Counter-IED Strategy in Modern War

Captain David F. Eisler, U.S. Army

Captain David F. Eisler, U.S. Army, was the leader of the counter-IED cell for the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Zabul, Afghanistan (OEF X-XI). He previously deployed with the regiment to Diyala, Iraq, in 2008. He holds a B.A. from Cornell University.

PHOTO: U.S. Army SPC Glenn Escano, right, speaks with an Iraqi police officer while conducting a sweep for improvised explosive devices along the Baghdad-Diyala Highway in Baghdad, Iraq, 4 October 2009. (1LT Josh Risher, U.S. Army)

IN THE YEARS since improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became symbols of asymmetric warfare and modern military conflict, very little has changed in the realm of counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) strategy. The military is always searching for better vehicles and equipment to defeat what is, at its core, a homemade device made for a fraction of the cost of our technological countermeasures. As a result, C-IED strategy has primarily focused on developing new ways to mitigate the effects of an IED blast rather than trying to prevent it from occurring. Billions of dollars have been spent in the name of saving lives, yet the true cause of the problem and its origins remain largely ignored, leaving out the crucial role played by population-centric counterinsurgency operations.

The Nature of the Problem

When elements of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment arrived in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, in July 2010, they faced an area of operations that had seen constantly increasing IED activity for several years in the same spots along Highway 1, an important maneuver corridor running from Kandahar City to Kabul. Casualties quickly mounted as IEDs with large net explosive weights detonated on convoys and route clearance vehicles, destroying even the largest of their kind. The insurgents had the propaganda victory they sought by obliterating American "tanks," and security forces were scrambling to stop the bleeding and maintain freedom of movement.

Initial counter-IED plans sought to facilitate the relief in place between two Romanian battalions conducting operations along the highway. Conceived as a means to deter enemy IED emplacement, the plan was simple—flood the engagement areas with security forces, occupy established checkpoints, and maintain near constant surveillance to interdict any attempted insurgent activity on the most dangerous sections of the road. A combined arms approach integrated route clearance platoons with organic maneuver units to patrol the highway. Improvised explosive device activity decreased rapidly despite insurgent attempts to exploit the seams of units' battle spaces and emplace IEDs in the least-patrolled and least-overwatched areas.

The mission was considered a success. The Romanian battalions were able to conduct their transfer of authority, and overall insurgent IED activity on the previously lethal sections of the road remained mostly low or ineffective, even during the usual summer fighting surge in southern Afghanistan. The presence of security forces along the highway decreased in favor of operations in other areas, and the IED threat was believed to be mostly pacified.

Yet, the IEDs never really went away. A few months later, in the period leading up to the provincial elections in September, new engagement areas were steadily appearing just outside the previously established boundaries of the first operation. By November, the same sections of the road had re-emerged as the most dangerous routes in the area of operations as over 1,500 pounds of homemade explosives detonated in the course of only a few days. With the arrival of spring in 2011, IED activity resumed in the same areas it had taken place during the previous three years. Initial suppression operations had succeeded in temporarily relieving the pressure, but failed to address the true source of the IED problem–the pervading influence and support of a homegrown local insurgency.

Security and Influence

The first step for any counterinsurgent is to secure the population against the intimidation and influence of the insurgency. Doctrine (and conventional wisdom) argue that the surest way to accomplish this is by establishing a persistent partnership with local security forces and living among the population. Merely conducting weekly visits and key leader engagements with local elders and officials may provide insights into governance and development issues, but they achieve few lasting effects unless the people feel safe.

Because both sides of a modern asymmetric conflict must continuously vie for the support of the local population, the counterinsurgent can develop a baseline security assessment of an area by tracking reports of insurgent activity against civilians. In this case, distinguishing between active anti-civilian and passive anti-civilian activity is critical. Active anti-civilian activity can include intimidation, forced taxation, and isolation through the emplacement of mine or IED obstacle belts that limit the population's freedom of movement. Clearly, counterinsurgents cannot engage in such activity because it would lead to a complete loss of popular support and bring a swift end to their efforts. Insurgents, on the other hand, may use these tactics to increase their control and influence in a given area. Popular support need not be given happily, but it must be at a level to ensure that the influence of government security forces and the people's desire for economic and essential services aid never outweigh their fear of insurgent retribution or punishment. As an example, there have been cases in which the Taliban senior leadership replaced insurgent commanders because they were thought to have been too harsh on local civilians and therefore a threat to the insurgency's popular support.[1] The most successful insurgent commanders know to use intimidation only when necessary to maintain their control of the people.

