Human Intelligence (HUMINT) as a Driver for Intelligence Operations

Brig **NK Bhatia**, SM (Retd) was the Chief Instructor at the Military Intelligence School.

The King shall proceed to create spies, spies under the guise of a fraudulent discipline, a recluse, a householder, a merchant, an ascetic practising austerities, a classmate or a colleague, a firebrand, a prisoner and a mendicant women.
— Kautilya, in *Arthashastra*, 300 BC

Introduction

Humans, since time immemorial, have always been the primary and most important link in the process of intelligence gathering. The process centres on the primacy of humans since they are the only species endowed with logic, reasoning, ingenuity and courage. Advancements in the fields of science and technology during the 20th century impelled a decrease in reliance on humans as the sole gatherers of intelligence and led to a gradual shift towards the use of technology.

The 9/11 attacks were perpetuated by a handful of terrorists wielding 'Stanley knives'. The attacks revealed the total failure of the intelligence agencies to detect and preempt an event with catastrophic consequences. Despite the launch of "Operation Enduring Freedom" and connected operations to reach the main

Key Points

1. HUMINT plays a pivotal role in intelligence gathering.

2. Advancements in the fields of science and technology impelled a decrease in reliance on HUMINT and a gradual increase in reliance on intelligence gathering through TECHINT.

3. The most advanced technologies cannot discern or extrapolate the ingenious and simple methods adopted by faceless HUMINT entities, who are driven more by ideology and determination than high technology to wage a 'war'.

4. In the 21st century, the enemy is not a state. Today's insurgents are ruthless, resourceful, and adept at weaving themselves into the fabric of their societies, making themselves virtually undetectable until they strike.

5. The focus on the role of HUMINT has increased manifold since they are able to penetrate adversarial structures revealing long-term planning and foresight.

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) ...

perpetuator, Osama bin Laden and almost the entire top hierarchy of the Al Qaeda and Taliban continued to elude US forces for over a decade until a valuable Human Intelligence (HUMINT) asset provided a crucial lead to his whereabouts. Faulty intelligence, based mostly on Technical Intelligence (TECHINT) about Weapons of Mass of Destruction (WMDs), led to "Operation Iraqi Freedom" in Iraq. The impact of the operations and post war scenario in Iraq impacted the security scenario, leading to the rise of numerous groups, including the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS). All this has led to a fair amount of introspection, and, today, the intelligence community stands at a cross-roads, lacking valuable human assets that can penetrate the new organisations and provide inputs so crucial to take on the challenges. As the international scenario and the world order evolves, there is also a realisation that, while there may have been a paradigm shift in technology related to intelligence collection, HUMINT will always play a pivotal role in all intelligence gathering.

The onset of the 21st century has brought with it new dimensions of war: asymmetric threats, using new social media to advantage, with comparatively good penetration of the targeted audience, and generally faceless, formless and not easily identifiable. There are no battle lines, frontlines or enemy concentrations for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to monitor continuously and, consequently, for the armed forces to engage cohesively. Non-contact warfare and effective use of social media to indoctrinate, recruit and challenge highly trained armed forces are throwing up new challenges for all intelligence outfits.

Not surprisingly, these new developments have left the developed nations bewildered about the methods to be adopted to tackle these threats. At times, the advanced technologies cannot discern or extrapolate the ingenious and simple methods adopted by faceless entities, driven more by ideology and determination than high technology to defeat their 'enemy'. Therefore, such situations require a change in focus and adoption of covert, infiltratory tactics to tackle a faceless 'enemy' who is fighting an ideological, moral and religious war that has no defined combat zones or territories.

HUMINT : Historical Perspective

Historically, intelligence was always associated with individuals. The Indian and Greek war epics are full of stories related to the use of humans for obtaining information on adversaries that eventually lead to victories on the battlefield. The *Arthshastra*, by Kautilya, speaks of an efficient system of intelligence gathering: the King was kept informed of events in his Kingdom by a network of spies. Obtaining intelligence became synonymous with victories on the battlefront and running of the day-to-day affairs of the state. Sun Tzu, in his *Art of War,* states, "The reason the enlightened Prince and the wise General conquer the enemy…. is for knowledge". In fact, it would be correct to summarise intelligence gathering as one of the most important tools of statecraft.

Prior to World War I, HUMINT was the principle source of information gathering. Nations that built and nurtured their spy networks meticulously over the years were the ones that succeeded the most. Since technology and its uses were scarce, building a credible intelligence network depended completely on spotting, recruitment, penetration and running of spy networks. All nations employed the services of spies, exploiting their ethnicity, religion and sex to penetrate the hardest of shields. Spies, in spite of achieving amazing successes, always maintained anonymity and their exploits were rarely acknowledged. Over the years, the 'cloak and dagger' game was refined and mastered by nations as a fine art, with penetration into the most vital organs of adversaries.

