By Alex Shone

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remain the primary, physical threat to Coalition soldiers and personnel in Afghanistan. An inexpensive and immensely varied device; they pose a strategic threat to the Coalition mission in Afghanistan perpetuating instability and obstructing international objectives. Counter-IED (CIED) strategy, in theory, targets IEDs are their source to enable interdiction to the 'left of the bang'; meaning literally before they can be emplaced and detonated. However, in reality CIED efforts have played into the insurgents' hands by concentrating on dealing with IEDs once they have been emplaced. This immediate requirement has consumed the lion's share of the finite resources available. CIED strategy needs to return its focus towards interdicting the IEDs before they are emplaced, to the left of the bang.

This focus must move towards locating and attacking the IED networks that are at work in Afghanistan; where IEDs are built and emplaced by 'attack nodes'. These nodes are small, localised elements, belonging to a larger network of shared material, training and leadership resources. The attacking nodes have limited contact with each other; decapitating strategies have proved ineffective as where one node is destroyed, another rises to replace it. The successor node is then an unknown quantity to the CIED team and the intelligence cycle must reset itself; consuming resources and advancing the insurgents' goal to 'wear out' the perceived occupiers.

This strategy requires a vastly altered intelligence-led approach, requiring CIED-intelligence units to utilise IED attack nodes to lead them to their backers and beyond. This requires an effective cooperative effort between field-based teams with national CIED intelligence centres; to construct detailed operational pictures of insurgent IED capabilities. Critical shortfalls in human, geographic and weapons intelligence need to be corrected; as do those behind inefficient information management, allowing CIED intelligence operators to access, contribute and coordinate collected intelligence assets. Critical to this is for a genuine merger between CIED and intelligence efforts to take place; overcoming institutional obstructions to produce fused, all-source intelligence products.

This intelligence requirement faces some considerable challenges in Afghanistan. First is the highly localised manifestation of IED attacking nodes; tribal demographics translate into enormous obstacles to intelligence collection and exploitation. Second is the ubiquity of deployed devices that forces a response by CIED forces to deal with them. Third are the limited resources that are available to achieve these requirements and overcome obstacles. In Afghanistan, the CIED effort requires its own 'surge' of resources, primarily in manpower, to overcome the focus of disrupting the IEDs instead of defeating the networks that are producing them.

The full report can be read here .