Consequently, areas experiencing limited insurgent intimidation are more likely to be insurgent-dominated support zones than areas with higher numbers of reports, especially in places with a significant International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) or Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) presence.

In this regard, the term "freedom of influence" is introduced in order to more precisely define the variable that the insurgents use to control the population. Whereas freedom of movement describes the ability of a maneuver element to project combat power at a chosen time, space, and purpose, freedom of influence reflects the capability of the insurgent or counterinsurgent to engage with and directly affect the local population's attitudes, opinions, and perceptions.

In the situation described earlier, although ISAF and ANSF security forces were able to maintain their freedom of movement by conducting disruption and interdiction operations along Highway 1, the insurgents held their freedom of influence on the population in the surrounding villages. This

…areas experiencing limited insurgent intimidation are more likely to be insurgent-dominated…

led to a continuously accessible support zone just outside the operational boundaries and focus of friendly security patrols. The early positive effects they achieved did not translate into lasting security gains, leaving the next rotation of units open to the same dangers as before.

Measuring Success

In a field replete with numbers, statistics, metrics, and assessments, defining a true measure of success for C-IED operations and strategy is difficult. The standard model tends to weigh heavily the number of IEDs found and cleared by security forces against the number that detonate. The underlying assumption is that an increased percentage of IEDs found and cleared means that insurgent forces are less effective with their IED emplacements, and that friendly forces have adapted to enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Further analysis looks at the rate at which the percentage of cleared IEDs increases or decreases, which measures how quickly friendly forces are adapting to changes in insurgent tactics (or, conversely, how slowly the insurgents are changing their tactics to match the counterinsurgents' countermeasures). Another way of looking at the problem is to assess the effectiveness of IED detonations by determining how many IED strikes damage vehicles or cause casualties. However, most of these methods are better for identifying contested areas rather than assessing a district's overall security because IED activity will typically mirror any increased presence of security forces.

Additional methodologies of quantitative and qualitative data analysis attempt to track overall security trends at both a provincial and district level. Unfortunately, most of these are defined in terms of counterinsurgent activity rather than that of the civilian population. For example, a "route status matrix" provides commanders with a graphical depiction of freedom of movement on primary and secondary roads based on recent IED activity (normally an aggregate set against ISAF and ANSF patrols) as well as deliberate clearance operations conducted by engineers and route clearance platoons. However, this matrix does not consider freedom of movement of local traffic, which could present a vastly different picture if an insurgent has decided not to limit the security forces' freedom of movement but rather to maintain his own freedom of influence by placing obstacle belts between the population and the roads.

U.S. Army soldiers train for IED detection in Baghdad, Iraq, 4 October 2009.

(1LT Josh Risher, U.S. Army)

The metric perhaps least reminiscent of classic and modern counterinsurgency doctrine is tracking the number of high-valued individuals (HVIs) killed or captured in raids or direct attacks. Those classified as HVIs are normally senior insurgent military commanders or shadow government leaders with influence within the Taliban. They are rarely, if ever, low-level insurgents actually conducting the attacks. Such individuals are considered expendable and easily replaceable.

Yet throughout the last several years, insurgent networks have grown increasingly larger and more interconnected. Finding an irreplaceable leader or personality has proven nearly impossible. Little quantitative data exists to support the hypothesis that HVI targeting operations have any measurable long-term effect on levels of insurgent activity; their operations may slow down or even cease after they lose a key leader or explosives expert, but it is only a matter of time before the void is filled and operations resume. Treating the symptoms does not cure the disease.

However, one metric may effectively measure security gains in the Afghan counterinsurgency conflict and modern asymmetric conflict in general, particularly at the local or district level—IEDs turned in or reported by civilians. In these instances, a local national provides unsolicited information to ISAF or ANSF forces that leads to the discovery of an IED or its components. Care must be taken to distinguish an unsolicited tip from that of a paid informant or source. While an informant may provide potentially reliable information, there have been cases of sources intentionally emplacing weapons or explosive materials themselves and then leading security forces to the cache site simply to collect a monetary reward.

