KEY EVENTS

On November 15, 2023, Dr. David Strachan-Morris, presented on *Developing Theory on the Insurgent Use of Intelligence* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were uncertainty towards the global threat environment, counterintelligence strategies in vulnerable regions, and the treatment of intelligence as a public good.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Strachan-Morris provided an overview of the different types of intelligence collections, objectives, and characteristics related to insurgent use of intelligence and how these could be factored into counterinsurgency. He stated that governments must forgo the notion that intelligence is strictly a state-led process because much decision-making results from the workings of a variety of global actors, including violent and non-state ones such as insurgent groups. As a result, more attention must be given to insurgent intelligence capabilities and offensive counterinsurgency. Dr. Strachan-Morris asserted that the above factors can provide various opportunities toward disrupting insurgent intelligence network capabilities and/or feeding disinformation.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The current literature on the use of intelligence by insurgent groups across different countries suggests that the objectives and level of success behind securing and exploiting intelligence against adversaries is largely based upon

insurgent group characteristics, which counterinsurgency forces can use to their advantage. The case studies listed by Dr. Strachan-Morris demonstrated that insurgent groups are highly ideological and secretive and more dependent on external support when compared to counter-insurgency forces. Ideological characteristics of insurgent groups often include nationalist, religious, political, or a mixture of these views, whereas the clandestine nature of their group structure can lead to many groups adopting flat, cell-based group structures over hierarchical ones. Due to the power imbalance between insurgents and counterinsurgent forces, insurgent groups are often forced to rely on external support from other nation states, such as the use of harbors, supplies, or political support. Based on this outline, it is apparent that gaining intelligence associated with these adversarial characteristics can allow counterinsurgency forces to gain a significant advantage over insurgencies.

The strategic usage of intelligence by insurgents is often determined by its level of operational efficacy against counterinsurgent forces. The North Vietnamese case study showed that when the North Vietnamese received SIGINT from its Russian and Chinese allies in 1975, it was mainly concerned with the fact that the Americans would not be providing airpower to the South Vietnamese in an upcoming offensive; thus, providing the NVA with an incentive to go ahead with their planned offensive. Strategic intelligence use is lower, however, compared to other forms, since insurgent leadership strategy is usually guided by ideological disposition and worldview unless information to the contrary has been provided by external state actors.

Insurgent intelligence is also used for targeting, providing warnings, covert action, counterintelligence, and analysis. Targeting intelligence is based on real-time events that are being observed in the context of counterinsurgency operations; whereas warning intelligence and counterintelligence are more proactive forms that heighten a state of readiness against an impending offensive. Covert action is an essential element of all insurgent operations due to the secretive characteristic of insurgencies, and therefore, the brunt of the intelligence is often used for the purpose of directing this action. Finally, operationally focused intelligence analysis is prioritized over strategic political, economic, or social analysis, pointing to the notion that insurgents prefer intelligence that is practical and quickly utilized in their operational campaigns. Based on this, insurgents are most likely to prioritize OSINT (a major source), HUMINT, IMINT and GEOINT, with SIGINT to help them achieve success.

Dr. Strachan-Morris outlined the problems related to the mindset surrounding insurgent use of intelligence and the opportunities presented by refocusing

counterinsurgency priorities. Classical counterinsurgent literature has given little attention to the importance placed by insurgents on collecting intelligence on counterinsurgency—an issue that is still witnessed in modern counterinsurgency manuals. Conversely, there is more focus by counterinsurgency on collecting data on operational and logistical elements of the insurgents to develop counterintelligence, so that it can be used to preserve operational security rather than target/disrupt insurgent cells. Moving towards the understanding that insurgents value intelligence for disrupting counterinsurgency operations can create a tactical opportunity to disrupt the intelligence network and/or feed disinformation to the insurgent group if it can be learned how the insurgent group collects, analyses, and uses intelligence.

