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TARGETING IN OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (AFGHANISTAN, OCTOBER 2001 - MARCH 2002): HARMONIZATION OF DISCIPLINES AND CAPABILITIES

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JCSP 40

Exercise *Solo Flight*

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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Armed Forces doctrine defines targeting as:

> … the process of selecting and prioritizing targets and matching the appropriate response to them, taking into account operational requirements and capabilities. This process consists of the selection and evaluation of legitimate targets followed by the selection of the means (munitions-based or non-munitions-based) to be used to achieve the effects desired.[1]

Targeting, by its very nature, is a joint endeavour. In joint targeting, effective participation of multiple disciplines and systematic target engagement are best achieved through the harmonization of disciplines and their associated capabilities. As per U.S. doctrine, there are four principles of joint targeting, as follows:

1. The targeting process is **focused** on achieving the JFC's objectives.
2. Targeting is concerned with the creation of specific **desired effects** through target engagement.
3. Joint targeting is a command function that requires the participation of **many disciplines**.
4. The joint targeting cycle seeks to create effects through target engagement in a **systematic** manner.[2]

To scope this paper, I will focus my discussion exclusively on principle numbers 3 and 4. In demonstrating the concept of optimal harmonization, I will discuss this in the context of irregular warfare (IW) during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF)

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[1] Department of National Defence, Canadian Forces Joint Publication, CFJP 3-9 Targeting 1st Ed. (Ottawa: Strategic Joint Staff, 12 December 2014), online: http://cjoccoic.mil.ca/sites/_resources/CFWC/Index/JD/CFJP%20-%20PDF/CFJP%203-9/CFJP%203-9_%2012%20December%202014.pdf: vii.

[2] U.S. Department of Defence, Joint Publication 3-60, 13 April 2007, Joint Targeting, online: https://www.aclu.org/files/dronefoia/dod/drone_dod_jp3_60.pdf.: I-8. Canadian Targeting Doctrine articulates five principles of targeting, which reflect those articulated in U.S. doctrine with the exception that Canadian doctrine includes the added principle of "legitimate" targets (*Ibid.*, 1-5).

(Afghanistan October 2001 – March 2002). While this operation was multi-national in nature, my paper will focus solely on the U.S. as the principal player.

During OEF, the U.S.' harmonization of disciplines and capabilities was pivotal to its success in its targeting campaign. It achieved this by effectively coordinating, integrating, and synchronizing its available resources, notably its ISR, SOF, air power, advanced technology and weaponry, information operations (IO), and battle assessment metrics.[3] The importance of this harmonization was illustrated by the following quote:

> If there was anything "transformational" about the way Enduring Freedom was conducted, it was the dominance of fused information over platforms and munitions as the principal enabler of the [targeting] campaign's success … That new dynamic made possible all other major aspects of the war, including the integration of SOF with precision-strike air power, the minimization of target-location error, the avoidance of collateral damage, and command from the rear … Thanks to real-time imagery and increased communications connectivity, the kill chain was shorter than ever, and target-attack accuracy was truly phenomenal.[4]

While the U.S. achieved much success in its targeting during OEF, the early stage of OPERATION ANACONDA demonstrated how sub-optimal harmonization of disciplines (in this case, the lack of inclusion of air power support for the American and friendly forces on the ground) can have devastating results.

IRREGULAR WARFARE (IW)

To achieve success in IW, it is important that we understand the enemy whom we are fighting and to custom-tailor our targeting campaign accordingly. While we benefit from technological advances in many areas, our challenge in IW is how to use our superior technology to effectively battle against insurgents and extremist groups whose

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[3] While the engagement of other disciplines, such as legal and logistics, provided an important role to targeting, in an effort to scope this paper, I will not be discussing these disciplines.

[4] Benjamin S. Lambeth, Air Power Against Terror – America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom, online: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG166-1.pdf: xxix.

style of warfare we often cannot comprehend and whose actions are not constrained by the international treaties and laws that bind us. Targeting is challenging in IW because the strategic centres that we conventionally bomb may not be available, insurgents may blend into the civilian population and they use terrorist tactics that fall outside the laws of war (e.g. suicide bombings; shielding themselves amongst civilians or in places of sanctuary such as hospitals and mosques/churches). In an operation such as OEF, the insurgents have dissimilar fighting strategy and tactics; thus, it may be challenging to gather intelligence (INTEL) on the location and activity of targets.