The importance of an IED turned in by a civilian comes from the direct interaction between that person and representatives of the government, particularly if the device is turned in to the Afghan National Army, police, or local governance centers. A local population willing to point out the locations of explosive materials could indicate security gains in that area, especially if the area already has a high level of insurgent IED activity. The more the people feel that the government can protect them and provide better stability than the insurgents, the greater the stake they have in their own security against insurgent intimidation. Similar developments led to the beginning of the highly successful Sunni Awakening and the Sons of Iraq program in late 2006, as well as the onset of the Afghan Local Police program in 2010.

The most successful C-IED operations nest within counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine. They do not focus on the devices themselves, but on the population. A company-sized element that moves into villages adjacent to a primary IED engagement area and remains there for an extended period, habitually interacting with the villagers and conducting key leader engagements, should begin to see security gains in the form of local national tips and turn-ins. In some cases, a lack of available maneuver units can limit combat power for such operations, forcing commanders to attempt to cover large areas and reducing the number of possible engagements with the people. However, in the end, a continuous presence somewhere is better than a fleeting presence everywhere. As the people begin to believe that the security will be lasting and not just temporary, they are more likely to provide intelligence and turn against the insurgency.[2]

An area with a large ISAF presence, and consequently an increased amount of violent activity, but with no increase in IEDs turned in is cause for concern. Villages with a higher number of turn-ins likely feel more connected to their government and security forces and are more willing to take a direct stand against the insurgency. Conversely, low turn-in areas may fear intimidation and retaliation for assisting security forces and would rather hold their tongue and remain isolated than fight back. In that case, the insurgent influence in the area is probably strong enough that the people fear the repercussions of cooperating with the government more than

they seek its protection. Special attention should be paid to IED events within a short distance of a village, since the people in the village likely knew something about the device and its emplacement, but were too afraid to say anything. These events are far too common and must be countered by comprehensive counterinsurgency operations.

Each explosive detonation against ISAF or ANSF is a psychological victory for the insurgency, demonstrating the weakness of the government and its inability to provide security and stability for its people. The government must convince the people, especially their influential community and religious leaders, that the insurgency poses the greater threat to their villages and people. All too often, the sporadic presence of security forces in an area leads to a rapid spike of activity in response, conditioning the people to associate the government with increased violence.

An Iraqi police officer bags evidence while participating in an improvised explosive device exploitation search during a two-week training course run by Task Force Nassir at Combat Outpost Cashe North, Iraq, 13 February 2010.

To actively engage the population and garner support against the insurgency, the counterinsurgent must overcome this mindset.

Separating the people from the influence of their government is one of the primary objectives for an insurgency in order to maintain its influence over the population free from outside intervention. Afghanistan expert Seth Jones notes that "by threatening the population, the insurgents give individuals a strong rationale to refuse or refrain from cooperating with the indigenous government and external actors."[3] Successful counterinsurgency operations must aim to defeat this insurgent influence.

The first step in that process is security; a population can never have faith in its government if it is not trusted to provide even basic protection. A periodic presence will not suffice, since the insurgents can (and usually do) wait until a patrol has left the area to aggressively counter any positive relations and reclaim their control of the people. Only persistent security during the initial stages of operations can set the conditions to tip the balance of support in favor of the government and away from the insurgents.

Separating the Insurgent, Attacking the Network

Successfully securing the population will lead to the separation of the insurgent, as the insurgency requires the support of the people to survive. One of the key advances in modern counterinsurgency has been the application of biometric and forensic intelligence to catch an elusive enemy capable of blending in with the population. Biometric enrollments have become part of campaign plans, and the addition of law enforcement personnel and trained explosive ordnance disposal technicians has provided units with increasingly more information about the construction and origins of IEDs through their detailed post-blast analysis. Separately, biometrics and post-blast analysis each provide invaluable intelligence unavailable to previous generations of counterinsurgents, but their benefits become even more evident when combined.

Conducting independent biometric enrollments is an excellent way to build a database of citizens but by itself does not separate the insurgent from

the population except in certain rare cases.[4] Similarly, comprehensive post-blast analysis provides a wealth of information about IED construction and composition, often including fingerprints and other biometric data found at the scene of an event, but ends short of positive identification. Although latent fingerprints can be matched to others found in different events, they provide little information about the actual person emplacing or constructing the devices.