Intelligence analysis that is based on the insurgent characteristics described above can provide prescient knowledge relating to how insurgents will likely collect, analyze, and use their gathered intelligence. Understanding how ideology factors into leadership strategies and decision-making can provide insight as to how objective insurgent intelligence assessments are in relation to the leadership's worldview. The secretive nature of insurgent groups means that they are likely to be susceptible to paranoia if they suspect that their network has been infiltrated; hence, much of their intelligence will be geared towards identifying and suppressing dissenters or traitors in their ranks. In addition, the power imbalance provides an opportunity for smaller forces to prevail over a stronger force if the smaller force has more knowledge. This point underscores the importance of understanding the role of intelligence by the insurgent group as it can allow one to prioritize insurgent intelligence infrastructure and methodology when gathering intelligence. Lastly, the reliance on external state supporters provides opportunities for counterinsurgent forces to identify such supporters and their intelligence capability and use that to prioritize understanding of methods utilized by supporters who are most likely to aid the insurgent group.

Question & Answer Period

What strategies must be used to train budding intelligence practitioners and leaders so that they are in a position to lead through and navigate the threat environment and its nexus with adjacent communities and groups?

We need to become comfortable with our uncertainty. This means educating leaders in what uncertainty means and being comfortable in conveying it to decision makers in a manner that doesn't disregard the intelligence that is being provided. We must teach the next generation to navigate its complexity by being

comfortable with talking about things that they don't know and by being able to evaluate the significance of any knowledge gaps in question.

In Nigeria, insurgency and banditry are significant security threats to the region. Insurgents are known to make use of informants in the populace which makes intelligence gathering difficult for security forces that make use of sources within the indigenous population. What other methods can security use for their intelligence gathering?
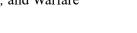
One of the key aims of counterinsurgency forces is getting to a level where the local population is choosing to provide intelligence to them over the insurgents themselves. It is difficult to conduct a successful counterinsurgency campaign without local support. Currently on the military side, counterinsurgency is focused on reducing violence by limiting civilian casualties and inflicting insurgent casualties at a heightened level. It is necessary to shift focus towards political and diplomatic activity that has a long-term focus on bringing the insurgency to its conclusion. In addition, targeting the leadership, in the political and diplomatic sense, over its rank and file is necessary as well because this is more likely to win the confidence of the people who will then be willing to support your efforts.

What is your view on the common usage of the term "intelligence community"? Intelligence is often perceived as a function of the executive branch of the government. How do you ensure that this community is perceived as apolitical and not an extension of the executive branch? In times of polarization, is the term "community" negatively influencing the impact of intelligence as a public good?

I concur with assertions that state that the idea of community and oversight are good aspects. However, the idea of intelligence being seen as a public good is important as well. The release of declassified reports, such as those released by the British government on Gaza and Ukraine provides knowledge and methodology to the public, enabling them to understand how the intelligence process works. Such declassifications also give hindsight knowledge to the public on how things went wrong, why they went wrong, and lessons that were learned. By treating intelligence as a public good, the intelligence community is made more transparent and less likely to be perceived suspiciously by others.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Insurgent groups are highly ideological and secretive. Ideological characteristics of insurgent groups often include nationalist, religious,

political, or a mix of these views which can influence how intelligence is presented to their leadership, while their secretive traits can lead to many groups adopting flat, cell-based group structures over hierarchical ones.

- Strategic intelligence is rarely used by insurgent groups because insurgent leadership strategy is usually guided by ideological disposition & worldview unless information to the contrary has been provided by external state actors.

- Insurgents use intelligence for strategic, warning, covert action, counterintelligence, targeting, and analysis purposes. Strategic intelligence is rare compared to the other forms which mainly prioritize instant utility in their operations.

- Classical counterinsurgent literature has placed little attention on the importance placed by insurgents on collecting intelligence on counterinsurgency. Instead, there has been more focus by counterinsurgency on collecting data on operational and logistics elements of the insurgents and using counterintelligence to preserve operational security rather than use it for offensive purposes.

- Counterinsurgent forces can exploit insurgent characteristics to disrupt their intelligence capabilities and/or feed disinformation to them.

Further Readings

Strachan-Morris, D. (2019). Developing theory on the use of intelligence by non-state actors: five case studies on insurgent intelligence. *Intelligence and National Security, 34*(7), 980-984. https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1672034

Strachan-Morris, D. (2019). 'The use of intelligence by insurgent groups: The North Vietnamese and the Second Indochina war as a case study'. *Intelligence and National Security, 34*(7), 985-998. https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1668714

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