Extraordinary results achieved by spies and intelligence agents were publicly acknowledged for the first time during World War I. This brought into

focus the role of agents and spies who had been able to penetrate adversarial structures revealing long – term planning and foresight. Apprehension of a number of 'agents', 'double agents' and 'sleeper' agents established the fact that all states were practising the art of HUMINT with a measure of success. Alongside, the inherent risks and dangers to the lives of the spies were also revealed. Very few nations admitted to their employment and most spies, when detected, faced inglorious elimination through brutal means such as death by firing squads and public hangings.

Technological innovations in the fields of communication and warfare and their use during World War I brought to the fore a requirement to tap the innovation for intelligence gathering. This was the genesis of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT). Subsequent use of aircraft in war led to their use for aerial and photo-reconnaissance and the birth of Imagery Intelligence (IMINT). The use of these advancements was a boon to intelligence gathering.

During World War II, the Western countries expended considerable funds to develop their Technical Intelligence (TECHINT) capabilities. However, the HUMINT networks established over the years were still in place and functioning. Using a judicious combination of SIGINT, TECHINT, IMINT and HUMINT, they were able to achieve significant results.

Cold War and Intelligence

The end of World War II, led to the emergence of two 'power blocs', and the consequent 'Cold War'. Ideological differences and mutual suspicions gave rise to tighter controls and denial of accessibility into the Eastern Bloc countries. The focus on intelligence gathering, with the need to know what was happening behind the 'Iron Curtain' became a high priority for the Western world. However, with the passage of time, penetration of the 'Iron Curtain' became difficult, leading to the drying up of HUMINT specific information. The Eastern bloc

countries, especially Soviet Russia, also launched large scale intelligence gathering operations through subversion of many senior Western officials, deep penetrations into vital establishments and blackmail. The KGB proved more successful at penetrating Western intelligence systems, exploiting the open Western society for penetrating vital installations; but its ability to retain assets was poor due to the harsh treatment of the assets. The period also witnessed the rise of the famous double spy Kim Philby, who worked for both the Soviets and the British, and Major Popov, who worked for the Western allies.

The collapse of the USSR ended an interesting chapter in intelligence gathering. The era of the Cold War is replete with instances of ingenuity, veiled deception and 'no-holds barred' contests to establish superiority in intelligence gathering. Hence, it would not be incorrect to state that modern intelligence gathering tools, techniques and procedures largely evolved during this period. The Western world was united in its efforts to defeat Communism at any cost. This resulted in increased funding for intelligence gathering and TECHINT efforts, leading to the development of spy planes (the U-2, SR-71, etc), extensive use of photo-reconnaissance, satellites, etc. The result of this development was increased focus on gathering intelligence through satellites and electronic means, with traditional agent-based HUMINT being used for supplementing and corroborating TECHINT.

Post Cold War Threats

"In the 21st century, the enemy is not a state. Today's insurgents are ruthless, resourceful, and adept at weaving themselves into the fabric of their societies, making themselves virtually undetectable until they strike. They are everywhere, yet they are nowhere", the intellectual godfather of counter-insurgency, David Galula, has stated. And that is the challenge of the intelligence community worldwide. Besides, new threats in the form of sub-national identities, weapons proliferation and global terrorism started

to emerge in the post Cold War era. It was not until 2001 that the world saw the real face of terror and launched an all out war to tackle the menace. The lack of intelligence on the emerging threats became clear only when it was realised that the world as a whole did not have sufficient knowledge about Al Qaeda, its ideology, structures and strengths. The need to obtain information from the grassroots clandestine means, penetrating drug networks or for following the money trail to terrorist organisations by resorting to basic HUMINT tradecraft emerged as the biggest challenges. The requirement to place individuals on the ground was never felt more and that required the ability to expand HUMINT operations and get involved in a task laced with inherent risks. This is becoming increasingly relevant, especially with regard to the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) which is emerging as a major global threat. The drone-centric strategy adopted in Yemen and Pakistan is of no use unless backed by HUMINT assets on the ground.