USE OF ISR IN TARGETING DURING OEF

For OEF, the U.S. had the following strategic end states: to overthrow the Taliban government so that Afghanistan would not provide a safe haven for terrorists, and to decimate al-Qaeda. To achieve this, the U.S. needed to effectively plan the simultaneity and continuum of targeting operations such that they related the targeting plans on the battlefield to the operational objectives in order to achieve the strategic ends.

Targeting and ISR go hand-in-hand; the effectiveness of the former is directly dependent upon the reliability and timeliness of the INTEL received, such as the insurgent's strengths/ weaknesses (e.g. personnel numbers; capabilities; location); the geographical terrain; the situation on the ground regarding local public support of the Taliban government and al-Qaeda forces.

In conventional warfare, at all levels, the U.S. has focused on sophisticated technology in the areas of ISR, fighting platforms, weaponry, etc. While a technologically advanced approach to INTEL gathering worked during the Cold War, the U.S. needed to modify its approach IOT achieve success in OEF. The U.S. innovatively

resorted to less sophisticated human intelligence (HUMINT) gathering techniques wherein it positioned its Special Operations Forces (SOF) on the ground in Afghanistan, working with host nation (HN) forces, for the purpose of identifying, tracking, and locating key insurgent targets.

With SOF providing an invaluable HUMINT resource, the U.S. expertly integrated advanced ISR technology for gathering INTEL on the insurgents' whereabouts. Such technology included UAVs, which were used to spot and provide real-life imagery of insurgent activity on the ground, and the Rivet Joint electronic intelligence fleet, which was used to jam radio frequencies and to intercept insurgent radio communications to locate the insurgents and their activities. Through its advanced technology, the U.S. elevated its targeting campaign to a new level because it was able to collate and synchronize INTEL from the broad spectrum of its recce assets including SOF's HUMINT, UAVs, fast forward air controller aircraft, and JSTARS. *"This improved connectivity enabled constant surveillance of enemy activity and contributed significantly to shortening the kill chain."*[5] *"Global communications connectivity and the common operating picture that was made possible by linking the inputs of UAVs and other sensors enabled a close partnership between airmen and SOF units and shortened the time from identification to successful target attacks."*[6]

USE OF SOF IN TARGETING DURING OEF

Due to the harmonization involved, there was a synergistic relationship between SOF and air power. The unique employment of SOF proved to be a highly effective force enabler to air power by providing invaluable HUMINT on the location of al-Qaeda and

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Operation Enduring Freedom: An Assessment, Research Brief, RAND Corporation, online: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9148/index1.html.

Taliban targets, including strategic leadership targets, and calling in timely air strikes. In turn, air power supported SOF's effort on the ground, engaged with HN Commanders in their battle against the insurgents. Air power's fire support was critical in the absence of conventional American ground troops.

Throughout OEF, SOF, with their specialized skills and small team sizes, were highly capable of operating within a spectrum of conflict, shifting between unconventional and conventional warfare. SOF served the vital roles of preparing the battleground in Afghanistan, and providing an effective tactical force in support of the host nation (HN) commanders. SOF best accomplished this through their establishment of observation posts for the purpose of calling in air strikes against visually acquired Taliban/al Qaeda targets, as well as conducting airborne and air assault operations. SOF's ability to call in air strikes, even in the absence of friendly forces in direct contact with the enemy, *"was a unique air-land partnership that featured unprecedented mutual support between allied air power and ground-based SOF teams."*[7] This was arguably *"[t]he greatest tactical innovation of the war."*[8] The combination of SOF's HUMINT skills and precision air weaponry achieved highly effective results on the battlefield for the HN commanders, while minimizing both fratricide and collateral damage. The synergistic relationship of SOF and air power, in the absence of conventional ground troops, was a unique and pivotal feature in the U.S. operational approach to IW.

