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Countering the improvised explosive devices threat¹

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Australian Defence Force Counter-IED Task Force

The improvised explosive device (IED) has become an enemy weapon of choice in the urban guerrilla warfare being waged against coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Australian Defence Force has formed a counter-IED task force to study this development and to devise counter measures. In this paper, the nature of the threat is explained and actions being taken to counter it are outlined.

Introduction

Coalition Force operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years have featured a new form of asymmetric warfare, with insurgents often attacking vehicles and targeting dismounted patrols with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Footage of Coalition Force soldiers targeted in the attacks is also readily available on easily-accessible websites, as insurgents use the internet to gain support and quickly disseminate news of their successes. Compared to conventional weaponry, IEDs are relatively cheap and easy to use – instructions on how to make and employ these weapons are circulated easily. In an era when Coalition Force personnel face adaptive and resolute enemies, the IED has emerged as an enemy weapon of choice. Globalisation and technological advances allow the enemy to communicate with increasing ease and to transfer information and knowledge faster than ever before, leading to increased use of IEDs.

While IEDs are not a new phenomenon, their increased deployment over the past few years has compounded an infinitely more complex type of warfare which is taking place in an urban environment, often amongst the civilian population. The insurgent 'blends in' with non-combatants and is not easily recognisable. General Rupert Smith has summarised this succinctly, saying that our adversaries now are 'of and amongst the people'³. Supporting this definition of irregular warfare, it is becoming evident that conventional armies are being targeted by resourceful enemies who use classic insurgent tactics and cheap IEDs for strategic effect in order to weaken Western willpower.

IEDs have various definitions – at times they are considered to be mines, booby traps or other items of ordnance. The agreed North Atlantic Treaty Organisation definition, to which Australia also subscribes, is: "A device placed or fabricated in an improvised manner, which incorporates destructive materials designed to destroy and harass"⁴.

Like many other nations, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) recognised the potential for Australian casualties from this type of insurgent warfare and that there was a continuing trend in modern warfare towards the use of a networked, asymmetric model. In mid-2006, the ADF formed a dedicated Counter-IED Task Force to better understand the growing trend of insurgent and terrorist use of IEDs as a tactic of choice across the globe. The Counter-IED Task Force is comprised of military, scientific and intelligence experts, many of whom have served in combat zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Specific individual skills include explosive ordnance disposal, ammunition technical officer, clearance diving and intelligence.

IEDs – a global threat

IEDs are likely to remain a significant enduring threat to coalition forces. It is generally agreed that the emergence of the IED in recent years as a weapon of choice for insurgents has resulted in operational surprise for many conventional military forces. Despite the past experiences of the British in Northern Ireland and the Israelis in the Lebanon, the ramifications of widespread use of IEDs have only recently become fully appreciated by many other military forces. IEDs have become by far the largest cause of Coalition Force casualties in the Middle East and, as a consequence, there has been significant 'catch up' in expenditure by many nations in an effort to pursue counter-IED structures and technologies. For Australia, this has meant that the ADF has had to 'test and adjust' in its approach to the counter-IED battle. It has focused largely on prevention and protection against the device, better training of our forces and discreetly attacking the IED networks. While the ADF quickly devoted resources to the problem, there still is much to be done to harness all synergies of the Australian Defence Organisation to its solution.

Versatile, adaptive and creative enemy

In Iraq, mobile phone initiation of IEDs has been common and future IED threats could well involve expanded-frequency radio-controlled IEDs. As well as the ongoing exploitation of advanced technology, it is expected insurgents will continue to employ low-technology 'tried and true' methods, such as old-fashioned 'Vietnam era' command-wire and pressure-plate IEDs, to counter

¹This paper is based on an address to the Institute on 29 April 2008 by Brigadier P. D. Winter, CSC, Commander ADF Counter-IED Task Force, which was attended by 90 members and guests.

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³General Sir Rupert Smith (2005). *The Utility of Force – the Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin Books Ltd: Great Britain).

⁴Military Dictionary: <http://www.answers.com/topic/improved-explosive-device> [downloaded 25 March 2008].

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