HUMINT Imperatives : Relevance

HUMINT, the oldest method of intelligence gathering, will always remain relevant, since it cannot be surpassed as a source of critical intelligence for policy and decision-makers. This can be best exemplified by two cases: the timely information provided by a US 'mole' in the Kremlin (USSR) to the Kennedy Administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis enabled the US to accurately assess how far they could 'push' the Soviets. During the recent Iraq War, Saddam Hussein narrowly escaped being killed after US forces launched a preemptive decapitation strike on receiving a HUMINT tip-off; he was eventually captured on the basis of a HUMINT input. Hence, HUMINT provides original information and is critical for demystifying 'grey areas' and corroborating inputs from other sources. Technology, howsoever advanced, cannot substitute intelligence gathered by humans since the same technology also enables counter-measures to deceive sensors. It would be evident that sole reliance on TECHINT has often led to intelligence failures. The wide spectrum of ways

in which HUMINT operatives may be employed for gathering intelligence far surpasses TECHINT methods, since HUMINT methods are limited only by the ingenuity of the human brain, or the lack of it. In the domains of insurgency, terrorism, ethnic riots/conflicts, narcotics, organised crime, WMD proliferation, etc, the utility of, and reliance on, HUMINT is almost total. Future conflict identification and resolution scenarios, therefore, require an increased emphasis on HUMINT.

Cost-Effectiveness of HUMINT

Technological aids are capital intensive whereas a source, agent or informant is considered a disposable, bargain-able commodity. An investment in a source requires secrecy, whereas an investment in technology acquisition is a tangible event. Cost-effectiveness is judged by tangible results and they may not come for a period of time in the case of a HUMINT asset. The problem is compounded by secrecy surrounding 'sources' and the fact that such expenses do not have to be backed up by acquisition of tangible material assets. Hence, budgets for HUMINT continued to decline since the end of the Cold War until it was realised that the creation of HUMINT assets was the only way to penetrate the network of non-state actors. This limitation has already been recognised by some intelligence agencies that are instituting measures to develop cogent, short and long-term HUMINT capabilities.

HUMINT operations are also hostage to expectations: most policy-makers want agents and informants to deliver results instantly. Such expectations often preclude achievement of long-term or strategic goals.

Agent Recruitment

Recruitment of agents is the most difficult part of the HUMINT process and is fraught with danger. Identifying people who will undertake clandestine operations entails inherent risk. The recruiter has to often interact with persons of unsavoury character

and nature, at times having criminal and dubious pasts. However, the overriding consideration in all such interactions and activities is the intention to acquire information, even at personal risk to the handlers. Identification of a person with appropriate 'credentials', howsoever dubious, is, therefore, of prime importance eg, one may be forced to hire a disgruntled terrorist to glean details of clandestine terrorists networks, as also their movement, sympathisers, financers, etc. It is often observed that at times, agents and sources will try to use their handlers to further their self-interests. An expert handler, therefore, must possess self-discipline, be vigilant, and have impeccable professional integrity and ability to see through such sources.

Another area of conflict in agent recruitment is the rivalry between different agencies pursuing the same goals. This can sometimes be resolved with close coordination and communication between them.

Overt HUMINT

This refers to open collection of information through humans, and is mostly collected through legitimate means, with no risk / threat to the persons engaged in such activities. It encompasses collection of information by diplomatic staff and obtaining data through open sources, de-briefing of foreign nationals and people moving across borders, interrogations, etc. Approximately, 80 percent of all intelligence can be gathered through friendly exchanges and without exposing intelligence staff to risk.

Covert HUMINT

This aspect of HUMINT relates to gathering of information through covert and clandestine activities eg, operations by undercover agents, spies, fifth columnists, front organisations, etc. A person assigned to undertake the designated task is identified, trained and penetrated at the correct place to undertake the assigned activity. He remains in close contact with his handlers using various means of communication

and carries out clandestine operations. This activity requires prior training, courage, ingenuity and a sharp mind. The process of gathering intelligence covertly is painstakingly slow, expensive and nurtured over a long period of time. It involves conceptualising, visualising and determining the likely shape of events in the short, medium and long terms, and then identifying the correct people for the job.

At times, it may be necessary to train them in specialised activities. Agents and spies may be motivated to join the profession for the thrill it offers (which, however, wears off soon), ideology, revenge or simply to eke out a living. Covert intelligence gathering encompasses many facets like sleeper agents, moles, penetrating agents, dual / double agents.

Covert Actions

Covert operations tend to become an extension of intelligence operations on account of the secrecy attached to them. These are planned at very high levels, keeping strategic goals in mind. Covert operations can be of varying types, viz psychological, economic, political or military, depending upon the nature of the assignment. They could even relate to TECHINT, like the U-2 over-flight missions undertaken by the USA against the USSR in the mid-1960s. Covert action at strategic levels could include regime change, setting up of propaganda units or actions leading to collapse of economies. Such actions may involve large-scale sabotage, subversion and widespread chaos. Covert actions can often be hazardous and life threatening. A prime example of such an operation was "Operation Neptune Spear", planned at the highest levels of the US government and carried out in utmost secrecy to eliminate Osama bin Laden.

