Hemispheric-Level Experience and Education Enables Solutions to Complex International Problems

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Abstract:

Whether man-made or natural, complex problems facing the countries of the Western Hemisphere are challenging. They transcend national boundaries and affect countries differently. Bureaucracy appears to exacerbate them. Moreover, government-developed solutions are often ineffective and require a resource commitment level that burdens the taxpayer. Because a solution optimized for one country is not often as functional in another, effective solutions for complex international problems require the coordinated and synchronized efforts of all of the countries impacted by the problem. International problems require international solutions, and individuals with a hemispheric perspective to problem-solving are better able to develop those solutions. Service with, and education from, a hemispheric-level organization contributes to the cognitive and experiential development of the kinds of individuals who can then create solutions to complex international problems.

Resumen:

Independientemente de que sean de origen humano o natural, los problemas complejos que enfrentan los países del Hemisferio Occidental constituyen grandes desafios que trascienden las fronteras nacionales y afectan a cada país de forma diferente. Las burocracias aparentemente contribuyen a empeorar la situación. Se estima, además que las soluciones formuladas por los gobiernos suelen ser ineficaces y requieren dedicar un nivel de recursos que imponen una carga excesiva a los contribuyentes. En vista de que una solución óptima para un país no siempre resulta ser tan funcional en otro, la formulación de soluciones eficaces para

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enfrentar problemas complejos requiere esfuerzos coordinados y sincronizados de todos los países que sufren del impacto del problema. Los problemas internacionales requieren soluciones internacionales, y aquellas personas que contribuyen una perspectiva hemisférica a la resolución de los problemas son más capaces de formular estas soluciones. Una trayectoria de servicio y educación en una organización hemisférica contribuye al desarrollo de conocimientos y experiencias de todo tipo de individuos que a su vez pueden crear soluciones a problemas complejos a nivel internacional.

Keywords: Hemispheric-level education; complex international problems; multinational task forces; Inter-American Defense College; cognitive bias

Palabras claves: educación a nivel hemisférico; problemas complejos a nivel internacional; fuerzas de tarea multinacionales; Colegio Interamericano de Defensa; sesgo cognitivo

International Problems

International problems are complex problems; they often meet the classical definition of "wicked problems" in that they require more than one solution.² An effective solution in one country may not necessarily be effective in another country—requiring the development and implementation of multiple solutions to the problem. Hemispheric-level experience and education enable the cognitive and experiential development of individuals who are postured to create effective solutions to the complex international problems facing multiple countries.

The International Environment

Natural disasters, trans-national organized crime, and pandemic disease are some of the complex challenges facing the hemisphere. These are complex problems because each of them transcends national boundaries and affects more than one country. With increasing

² Melvin M. Webber and Horst W. J. Rittel, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (Jun 1973).

globalization, the impact of these complex international problems is significant. Their economic, social, or destructive impact may reach levels that challenge governance. The increasing prevalence of natural disasters illustrates the scope of complex international problems.

In 2017, there were 335 documented natural disasters that adversely affected over 95.6 million people at an economic impact of US \$335 billion. Ninety-three of these disasters occurred in the Americas, and 136 occurred in Asia.³ Among those disasters were several categories four and five hurricanes. The United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) was responsible for organizing the support that the US Department of Defense provided to civil authorities in response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria. The clustering of these successive hurricanes presented a complex problem to the hemisphere because of the magnitude of their impact.

These hurricanes struck multiple locations in ways that placed strain on the whole of government response and brought to light several shortfalls. One of the notable shortfalls was a need for tailored response plans for each of the locations struck by the hurricanes.

³ Regina Below and Pascaline Wallemacq, *Natural Disasters 2017* (Brussels: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), 2018), https://cred.be/sites/default/files/adsr 2017.pdf.



