Improving Non-Lethal Targeting in COIN

By 2LT Ian Strebel

"The control of information is strategically decisive in counterinsurgency."[1] Information is the main weapon that insurgents use to gain the vital support of the populations in which they operate. In many cases information control is nothing more than portraying certain events in a calculated way. It may include spreading propaganda, twisting facts or blatantly spreading untruths. While this type of information control is necessary and is employed by both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, it is reactive in nature.   Winning a counterinsurgency requires a proactive approach to information control. This is achieved by knowing and understanding what the local populations are thinking and feeling, and then using non-lethal targeting to exploit that information.

As the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, it becomes more and more apparent that non-lethal targeting is often more effective than lethal targeting in COIN operations. "Killing every insurgent is normally impossible. Attempting to do so can also be counterproductive in some cases…Dynamic insurgencies can replace losses quickly. Skillful counterinsurgents must thus cut off the sources of that recuperative power. Some sources can be reduced by redressing the social, political and economic grievances that fuel the insurgency."[2] There are two relatively untapped sources of intelligence collection that if used correctly can help achieve the goal of isolating the insurgents from the local population: Open source intelligence (OSINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT).

"Open sources possess much of the information that we need to understand the physical and human factors of the operational environments in which we conduct or may conduct military

operations."[3] The main problem is that open source intelligence is usually collected at division

level or above. The end result is that a company or battalion commander operating in a smaller

area of operation gains little applicable knowledge for their region. If COIN operations were

being conducted in the United States, for example, watching CNN or reading *The New York

Times* would ultimately provide very little information for a commander operating in Seattle,

Washington.

Having local patrols increase their collection of public documents can be a solution to

this problem. Patrols should engage in consistent collection, especially of local newspapers,

magazines and leaflets. They should also vary the time and locations of collection to avoid

setting patterns. Books, leaflets, magazines, maps, manuals, marketing brochures, newspapers,

photographs, public property records, and other forms of recorded information are examples of

useful public documents that provide valuable information about operational environments.[4]

Analysts should identify which public documents have the ability to provide the best *local*

intelligence. While *The New York Times* is available in Seattle, it will not be as valuable to the

commander there as *The Seattle Times* or other local papers.

A potential problem associated with the increased collection of public documents at the

lower echelons, especially in a foreign environment, is the lack of linguistic support in many

units. While this is a consequence of a linguist shortage within the U.S. military which cannot

be addressed here, utilizing linguists from the brigade SIGINT and human intelligence

(HUMINT) platoons to only translate headlines or main bullet points from the documents would

be a possible solution. Translating headlines or bullet points from public documents will reduce

the amount of time that translators spend on each document while still providing the main idea

behind the article. Analysts can then determine if certain topics merit a more in-depth translation based on their commander's priority intelligence requirements.

In addition, while SIGINT is currently being used almost exclusively for lethal targeting, it could be also be very effectively employed in non-lethal targeting. A typical SIGINT linguist may spend his whole eight to twelve-hour shift looking for lethal targets and force protection issues. To help commanders identify non-lethal targets, SIGINT linguists should be directed to reallocate one or two hours of their shift in collecting and transcribing communications which meet the commander's local intelligence requirements. The hours of collection and other SIGINT variables must be randomized to ensure that this collection does not target a specific group but rather gathers information from a representative cross-section of the populace.

Commanders may direct SIGINT platoons to collect on a specific event or area in support of non-lethal targeting operations. Examples include: "What do people think about the new sheikh?; Are there problems with the water system?; Do people trust the local security forces?; Etc." The advantage of focusing collection in this manner is that it allows the linguists to sift through more traffic because they can focus on key words rather than the whole message. This yields an increase in information fulfilling the commander's intelligence requirements. However, whenever SIGINT collection is focused on either lethal or non-lethal targeting, the commander should be aware that intelligence not currently in focus will be missed. This problem requires the commander to properly balance the SIGINT collection priorities to meet lethal, force protection and non-lethal targeting needs.

In disseminating and analyzing SIGINT collection, analysts should combine translated documents and SIGINT reporting into categories that reflect areas of local concern to the populace. These areas should be assessed as to their importance and impact on local operations. SIGINT reporting should be used to confirm or deny reporting in public documents. Public documents should also be assessed to determine if the publication accurately reflects local concerns or is being used to influence public opinion. The final report should include recommendations to the commander compiled from this information. For illustration purposes, a potential final product for a commander conducting hypothetical COIN operations in Seattle, WA would appear as follows:

Success in counterinsurgency operations requires a proactive approach in controlling information that can be used to isolate insurgencies from their base support within the local population. When commanders optimize their OSINT collection and SIGINT resources to meet their priority intelligence requirements, they are able to effectively extinguish the insurgencies' resources before they can be employed. Reallocating assets in this manner will allow commanders to better identify and execute local, non-lethal targeting operations.

[1] Nagl, John A. Foreword. Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice. By David Galula. Westport. Praeger Security International. 2006. Ix.
[2] Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency. Headquarters, Department of the Army. 2006. 1-23.
[3] Field Manual Interim 2-22.9: Open Source Intelligence. Headquarters, Department of the Army. 2006. 1-1.
[4] Field Manual Interim 2-22.9: Open Source Intelligence. Headquarters, Department of the Army. 2006. 2-5.

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