When biometrics and post-blast analysis merge, they have the capability to truly separate the insurgent. Fingerprints recovered from IED materials in one area can be linked to a specific person enrolled somewhere else, painting a more detailed picture of the device's origin and defining the insurgent network more clearly. Such success depends on training units to treat each IED event not as an impediment to maneuver that they need to breach or clear, but as a legitimate crime scene with valuable forensic evidence available to catch the perpetrator and identify his supplier.

Education for indigenous and coalition security forces as well as the local population is paramount to understanding how both biometrics and post-blast analysis can be used to isolate the insurgents from innocents, identifying those who act against the interests of the people and the government. A robust biometrics and forensics program should be at the forefront of any "attack the network" strategy because it can link explosive events to their locations on the battlefield and potentially provide the identity of those responsible. Developing a picture of these low-level insurgent networks is the key to understanding the origins of the explosive devices and identifying the supply chains that support them.

Ultimately, the true goal of biometrics and forensics is to develop the rule of law through the host nation government and judicial system. Evidence collected from explosive materials or post-blast analysis can help convict criminals in local courts. Warrants and arrests are the direct result of a concerted effort by ground units in partnership with indigenous security forces to conduct a thorough investigation of an event rather than clearing the scene and moving on to the next objective. The gratification may not be as instant as catching an insurgent in the act, but the long-term effects are considerably more beneficial.

Despite the potential advantages of quickly enrolling an entire population into a biometrics database, care must be taken to ensure that indigenous security forces take the lead in all biometrics operations to avoid the perception of continuous foreign intervention and the systematic cataloguing of local citizens. More direct action on the part of ISAF forces runs the risk of aggravating the very population they mean to protect, while host nation forces can build relationships with the local civilians while conducting a legitimate census. This has the added benefit of engaging many communities that traditionally do not see a regular ANSF presence. Although biometrics collection is an important element of C-IED strategy, it should not come at the expense of alienating the people.

Attacking the network through a concerted evidence and biometrics collection effort is an integral aspect of C-IED strategy, yet it must complement rather than substitute for counterinsurgency operations. Understanding the difference between actively targeting insurgent nodes and indirectly eroding their support and influence through the population is important. While analyzing insurgent TTP and attack methods will certainly provide valuable information to ground units conducting operations, it does not eliminate the source of the threat. A constantly evolving game of spy-versus-spy only circumvents the issue, showing no signs of ending as both insurgent and counterinsurgent vie for the tactical upper hand.

Final Thoughts

Military strategy in Afghanistan has scarcely changed since the early days of hunting the Taliban in 2001. Even today, we place more emphasis and attention on targeting operations designed to crumble insurgent networks than on population-centric counterinsurgency. Improvised explosive devices are considered a lamentable byproduct of the insurgent's general unwillingness to engage in direct action. Technological advances continue to flow into theater to guard against increasingly sophisticated and dangerous threats that, in spite of the new technology, continue to injure and kill soldiers and civilians.

Both of these methods—targeting and technology—are essentially defensive and reactive in nature. Even operations against Taliban leaders and facilita-

(CPL Michael Augusto, U.S. Marine Corps)

A U.S. marine uses a portable two-way radio to call in a possible improvised explosive device during a training exercise at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan, 20 February 2011.

tors seek to reduce insurgent capability to conduct attacks, their success measured in complicated slides, graphs, and charts arranged in whatever way best represents progress. IEDs are simply the weapon of choice to support the insurgents' political cause, facilitating consolidation of power and influence from within the population.

Although counter-IED strategy is a microcosm of counterinsurgency, our intelligence and operations groups sometimes treat it as a separate function, preferring to develop new methods to defeat the device (or its intended effects) rather than understand it. The tools needed to effectively neutralize IEDs as a battlefield threat will not be found in technological systems or equipment, nor in killing insurgent leaders, but rather in building relationships with the people who have become the battleground for all modern military conflicts. Their silence speaks as loudly as the next explosion. *MR*

NOTES

1. Anand Gopal, "The Battle for Afghanistan—Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar," New America Foundation, November 2010, 27.

2. See for example the Canadian's experience in Kandahar in 2009; Carl Forsberg, "The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar," The Institute for the Study of War, December 2009, 52.

3. Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, *RAND Counterinsurgency Study: Volume 4* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 49-50.

4. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 1964), 82.