Intelligence-Led Operations

The real worth of the HUMINT effort is in the conduct of operations leading to spectacular successes with minimal effort. This requires penetration of radical

groups and societies to acquire information on their activities on a day-to-day basis. It may involve subverting the loyalties of close allies and undertaking missions leading to assassinations of top insurgents / terrorists leaders or their cadre(s) or sabotaging their illegal activities or compelling them to negotiate through blackmail. In extreme cases, it involves regime change or arm-twisting legitimate governments. The operations mostly depend on humans for their success, though extensive use of technology is often made. The capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 is a recent example of such activity.

The Future: Threats and Challenges

The 9/11 Commission's Report (US) makes ironic reading: 15 different US intelligence agencies using five different databases, but none able to interact with one another. The Markle Foundation, a New York-based think-tank also found that the real problems of the intelligence community were not so much technological as social, viz personality conflicts, identity conflicts between agencies, bureaucratic stonewalling and the reluctance to part with resources. It has also indicted the US intelligence agencies for the neglect of HUMINT.

The Kargil Review Committee too had correctly analysed 'intelligence failure' as one of the causes that led to the intrusion in Kargil remaining undetected in the initial stages. TECHINT assets have limitations in mountainous, riverine and forested terrain or areas obscured by clouds / fog (this aspect has been apparent since the 1970s movement on the Ho Chi Minh trail could not be disrupted despite the best efforts). With the focus of intelligence efforts in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) being diverted to counter terrorism, combat–related information did not receive the attention it deserved. Further, there was a neglect of HUMINT which could have discerned and analysed additional activity: the induction of additional Pakistan Army units into the Frontier Corps Northern Area (FCNA) and the gradual, controlled build up across the Line of Control (LoC)

which, perhaps could not have been monitored by TECHINT sensors. Eventually, the intrusion was detected by humans. The consequences of this failure are part of history and exemplify the potential for damage such failures could entail even for a nuclear capable state.

The threat of conventional war has receded. However, new situations have emerged, primarily terrorism, asymmetric warfare, ethno-religious conflicts, non-contact war, threats from social media, state sponsored funding of low intensity conflicts, issues relating to mass movement of populations from under-privileged neighbourhoods to more prosperous regions (such as the ongoing refugee crises, leading to demographic imbalances), conflicts based on economic disparities between populations in different regions, threats related to environmental issues, energy security, organised crime, failed / failing states, etc. The problem confronting the intelligence fraternity is to keep pace with the strategic environment in the evolving world order which is changing at a much faster rate than we perceive.

Future operations are unlikely to be anything akin to the 'set-piece' battles of yore, and will entail, and, at times, even hinge on, the ability of the intelligence agencies to penetrate the adversaries and obtain inputs about their intentions and capabilities to successfully accomplish the desired goal. The armed forces, in particular, will need timely, cogent and incisive intelligence to tackle the evolving situations to stay ahead of the adversaries.

The unconventional warfare currently being witnessed uses uncertainty as a predominant tool to cause disruption and demoralisation. It is being orchestrated by indigenous or proxy forces, with worldwide ramifications, without a face. It employs terror as the primary tool, using offensive covert / clandestine operations, as well as indirect activities like subversion using the social media, and sabotage to challenge the established norms. The havoc it causes capitalises upon the intangibles of war, psychology,

morale, surprise and fear. It holds very little respect for verified estimates of an enemy and recognises the fact that a well established fighting force faces uncertainty and is bogged down, dissipating its 'will' to counter the hidden enemy. Therefore, the requirement to have pin-point intelligence through penetration using HUMINT is the answer to challenge the enemy.

Although technology has had a profound effect on lethality levels, it is the Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms that can pin-point troop deployments and modern weapon systems which can wreak immense destruction in extremely short periods, and the outcome of a battle could be decided in a matter of minutes. The success of any operational plan or operation will depend largely on the quality of intelligence available. Whether it be conventional operations or asymmetric threats, the need is for long-term strategic intelligence, medium-term and 'near real-time' operational intelligence or 'real-time' tactical targeting and Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) intelligence; any future intelligence gathering will be based on flexible and robust intelligence acquisition plans that employ a variety of sources and sensors. The challenge for the intelligence community is, therefore, to evolve mechanisms that can:

- Discern emerging situations well in time, so that national planners can respond to quell them before they reach conflagration levels.
- As deployments and equipment acquisitions can no longer be kept hidden, provide an insight into the 'minds of an adversary' viz intentions.
- Provide accurate assessment on situations that have progressed beyond initial stages.
- Provide target information to the armed forces especially on vital / leadership targets, as also BDA in certain cases.