Figure 1. Clustering of Hurricanes Katia, Irma, and Jose on 8 September 2017 (NOAA/GOES-16). Prior to the date of this photograph, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas on 25 August 2017.⁴

At the time of the onset of these hurricanes, NORTHCOM employed a base comprehensive response plan designed to provide defense support to civil authorities (DSCA) wherever the need may occur within the United States. The standard procedure is to use the base plan as a foundation, and modify it according to the unique characteristics associated with the areas affected by the disaster. For example, in the case of the 2017 hurricanes, the base plan was updated for use in Texas for Hurricane Harvey. Similarly, the intent was to modify it for Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and possibly Jose before they made landfall in Florida, Puerto Rico, or the US Virgin Islands. The available time between the hurricanes, however, was not sufficient for deliberate planning. Therefore, response planning for island support was hasty.

NORTHCOM discovered that the complexity of the response planning was very straightforward

⁴ National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NESDIS), "GOES-16 Sees Three Hurricanes in the Atlantic," NOAA Environmental Visualization Library, September 7, 2017, https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/content/goes-16-sees-three-hurricanes-atlantic.

for the effects of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma within the continental United States, but was significantly different for support to Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.⁵

Had NORTHCOM chosen to employ it "as-is," the same response plan that was updated and developed for Texas and Florida would not have been effective in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. Due to their isolation, the islands required a completely different response plan. In other words, although the same hurricanes affected multiple locations, the impacts of those hurricanes were different in each location. Moreover, since the infrastructure was different in each location, the logistical support necessary for the operational response was also different. Consequently, the government-developed response plans to mitigate those effects had to be different for each location.

NORTHCOM based their support to civil authorities in Texas and Florida from the land and aerial domains. In contrast, they based their support from the maritime domain for the response efforts in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. They were not able to use the aerial domain to provide support until the infrastructure on the islands regained a 24-hour operational capability. Thus, the development of one overarching and universal solution to the problem of a cluster of category four- and five-level hurricanes affecting multiple locations was not possible. The reality was this: civil authorities required defense support that was different and tailored for each location. NORTHCOM would not have been able to solve this complex problem had they tried to apply a single solution that worked for one location at each of the locations.

Other governmental agencies involved in the response experienced similar challenges in their planning. The general response plan that the Department of Health and Human Services

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⁵ Joseph C. Bonnett, *Norad and USNORTHERN Command 2017 Hurricane Season After Action Report/Improvement Plan* (Training and Exercises, US NORTHERN Command. Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado: Directorate of Training and Exercises, 15 July 2018).

(HHS) developed was sufficient for Florida and Texas but was insufficient for Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. A different plan for medical support was required for the islands. The same phenomenon occurred with respect to the restoration of critical infrastructure, such as power. The general response plan was sufficient to govern power restoration on the mainland. Power restoration on the islands, however, presented altogether different challenges and required a different plan.

In the case of the hurricane response, the assumption that broad plans would be universally applicable in all states and territories led to latency in the whole of government disaster response. As such, the island and territory response was not enough given the degree of human suffering, damage to infrastructure, and lengthy recovery time.

Hurricanes Katia, Irma, Jose, and Harvey showed the fallacy of assuming that it is possible to develop a general solution to a complex problem that affects multiple states and territories. In the United States, the geographic challenges across the 54 states and territories are different. It should make sense, therefore, that a general plan would not be effective in every state and territory. In the case of the 2017 hurricanes, planners would have benefitted from recognizing that the response to multiple successive hurricanes on both the mainland and the island territories was a complex problem; one that would require multiple solutions.

