deployment. These factors, when combined with its complex structure, require detailed deliberate planning to orchestrate its many disparate parts. 41 In the ADF, planning is conducted hierarchically, with missions and tasks cascading downwards from planning activities undertaken by superior headquarters. The ADF uses the Joint Military Appreciation Process (JMAP), a tailored and highly doctrinal assumption-based planning tool to produce highly detailed plans with defined endstates.42

On the other hand, other agencies do not possess the same need for deliberate planning as the ADF, nor are they optimised (or expected) to deploy quickly.⁴³ Indeed, as they are often optimised for running 'day-to-day' operations, they do not have the capacity—nor perhaps the requirement to adopt a deliberate planning tool for future operations. Certainly, the creation of the AFP IDG and the raising of the Australian Civilian Corps (ACC) provided some deployable capability, but their internal planning processes remain relatively immature when compared to the ADF. Due to their requirement to seek 'bottom up' solutions based on humanitarian need or localised emergency situations,44 these agencies adopt a more reactive planning approach than the military. For this reason, although they are often far more nimble in their response to individual events, they do not have the capacity to support decision makers of large organisations (such as WoG bodies) with the appropriate degree of support in planning and execution of current and future operations in the deployed environment. Furthermore, agencies such as DFAT's Australian Aid plan with an entirely different philosophy. In their case, needsbased assessments of humanitarian requirements drive their planning. They often have longer planning horizons, understand better the need to work with implementing partners, and strive not just to return a community to normalcy, but increase its resilience to human security issues in the future. For example, the approach taken by military organisations as they plan and conduct reconstruction with the aim of returning a conflict or disaster-affected nation to 'normalcy' contrasts with that of development agencies' emphasis on addressing underlying vulnerability to conflict or the catastrophic impacts of disasters, the so called 'build back better' approach. 45 These different cultural predispositions, in addition to the different processes and philosophies used in planning, can be a cause of frustration and friction amongst parties in a WoG body. This can result in disconnects in the planning and implementation of overseas disaster response and recovery initiatives, and inhibit the achievement of WoG objectives.

Strengthening the WoG approach through organisational diversity

If harnessed productively, the difference in organisation culture—the different language, hierarchy and processes—has the potential to provide the WoG approach with its greatest strength. Degrees of difference exist on a spectrum; homogeneity of culture and structure, even if possible, is not desirable. Some degree of difference allows strategic

and operational tailoring of WoG effects and strengthens the WoG approach to overseas operations.

As the United States 9/11 Commission noted, 'favouring the use of one [agency] while neglecting others ... result[s] in a weakened and vulnerable national effort'. ⁴⁶ Different organisational cultures allow different perspectives and analyses to be conducted, potentially identifying threats and opportunities that would otherwise be discarded. The three principal benefits of bridging different organisational cultures is that it can align organic, hierarchical and external actors to overcome the vertical stovepipe of information; presents opportunities to integrate the parallel application of national power across the tactical, operational and strategic domains; and can minimise 'groupthink'.

Irving Janis's concept of groupthink is defined as a 'mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action'. 47 Some of the contributing factors to groupthink that Janis identified were that groups only considered a few courses of action, had selective cultural bias in selecting information and a disinclination to seek external opinion. 48 The different organisational cultures and perspectives present within the WoG approach, if correctly harnessed, appear likely to overcome some of these factors. Different agencies have the ability to provide unbiased feedback that may challenge the group decision makers to make better or more informed choices and contemplate second and third order effects. 49 Thus, different organisational cultural can strengthen the outcomes of a WoG approach.

Apart from organisational culture itself, it is asserted that the second key barrier to the achievement of a successful WoG approach is structural, in that existing structures tend to reinforce agency differences, rather than similarities. Historically, Australia has tended to address impediments to WoG collaboration by formalising structures and practices for coordination at the strategic level. Initial forays were focused on coordination between ministerial portfolios on domestic policy issues. The domestic WoG approach is illustrative of this interagency collaborative approach taken by coordinating bodies such as the Council of Australian Governments, the Protective Security Coordination Centre, the National Counter Terrorism Committee and Emergency Management Australia's Crisis Centre whose task is to facilitate WoG responses to domestic issues and emergencies. 50 These collaborative approaches were then followed by structural changes to enhance the domestic cohesion of the WoG approach to foreign policy objectives.⁵¹

Recent developments have included the establishment of the Australian Civil-Military Centre, the AFP's International Deployment Group, and the Australian Civilian Corps (ACC).⁵² Punctuating these developments have been policy statements that have reinforced the centrality of the WoG approach. These include the 2008 Australian National Security Statement, the 2012 National Security Strategy, and the 2009 and 2013 Defence White Papers.⁵³

Unlike these permanent institutions established at the strategic level to facilitate WoG coordination, no permanent operational level WoG body exists. Efforts have been made to exchange liaison officers at the operational level, but it is important to distinguish between the functions of liaison⁵⁴ and that of a true collaborative WoG approach to planning and operations.⁵⁵ It is argued that current arrangements achieve the lesser goal of agency 'co-existence'—allowing deconfliction and information sharing between agencies—rather than full cooperation and collaboration, the ultimate goal of the WoG approach.