Combining a mix of the right technology [IMINT, SIGINT, COMINT (Commercial Intelligence), TECHINT, OSINT (Open Source Intelligence), etc], it is possible to discern about 80-90 percemt

of information required in intelligence operations. However, the balance, which is really vital and kept secure by nations, can essentially be gleaned through HUMINT efforts only, especially intangible factors like perceptions, clandestine activities, plans, decisions and, most importantly, intentions.

The present capability of the Services to meet the requirements of combat intelligence even at the tactical level is limited, especially relating to the field of HUMINT. With increasing need to take on asymmetric threats involving non-state actors, counter-insurgency and indigenous threats such as from Left Wing Extremism (LWE) not using any technology, the challenges for acquiring actionable intelligence are formidable. The current intelligence infrastructure is, therefore, beset by a gap between ever-increasing intelligence requirements and limited intelligence gathering resources, especially HUMINT.

There is a deep symbiotic relationship between intelligence and covert/special operations which are based on precise intelligence. Such operations, no matter how diverse, are conducted in pursuit of security, mostly in a secretive and clandestine way. It is for this reason that most countries, which are confronted by an array of threats, like India, maintain elite, specialised unit(s) of Special Forces and intelligence agencies. The Israelis have the Sayeret, the US has the Delta Force, the UK maintains the SAS while the erstwhile USSR had the Spetsnaz. Such forces are used extensively, but with great caution for a wide variety of tasks to further the strategic interests of their respective nation. The idea is simple: intelligence agencies provide the cause and all information, and an elite group executes what primarily is an intelligence-led operation. Regrettably, such a notion has yet to find root in our country. It is for this reason that we cannot look beyond a few 'specialists' for executing covert operations, whether it be 'resolving' a hijack or eliminating a terrorist leader. Another major reason why such operations are not taken up is because our HUMINT is often not good enough.

... as a Driver for Intelligence Operations

Hence, of all the 'national security' institutions, none has a deeper need for restructuring and reconceptualisation than intelligence. All the high-tech weapons, systems, nuclear arsenal and tactical and operational endeavours are likely to come to naught, if intelligence is treated with disdain. The 'Kargil intrusion' was a case in point; there is, thus, a dire need to develop at the very earliest, a strong viable, vibrant and effective HUMINT infrastructure.

Conclusion

The best technology and weapons could not prevent the worst terror attacks on the US. Similarly, failure to predict events of the late 20th century, for example, the invasion of the Falklands, invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR, collapse of the USSR, Iraqi invasion of Iran and Kuwait and the US response thereof, Indian and Pakistani nuclear blasts, World Trade Centre bombings, 9/11 attacks, Spring uprising, menacing advance of the ISIS, proliferation of Al Qaeda modules, have all exposed the limitations of TECHINT. The most significant failure of TECHINT has been its inability to reveal

the status of WMDs in Iraq (however, as per some reports, this failure is largely attributable to wrong and exaggerated interpretation of information fed to the US intelligence by Iraqi exiles). Even the best satellites or ISR platforms cannot peer into an enemy leader's mind and reveal his intentions.

As per Mikail Lyumbimov, a veteran Russian spy, with 25 years of experience, "The most important secrets can only be found in the human mind". Nations engaged in tackling the menace of terrorism and insurgency have, by and large, realised the importance of supplementing TECHINT efforts with HUMINT.

HUMINT is a fascinating field of human endeavour; it needs imagination, practical common sense, insatiable curiosity and persistence to ferret out the truth. Establishing a HUMINT network (s) takes time and is a resource-intensive process. The time has come for us to deeply introspect on this vital issue of intelligence gathering.

This paper is an update of an article first published in *Intelligence Journal* in February 2015.

References

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/iraq_and_weapons_of_mass_destruction

Christina Beasley, "A Comparative Study of US and Soviet HUMINT," www.pem.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Cambridge-Paper-CBeasley.pdf

Darin Swan, "Human Challenges in the Post 9/11 Era," www.academia.edu/1460547/HUMINT_Challenges_in_the_Post-9_11_Era

Robert Curuso, "The US Needs Better HUMINT to Beat ISIS," www.businessinsider.com/the-us-needs-better-humint-to-beat-isis-2014-9

www.9/11Commission.gov/report

"The Kargil Review Committee Report", *Frontline,* www.frontline.in/state/html/fl/1/7020310.html