



NATO's ISR challenge during ISAF VIII

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Introduction

Both NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the Commander of Joint Forces Command Brunssum have identified the provision of a comprehensive, timely and accurate Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability as an absolute key enabler in the success of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Unfortunately however, ISAF stage VIII's capability to satisfy the Commander's Priority Intelligence Requirements effectively and efficiently remains a huge challenge. This article will address NATO's limited ISR capability during ISAF VIII and how it has tried to cope with this.

NATO's ISR capability in ISAF VIII

Although a robust ISR capability was identified in the ISAF Stage II Combined Joint Statement Of Requirements (CJSOR), NATO's Force Generation process did not succeed in providing any dedicated Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and airborne surveillance capability. The Commander ISAF (COMISAF) only had Operational Control (OPCON) of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and Tactical Reconnaissance (TACRECCE) resources. As a result, during ISAF VIII, COMISAF's intelligence requirements were predominantly provided by Field HUMINT Teams (FHT) and normal ISAF troops on the ground.

Although German land-based SIGINT was present in the Area of Operations (AOO), the system was not under OPCON of COMISAF. It was embedded into the German Kabul Multi-National Brigade (KMNB) contingent for German force protection purposes and not integrated into ISAF's Command, Control and Communication (C3) infrastructure.

As such, direct tasking and exploitation was not possible. COMISAF's collection requirements could only be passed through as advisory tasking and results were only indirectly available. Nonetheless, German SIGINT reporting was provided to the intelligence division (CJ2) through the German National Intelligence Cell present at HQ ISAF and at times supported the CJ2 to gain and maintain situational awareness. National SIGINT information from other participating NATO countries, if any, was only indirectly provided through COINS, NATO's dedicated SIGINT Automated Data Processing system.

The only Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) ISR capability present within the ISAF AOO was the German LUNA unit within the KMNB. However, similar to SIGINT, OPCON over the LUNA was also retained nationally for force protection purposes and the system was not integrated into ISAF's C3 infrastructure. No direct tasking and exploitation was possible. Within KMNB, the LUNA was mainly tasked for surveillance missions in the larger Kabul AOO in order to detect possible rocket launches. Although the LUNA actually never identified any imminent rocket launches, it was generally accepted within the ISAF VIII community that its presence had a deterrent effect.

As indicated above, the only airborne ISR capability under ISAF OPCON was TACRECCE. During the entire period of ISAF stage VIII, two UK GR-7 Harriers with a dedicated TACRECCE capability were under OPCON of COMISAF. In addition, during the National Assembly and Parliamentary Council Elections (NAPCE) period, two French F-1CR Mirages were available for direct tasking. TACRECCE tasking was generated by CJ2 CCIRM (i.e. the Theatre Collection Manager) in close coordination with COMISAF's TAOC ISR manager.

TACRECCE collection requirements were listed in the Collection Tasking List, which was sent to the CAOC Al Udeid, Qatar, daily to be included into the next Air Tasking Order (ATO) (48 hours cycle). However, even with this more or less familiar traditional TACRECCE capability, significant problems existed. First of all, both the UK GR-7 Harrier and the French F-1CR Mirage do not have any downlink capability. As such, both systems were of limited use in support of COMISAF's collection requirements, which centred around flexible near-real time surveillance capability – riot control, demonstrations, kidnapping, force protection, etc. Additionally ADP connectivity, bandwidth and releasability issues aggravated the effective and efficient tasking and exploitation of this capability. Finally, the UK GR-7 Harriers were also deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and were 're-rolled' to Close Air Support missions of troops in contact within OEF at least 50% of the time, even further limiting their use. As a result, the use of the available TACRECCE was marginalized to the non-time critical support of creating and updating the restricted and prohibited target folders.

Finally, despite the fact that an administrative system (Requests for Information - RFIs) was in place to apply for airborne ISR support from OEF assets through Coalition Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A), in practical terms this never worked. Most times, our collection requirements were overruled by higher priority requirements related to CFC-A's mission. The few times, systems were available the unfamiliarity with our AOO nullified their use. For instance, during the NAPCE period collection sorties were flown in support of COMISAF's intelligence requirements, but the absence of a SIGINT baseline and limited specialist support prevented the timely exploitation of the information gathered.

Re-role of BE and NL F-16 CAS to ISR

In order to still be able to cope with suddenly emerging airborne ISR collection requirements, especially during the NAPCE period, the Dutch/Belgian F-16 contingent at Kabul International Airport (KAIA) agreed to accept 'scrambles' and 'airborne re-roles' for ISR missions using their LANTIRN targeting pods, despite the fact that this was not part of their declared ISAF mission. In close coordination with the Dutch/Belgian contingent, the TAOC and CJ2 CCIRM, SOPs were developed, in which all necessary details were laid down. On various occasions prior, during and after the NAPCE, Dutch and Belgian F-16s were scrambled and 'airborne re-rolled' to provide coverage on emerging security situations on the ground.

The Dutch F-16s proved to be very useful because of their downlink capability within the PRISM system to an improvised ground station within the TAOC. Despite the fact that this system significantly improved COMISAF's ISR capability, some problems still arose. Although almost near-real time imagery was now available, the lack of imagery analysis capability at HQ ISAF prevented maximum exploitation of the potential intelligence available on the imagery. Also, the resolution of the targeting pod imagery at times prevented the intelligence (CJ2) community from making sound analyses. Although the quality of the imagery of the LANTIRN targeting pod is more than sufficient to identify targets for engagement, it is at times insufficient to support in depth intelligence analysis.

Conclusion

The available ISR capability in support of ISAF VIII was at best limited, mainly caused by the inability and/or unwillingness of individual nations to fill the CJSOR. Additionally, ISAF's C3 infrastructure is currently unable to support the effective and efficient exploitation of airborne ISR assets. ADP connectivity, interoperability, bandwidth and imagery analysis capability prevents the effective use of 'live feed' and near-real time imagery. ISAF's expansion to the south and the east of Afghanistan will be even more highly intelligence-driven and the operational dynamics will require near-real time situational awareness accomplished through eyes and ears on the ground and in the air. Hopefully, NATO has been able to convince the nations participating in the ISAF stage III and IV Force Generation Conference in February 2006, to fill all the ISR requirements mentioned in the CJSOR, to include all that is necessary to exploit this capability to the maximum extend possible.