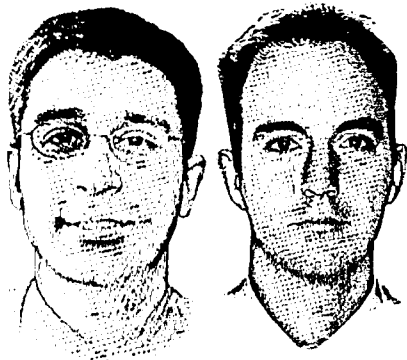


Aerial IEDs Show Adaptive, Resilient Enemy

The U.S. military is growing increasingly concerned about so-called aerial IEDs (improvised explosive devices) used against American helicopters in Iraq. Consisting of mortar rounds on short fuses, this new tactic has already been used on numerous occasions.

Given that the past month has been particularly bad for U.S.



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helicopter crews, we may be witnessing a new capability for insurgent forces in Iraq. While there appears to be some debate within the military on the nature of this threat (*Defense News*, Jan. 16 issue), the use of aerial IEDs can provide several insights into the organization and nature of the enemy.

First, this tactic shows that insurgent forces in Iraq are able

to mount complex operations that demonstrate competence in real-time targeting using relatively advanced weapon systems, as well as effective command, control and intelligence functions.

More than simply one man with a mortar tube, the aerial IED attacks are sophisticated operations that pose potentially serious threats to our ability to provide heliborne combat, medical and logistical support to isolated units or soldiers in contact with the enemy.

The ability of insurgent cells to detect and discern patterns in routes and flight operations, field spotters with communications devices, and devise a method for effective tracking and targeting reveals a level of operational effectiveness that is as disturbing as it is threatening.

Second, this tactic is the latest in a long string of examples where terrorist or insurgent forces demonstrate an ability to learn and adapt in response to pressure. Where the United States takes weeks and months to adapt its tactics, and months and years to adapt its deployed capabilities, the insurgents require much less time.

Though lacking a \$75 billion defense research, development, test and evaluation budget, they nevertheless manage to go

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through technology innovation cycles — the time between an idea and its introduction into the market as a product — at a swift pace.

The Pentagon is still working on numerous development options for countering ground-based IEDs. Meanwhile, terrorists are one step ahead, with new IEDs against which no counter is yet being planned.

Spreading the Lessons

More than simply using weapons effectively, however, our enemies also attempt to disseminate doctrine and lessons learned. For example, recent reports of Taliban insurgent leaders traveling to Iraq to learn advanced urban warfare tactics from Abu Musab al Zarqawi's network seem to belie the notion that al-Qaida is a disconnected, decentralized actor.

The recent increase in the lev-

el of suicide attacks in Afghanistan is likely an indicator that Afghan-based insurgents are utilizing tactics developed in Iraq. By employing networks as diverse as smuggling routes and the Internet, al-Qaida and its affiliates in Iraq and Afghanistan are showing an ability to consistently adapt to changing circumstances.

Third, the persistent and pervasive use of ground and aerial IEDs by insurgents may pose a serious threat to American strategy in Iraq. The current strategy, articulated in the Bush administration's policy document "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," released in November, is based on the need to push out and maintain a consistent presence in rural towns and villages.

Termed "clear, hold, build," the strategy logically requires that coalition units receive a level of logistical support that can maintain them in relatively static positions throughout the country. While the United States appears to be having some success in developing an indigenous Iraqi military, the aerial IED threat will threaten the ability of American commanders to support an Iraqi military that has extremely limited service and support capabilities. The increasingly effec-

tive use of these IED tactics could therefore carry strategic implications for American strategy in Iraq.

Gen. Richard Cody, Army vice chief of staff, was quoted in the March issue of *Army*: "the IED is the poor man's cruise missile." It appears that insurgents in Iraq have now fielded a poor man's air defense capability. Such developments should be addressed by military commanders and the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group. We must also become swifter in the introduction of countermeasures to the battlefield.

In parallel to the important development and testing programs currently under way, innovative uses of existing products could save precious time. Troops on the ground are surprisingly imaginative when it comes to devising new means of self-preservation, but often lack the budget and the time to implement these solutions fully and widely. They must be given these resources so that innovations by soldiers in one unit are immediately disseminated to others.

A similar effort should be devoted to understanding the process by which our enemies learn, adapt and share information. Success in Iraq and the broader war on terror may depend on it. ■