The response and recovery associated with a hurricane affecting multiple locations differently is not a new problem. It should not have been a surprise to planners. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch resulted in a regional disaster across Central America where a tailored response

⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Testimony on Hurricane Response before the Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 115th Congress (2017) (testimony from Robert Kadlec, M.D., Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

⁷ Carlos L. Yordán, "US Army Corps of Engineers' Power Restoration Strategy for Puerto Rico Post-Maria," *Centro Voices*, 20 February, 2018, https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/current-affairs/us-army-corps-engineers%E2%80%99-power-restoration-strategy-puerto-rico-post.

was necessary for each of the affected counties. Although it struck all of Central America, the impacts were different in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize. Government authorities, at that time, identified a need for regional coordination of response and recovery efforts. They also noted the complexity of the response and the fact that what was effective in one country was not as effective in another. Hurricane Mitch could have served as an observation, insight, or lesson-learned to the response planners for the 2017 hurricanes. Planners could have benefitted from a hemispheric perspective; lessons from Hurricane Mitch were re-observed in 2017.

Whether the complex disaster is a fire, an earthquake, or a pandemic infectious disease that transcends political boundaries, an effective response requires a tailored solution for each area affected by the problem. While a response plan for one country may inform the plan of another country, to be effective, each country requires tailored plans that account for their unique political, geographic, and economic conditions. It takes a multi-lateral perspective to develop these kinds of plans.

Trans-national organized crime is another example of a complex international problem that affects countries differently. Like natural disasters, the prevalence of trans-national crime involving drugs, terrorists/special interest aliens, weapons, human trafficking, and money is increasing. Unlike natural disasters, however, trans-national crime involves the added challenge of an adaptive and a thinking adversary, and countries are expending a tremendous amount of resources to try to solve it.

⁸ François Grunewald, Veronique de Geoffrey, and Sarah Lister, *NGO Responses to Hurricane Mitch: Evaluations for Accountability and learning*, Network Paper 34 (London: Humanitarian Practice Network; November 2000), https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/542.pdf.

The nature of trans-national organized crime is complex, and countries view the problem differently. For example, in the case of the drug problem between the US and Mexico, the United States desires Mexico's assistance to reduce the supply and flow of drugs. Mexico desires the United States to reduce both its demand for drugs as well as the flow of money and weapons into their country. From the US perspective of the problem, drugs flow into the United States from the supplier to the point of demand. From Mexico's perspective, weapons and money flow from the point of demand to the supplier. Therefore, a solution optimized for the United States would not necessarily work for Mexico. In other words, focusing solely on the supply and demand for drugs without consideration of the illegal flow of weapons and money does not solve the problem from Mexico's perspective—a perspective that also considers that many aspects of the drug distribution originate outside of their country from Central and South America.

The Merida initiative, created in 2007 between the US and Mexico sought a partnership to address trans-national organized crime. Over time (2011-2017), the initiative evolved to encompass four pillars; combatting trans-national criminal organizations, the rule of law/human rights, border security, and resilient communities. ¹⁰ In an effort to address these problems regionally, the initiative also includes an anti-crime assistance package to both Mexico and Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Although regional in focus, the agreement, and its evolution, is largely bi-lateral between México and the United States. Its effectiveness in Central America has not been particularly noteworthy. It has generated some successes, but despite the fact that it has existed for more than a decade, trans-national crime has

⁹ Topher L. McDougal, David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah, and John H. Patterson. *The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic across the U.S.-Mexico Border* (University of San Diego Trans-Border Institute: San Diego; Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé Institute, 2013). http://catcher.sandiego.edu/items/peacestudies/way_of_the_gun.pdf.

¹⁰ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Mexico: Evolution of the Merida Initiative*,

2007-2019, by Clare Ribando Seelke, IF10578, Version 12 (2019).

not lessened significantly. The Merida initiative shows that even bilateral solutions are often insufficient against complex hemispheric problems.

A complete solution to the complex international problem of trans-national crime requires the consideration of the concerns of all countries affected. Synchronization and coordination between all affected countries is necessary to solve international problems, and one must address the whole problem in order for a solution to be effective. Considering a complex international problem only from the unilateral perspective of a single country is not likely to result in an effective solution.