USE OF AIR POWER IN TARGETING DURING OEF

At the commencement of OEF, the air campaign concentrated on the establishment of air superiority wherein the USAF and the USN directed their bombing

[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Ibid.

and strike efforts at strategic targets, e.g. identified leadership targets, air defence assets such as airfields, and key communication facilities. Once air superiority was achieved, the focus of the air campaign shifted, continuing to bomb leadership targets, e.g. training locations, but now also striking at war-fighting assets on the battlefield, enroute insurgent convoys, and important logistical sites, e.g. ammo and fuel storage facilities. As previously mentioned, precision air power significantly enabled SOF and the indigenous friendly forces on the ground in their battle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Finally, the U.S. expanded its air campaign's bombing to target mountain caves, where Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters hid in an effort to protect themselves.

For the air campaign, the U.S. employed the loitering bombardment technique rather than the kill box technique that was utilized during the Gulf War. The former technique helped curtail collateral damage and fratricide of their SOF and friendly forces on the ground, two very important strategic objectives. Additionally, this technique offered the best chance of pinpointing the location of the insurgents' mobile and hidden surface-to-air missile sites.

The USAF and the USN were highly successful in their targeting efforts primarily because they were provided vital and accurate real-time target INTEL from their recce assets, including HUMINT from SOF and indigenous friendly forces, imagery from the UAVs, and communication intercepts. Advanced communications systems, notably data-linking technology, were arguably a force enabler for air power by rapidly amalgamating instantaneous INTEL from a plethora of mediums and, in so doing, minimized the kill chain. This, combined with precision air weaponry, was critical to striking/bombing key

targets that were mobile. The following quote captures the essence of the harmonization of disciplines and capabilities for successful air power:

> What distinguishes Enduring Freedom from previous campaigns, in effectiveness, was the effort put by the USAF into targeting. The combination of USAF F-16C Fast FACs, USN F-14D Fast FACs and the vital ground FAC teams, supported by Army Special Forces, all working in concert with Rivet Joint electronic intelligence gathering aircraft and recce UAVs, provided the necessary real time and near real time flow of targeting information required to put the bombs on target.[9]

USE OF ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY AND WEAPONRY IN TARGETING

A challenge in IW, such as OEF, is how to operationally and tactically employ advanced technology and weaponry to optimize targeting against an unsophisticated enemy, whilst also minimizing collateral damage and fratricide. The U.S. demonstrated how it effectively employed its SOF personnel in an unsophisticated HUMINT role, e.g. riding on horseback with the HN Commanders and using binoculars to site insurgent locations; how it used its Rivet Joint electronics to jam radio frequencies forcing the insurgents to use a limited number of frequencies which the U.S. could then intercept; and how it employed its advanced assets, e.g. its recce devices, its communications equipment, its precision weaponry.

Of the U.S.' recce assets, armed Predator UAVs proved invaluable in the targeting campaign because they were both an ISR asset and, when required, a combat platform. As an ISR asset, UAVs provided constant and continuous surveillance of insurgents on the battlefield. Advanced communications enabled Commanders to maintain centralized command and centralized execution. Once the UAVs sited potential targets, Commanders were kept informed via advanced communication systems such that

[9] Dr. Carlo Kopp, Operation Enduring Freedom Analysis, Air Power Australia, online: http://www.ausairpower.net/oef-analysis.html, last updated 27 January 2015.

they could decide to order an instantaneous attack by the armed UAV, and afterwards observe the resultant battle damage from the same UAV.

In loitering bombardment, the U.S. use of its heavy bombers was important because they could orbit for extended periods of time, and then bomb different targets as directed. These bombers offered tremendous flexibility in targeting because they carried a varied mix of bombs, both guided and non-guided, thereby enabling the Combat Air Operations Centre to match bombs to targets. Unlike the heavy bombers, the fighters could not offer the same flexibility of weapon payloads.

As previously stated, "*the dominance of fused information over platforms and munitions [was] the principal enabler of the [targeting] campaign's success … That new dynamic made possible all other major aspects of the war …"*[10] The U.S. demonstrated exceptional ability to rapidly collect and synchronize instantaneous INTEL from its broad spectrum of recce assets including SOF's HUMINT, UAVs, fast forward air controller aircraft, JSTARS, and the Rivet Joint electronic intelligence fleet. Furthermore, the U.S.' advanced communications network, including its access to broad commercial band width, enabled Commanders to exercise both centralized command and centralized control. The latter was an important feature due to the President's strategic objective of minimizing collateral damage.