However, that is not to say that the WoG approach has been unsuccessful at the operational and tactical level. The WoG approach adopted during the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) illustrates that the WoG approach can be highly successful at the tactical, operational and strategic level with the truly integrated WoG approach from Honiara to Canberra.⁵⁶ Australia's WoG approach in RAMSI has been praised by a RAND Corporation report as to 'the extent to which the military, police, aid organisations, and foreign affairs organisations cooperated in addressing what they agreed to accomplish and constraining themselves to those areas'.57 This coordination has arisen through the efforts of individuals who 'despite their different organisation cultures, [have been] forced to work together to solve a common problem',58 but these efforts are not durable—they exist only so long as the individual relationships which support them last, nor were they employed in Australia's subsequent deployments to Timor-Leste in 2006 and Afghanistan in 2010.59

The lack of a standing operational level WoG body⁶⁰ means 'that in practice the military...dominate and often overwhelm the civilian partners due to differences in numbers, absence of a common language, process, procedures and actions'.⁶¹ This practice can further inflame existing inter-departmental tensions, particularly with respect to reinforcement of the stereotype of the military as an '800-pound gorilla' that dominates WoG planning and implementation.⁶² Australia's experience of the WoG approach has for the most part (RAMSI being the exception) conformed to the

practice described by Major General H R McMaster of the US Maneuver Center as being predominantly a military-led activity with a 'sprinkling of interagency pixie dust'. Yet, for the complete adoption of an ideal WoG approach, the military should be prepared to not necessarily lead or dominate the WoG approach, but rather should be a component of a larger plan.

Other countries have recognised that the lack of operational level coordinating body is a significant structural impediment to the WoG approach. In 2004, the United States established a Joint Interagency Coordination Group (JIACG) as a fulltime multiagency planning group at the operational level to achieve successful interagency planning⁶³ and the United Kingdom, although also lacking a standing WoG body at the operational level, has at least attempted to compensate by adopting a common interagency doctrine.⁶⁴ This doctrine mitigates some of the structural impediments to cooperation, contributes to the rapid establishment of robust ad-hoc WoG bodies when required, and increases the likelihood of a successive WoG approach to operations. 65 In contrast, the Australian government has 'consciously eschewed the concept of a standing body to coordinate interagency offshore deployments',66 and still lacks the common operational-level doctrine to coordinate the disparate activities of its various agencies.

Australia has made significant inroads with respect to improving structural impediments, particularly at the strategic level. However, as argued by Baumann, in her work on civil-military cooperation, 'attempts at improving cooperation tend to focus only on the most visible problems' (like structure and computer systems) without addressing deep-seated cultural and philosophical challenges that linger below detection.⁶⁷ Even if the structural impediments at the operational level were completely resolved, incompatible organisational culture would still impede the WoG approach. The different approach to language, hierarchy and processes lead to organisations manifesting different cultural values that can impede the WoG approach. Organisational culture is the biggest impediment to a successful WoG approach to operations. The differences in organisational culture enliven the tribal dimension of social identity theory—where groups focus more strongly on differences between macro tribal 'in groups' and 'out groups' rather than similarities. 68 This impedes the success of a WoG approach to operations. However, perhaps due to the small relative size of Australia's agencies and its scale of deployments (compared to other Western nations) or the 'pioneering character in which actors [have] adapt[ed] to each other's idiosyncrasies',69 have overcome the impediments to a successful WoG approach by the 'partnerships [between] military officials and

diplomats that have established and facilitated [productive] working relationships and allowed both sides to benefit from one another's strengths'.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Recognising the limitations of a purely military response, Australia has increasingly employed a WoG approach to operations to apply the instruments of national power in concert to complex overseas contingencies. Australia, along with its international partners in the WoG spectrum, has seen a sharp increase in the frequency of such interventions over the past 20 years. Institutionally, a generation of future military and civilian leaders have experienced the benefits of the WoG approach. In addition, structural changes at the strategic level have addressed systemic issues in Australia's WoG coordinating mechanisms and resulted in the enhanced deployable capabilities for AFP and DFAT.

This paper has examined the impediments to Australia's approach to WoG operations overseas in response to conflict or humanitarian assistance. It has explored how the goal of synchronising elements of national power towards a unified WoG effort is impeded by organisational culture and structural factors that manifest themselves differently at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. While significant progress has been made at the strategic level, this has not cascaded to the operational level. At this level, a clash of organisational cultures and the absence of a permanent WoG body remain critical impediments to a successful WoG approach to operations. The paper concludes that incompatible organisational culture is the most significant impediment to Australia's WoG approach but argues that some differences in organisational culture provide the WoG approach with its greatest strength. Differences in organisational perspective offer diversity in thinking, challenges the status quo, prevents groupthink and leads to superior outcomes.

Australia's WoG approach is certainly not perfect, but has steadily improved over the past two decades. With continuing efforts to institutionalise training, awareness, structures and processes at sub-strategic levels the approach will continue to strengthen as operational and tactical level relationships become more habitual. Greater participation in the WoG environment, particularly at the operational level will enhance trust between departments, improve communication and provide greater opportunities to overcome the impediment of different organisational culture and allow further synchronisation in the application of the national power.

About the author

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He has completed a Masters in Military and Defence Studies, a Masters of Business Administration, and is currently completing studies in Terrorism and Security Studies. He graduated from the Australian Command and Staff College in 2013 and was the recipient of the Principal's Prize. In his civilian career, he is employed by the Queensland Police Service as a Senior Sergeant and is a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australian Civilian Corps as a Stability and Recovery Specialist.

The views expressed here are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Australian Army, the Australian Defence Force or the Australian Government.

Endnotes

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