A Compelling Need

Whenever a complex problem crosses territorial or bureaucratic boundaries, there are seams and gaps that can be exploited by an adversary. At the very least, if there is not an adversary, these seams and gaps add latency and further complexity to government-developed response actions. If there is a weakness in coordination between countries, either the adversary may take advantage of it, or the response action itself is not as effective as it potentially could be. Additionally, in the case of trans-national organized crime, should several countries succeed in coordination and synchronization, the adversary may shift to a place where there is less cohesion and synchronization. Countries affected by the problem must coordinate with each other to be able to solve it. Otherwise, there will be critical gaps and seams in the government-led responses that may actually further complicate the problem. Thus, a single country attempting to solve a complex international issue alone is not likely to be successful. Similarly, in the case of a pandemic infectious disease, should a country not collaborate, it may gain a toehold in a place that did not implement the appropriate measures as effectively as was done in other places.

Cooperation on health issues, however, is a positive example of an area where there has been a success in the development of hemispheric solutions. Thirty-five countries of the Americas, for example, collaborated on the response to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. This collaboration and coordination from all countries affected by the pandemic enabled preparedness, prevention, response, and treatment. Similar successes exist with the coordinated preparation and response of the Pan American and World Health Organization to the Zika Virus. Close and agile collaboration at a global level enabled detection, prevention, support, and research. Although not eradicated, Zika has not spiked to the levels of an uncontrollable pandemic crisis. Although some challenges exist, these two examples of pandemic infectious disease serve as a positive example of the results that arise when planners employ hemispheric-level collaboration and multiple tailored solutions to address these complex problems.

The fact that complex international problems transcend national boundaries and that a solution for one country might not work for another country calls for a different approach to problem-solving. Further, the fact that a solution developed for a complex problem within one country may not properly address the aspect of the problem that is manifest in another country, underpins the requirement for multiple solutions. Solutions to complex international problems must address each of the different characteristics that manifest in each of the affected countries. A problem solver who employs a single unilateral approach is unlikely to be successful.

Strategic leaders who are capable of solving "wicked" complex international problems are those who are capable of considering them from an international or a hemispheric-level

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¹¹ Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). *Response to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in the Americas: Lessons and Challenges.* (Meeting summary, Miami: PAHO, 2009).

¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "The 2009 H1N1 Pandemic: Summary Highlights, April 2009-April 2010." CDC. June 16, 2010. https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/cdcresponse.htm

¹³ Margaret Chan, Zika Strategic Response Plan (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016).

perspective. They are able to realize when a problem requires more than one solution. They are able to recognize that all affected countries need to collaborate on these solutions. As the number and scope of complex problems increase, there is a compelling need to educate and develop individuals who, through their experience or education, are capable of solving complex problems. Somehow, problem solvers must recognize that they are dealing with something complex and that more than one solution is necessary. An isolated, single agency or unilateral perspective does not lend itself to this realization.

Experiential Development of Hemispheric-Level Problem Solvers

Exposing individuals to hemispheric-level organizations is an effective way to gain the experience necessary to be able to view problems from an international or hemispheric-level perspective. It enables people to realize that a problem may be complex and require more than one solution. These organizations conduct planning, operations, and exercises—all of which enable individuals to learn the strengths, capabilities, and perspectives of others in collaboration toward a common objective. International organizations include multi-national task forces like the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S), regional security organizations like the Inter-American Defense Board, or political organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS).

Participation in multi-national taskforces like the JIATF-S is notably effective in gaining the experience necessary to be a hemispheric problem solver. This multi-agency organization includes partner countries from across the hemisphere and addresses the challenges of transnational organized crime in the maritime and air domains. In JIATF-S, several countries in

the hemisphere work together to address a common problem—drug-related crime.¹⁴ People who serve in the JIATF-S plan and conduct hemispheric-level operations. Upon completion of their assignment, they leave with a hemispheric perspective to problem-solving. Perhaps, when they view problems thereafter, it will be with a heightened hemispheric perspective.