USE OF INFORMATION OPERATIONS (IO) IN TARGETING DURING OEF

The U.S. planned and executed an unexpected Information Operations (IO) effort, which was an important aspect of its targeting campaign. It implemented this effort

[10] *Supra*, note 4, 365.

through the use of aircraft for public broadcasting/propaganda, leaflet drops, and food drops. The purpose of the IO effort was to instill fear in the insurgents, to disrupt their movement, and to gain the popular support of the local Afghans in an effort to isolate the insurgents.

USE OF ASSESSMENT METRICS IN TARGETING DURING OEF

The usage of assessment metrics in targeting was seen as important to the operation because it empowered commanders in their decision making at all levels. Through these targeting metrics, commanders could gauge their progress and assess the extent to which they were "winning" the war. During OEF, the assessment metrics implemented were the battle damage assessment (BDA) reporting rules. The BDA rules enabled commanders to assess the effectiveness of their air strikes, i.e. how many and the category (leadership facility or military asset) of target struck. "*BDA rules could only be satisfied by satellite photography regardless of other sources of confirmation."*[11]

ASSESSMENT

I believe that, as OEF progressed, the U.S. should have modified their BDA rules regarding verification sources such that they could rely upon their SOF supplied INTEL to provide confirmation of battle damage and, in so doing, reduce the number of strike-support sorties. Furthermore, based on my readings, it is unclear if U.S. forces effectively communicated the results of their operational assessments horizontally such that SOF were kept informed. By "closing the loop" on communications, the U.S. could have improved the effectiveness of their operational assessments for targeting.

OPERATION ANACONDA: BREAKDOWN IN HARMONIZATION OF DISCIPLINES AND CAPABILITIES

[11] *Ibid.*, 87.

Operation ANACONDA was planned in the absence of accurate and reliable INTEL; consequently, its operational planning was critically flawed. This operation was originally planned as a three-day battle with light combat; however, it became a seven-day battle of intense combat, and it lasted for 17 days.[12] Furthermore, the operational planners excluded the air component in the planning process; thus, ground troops engaged the insurgents in the absence of fire support; only SOF air assets were present. It was only upon engaging the insurgents that the U.S. forces recognized that they were fighting a larger, better equipped, stealthier enemy than they had planned. The dearth of accurate INTEL on the al-Qaeda fighters placed the U.S. and friendly forces in an unenviable and dangerous position once they engaged the enemy. Consequently, the initial operational plan was quickly revamped to include robust fire support.

ASSESSMENT

In my readings on Operation ANACONDA, it is unclear to me why the US experienced such challenges in obtaining accurate and reliable INTEL on the Taliban/al Qaeda. I submit that had the U.S. injected additional SOF troops into Afghanistan and better utilized them for their ISR skills to obtain critical information about the enemy in the Shahi Kowt Valley, the planners would have acquired the INTEL that they needed to more effectively conduct their operational planning. Even in the absence of accurate and reliable INTEL, the operational planners made an amateurish planning error by excluding the air component during the planning process, and failing to recognize the critical need for fire support in ground combat.

[12] Dr. Richard L. Kuglar, Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Adaptation in Battle. Washington, D.C.: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2007: 1.

CONCLUSION

In OEF, the U.S. demonstrated how it could succeed in IW, despite the tremendous distances from which it launched its air attacks against targets. The U.S. achieved this through the harmonization of disciplines and their associated capabilities, resulting in an effective air-ground targeting campaign. Underpinning the success of this campaign was the HUMINT provided by SOF on the ground, integrated with the friendly HN Commanders, identifying the location of al-Qaeda and Taliban targets and calling in air strikes. In turn, these air strikes permitted SOF, engaged with the Afghan Commanders, to advance their fight against the insurgents. Enabling synergies amongst the various disciplines throughout OEF was the advanced technology, notably in the area of ISR. Despite successes achieved, Operation ANACONDA demonstrated how ineffective harmonization of disciplines can have devastating impact on the targeting campaign and potentially the entire operation. In this particular case, the U.S. recognized the flaw in their planning for ANACONDA, and brought it back on track by engaging CENTCOM's air component for sufficient air support.

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