Participation in international exercises and combined joint task forces enables individuals to consider solutions to problems through an international lens. This vital and experiential-based approach is invaluable. In addition, there is also a cognitive approach to developing hemispheric-level problem solvers.

The Cognitive Development of Hemispheric-Level Problem Solvers

Participation in case studies, hemispheric-level tabletop exercises, and formal education is a way to develop, cognitively, individuals who can address hemispheric-level problems. Case studies allow individuals to analyze observations, insights, and lessons learned. Tabletop exercises allow the cognitive exploration of a solution to a problem without a large material resource expenditure. Formal education from hemispheric-level organizations is a means of inculcating knowledge that leads to the development of skills and abilities.

The Inter-American Defense College educates individuals to become strategic leaders in Inter-American defense and security. Its baseline of international faculty, staff, and students provides a foundation for the consideration of complex problems from an international perspective. Its ties to the OAS and the Inter-American Defense Board ensure that it delivers a curriculum that is constantly relevant, and that it addresses the issues of the hemisphere from the

¹⁴ "Joint Interagency Task Force South," U.S. Southern Command, updated 3 Jan 2019, http://www.jiatfs.southcom.mil.

perspective of the hemisphere. Individuals trained at this organization leave it with an ability to analyze complex problems from a hemispheric perspective.

Another way to develop hemispheric-level problem solvers is to participate in international conferences, seminars, and workshops that include interagency participants.

Conferences that addresses a theme of concern to the hemisphere, with full participation from the hemisphere, enables the consideration of problems from all perspectives. Participants are able to better identify nuances and develop solutions to the complex problem.

The Benefit of Hemispheric-level Problem Solving

The experience of working and studying alongside others from throughout the hemisphere builds trust that also crosses national boundaries and is critical for effective problem-solving at the hemispheric level. It forges relationships. It facilitates communication. It makes collaboration possible. It aids in both the identification of solutions and the enabling of operations.

Considering complex problems from a hemispheric perspective is more likely to generate effective solutions because it also limits the potential for cognitive bias, like the illusion of validity. When one country tries to solve a complex international problem alone, the primary focus often tends to be that aspect of immediate concern to the country itself. Focusing on only one country's concern does not solve the complete international problem since the focus is only on one country. By not including the aspects affecting the other countries in the solution set, the full complex problem remains unsolved. The country's belief that the optimal solution it has

developed for the problem it faces is the correct one for the complete problem is, in fact, in the classical definition illusion of validity—a cognitive error.¹⁵

For example, the United States consistently tries to solve the drug problem by focusing on the interdiction of supply, and the reduction of consumer demand. It has done this for decades and has been unable to solve the drug problem. Although many believe that a combination of supply and demand reduction is a good strategy, its lack of effectiveness suggests influence by the cognitive bias of the illusion of validity.

Over the years of following this strategy, various administrations consistently overestimated their ability to interpret and predict an outcome based upon their analysis of the pattern of trafficking and consumption data—the classical definition of the illusion of validity. They invested billions of dollars in a decades-old problem that does not seem to be going away. Perhaps, the strategy has not been as successful as it otherwise might have been because it does not address all aspects of the complex problem from the perspectives of all of the affected countries.

Conclusion

The benefit of investing in the development of leaders through hemispheric-level experience and education helps ensure the consideration of broader perspectives when solving complex problems. It helps people recognize that the problem they are trying to solve may be complex, requiring the synchronized and coordinated application of multiple solutions. The enduring principle is that a universal solution for a complex problem may not be effective, and that international problems require international solutions. Similarly, a hemispheric perspective

¹⁵ Hillel J. Einhorn and Robin M. Hogarth, "Confidence in Judgment: Persistence of the Illusion of Validity," *Psychological Review* 85, no. 5 (Sep 1978).

is necessary to solve hemispheric problems. Attaining a hemispheric perspective requires hemispheric education or experience which, in turn, enables the development of solutions to complex international problems—a wise investment.

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