

# Security Assistance and Low Intensity Conflict: A Challenge to Excellence

by

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The most active threat we face today is not high intensity, but low intensity--the war in the shadows . . . . This threat is manifested in a stream of hostage crises, terrorist attacks, local conflicts and insurgencies. This is our most active threat for the remainder of this century.[1]

Vice-President George Bush

This paper attempts to provide a framework for the consideration of the role of the military security assistance officer involved in low intensity conflict (LIC). The paper assumes the national strategic perspective, briefly explaining what LIC is and detailing how security assistance fits in the context of U.S. responses to LIC. It also discusses the unique position the security assistance officer occupies in the process of formulating and executing U.S. foreign policy.

Since low intensity conflict (LIC) has begun to occupy a prominent place in the attention of our national leadership, the professional military officer understandably has an interest. Perhaps more directly concerned is the security assistance officer who serves in the remote areas of the world where most LIC incidents occur. However, because LIC is the "war in the shadows," understanding it can be somewhat difficult. To build a context for that understanding, several observations are appropriate.

First, what is LIC? The Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) defines it in JCS Publication 1 as:

A limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic and psychosocial pressures through terrorism and insurgency. Low Intensity Conflict is generally confined to a geographic area and is often characterized by constraints on weaponry, tactics and the level of violence.[2]

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The author recognizes the many contributions of the other officers at the A-AF CLIC to his clearer understanding of the general LIC phenomenon. In particular, he wishes to thank Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Walters, U.S. Army, and Doctor Thomas W. Crouch, Unit Historian, for their support in testing the ideas expressed in the paper.

The JCS definition is somewhat broad; it is difficult to interpret operationally. To facilitate understanding and discussion, the Army-Air Force Center for LIC at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, has divided LIC into four main components: insurgency/counterinsurgency; combating terrorism; peacetime contingency operations; and peacekeeping operations. Generally speaking, LIC incorporates all those situations involving the use of force, or its threatened use, short of direct, *sustained* combat between conventional forces.[3]

Is LIC a new form of warfare? While some argument to the contrary exists, there is a growing consensus that LIC forms a part of the long-established, general spectrum of warfare--specifically that form of violence found at the lower end of the conflict spectrum.[4] The consensus has its roots in an axiom of Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Prussian soldier and author of the influential work, *On War*. Clausewitz maintained that war is but a continuation of politics in another form. There are, however, certain characteristics about LIC that uncover heretofore less clear aspects of contemporary conflict. The Superpower standoff at the nuclear threshold and the resultant aversion to direct violent conflict are unique to recent history. This situation makes the small "war in the shadows" an attractive alternative. Costs are low; and therefore resorting to it is more widespread. The shadowy and insidious nature of LIC makes retaliation difficult. The media's hunger for emotive, exciting content for news stories, coupled with its technical advancement, produces near-instant notoriety. Moreover, the Soviets definitely are active in manipulating these widely-publicized LICs to their advantage.

In the worst-case, risk assessment game, one LIC in itself may have relatively low impact on the vital national interests of the US; but because of the high likelihood of its occurrence on several fronts, it can, in effect, multiply itself into a significant threat to national well-being. In geopolitical terms, isolated instances of LIC present little threat to either superpower; but, occurring simultaneously in numbers, they can have great impact on the interests of both.

A comment is in order at this point: LIC is a "superpower" term. It can mean many things to different people. What for the U.S. is low intensity--for example U.S. support to a Third World counterinsurgency--is for the assisted government very much high intensity, as it fights for its very survival. It is almost an insult to speak with that nation in terms of "low" intensity.

It is perhaps useful to compare the use of the term LIC with the use of the acronym "SAO (Security Assistance Organization)." There is an SAO at the U.S. embassy in each country where there is a significant U.S. security assistance program. But, in consonance with the parlance of the host country, the SAO usually goes under some other name, normally one that U.S. officials choose in consultation with host authorities. "LIC," then, like the term SAO, is best left to discussions in U.S. circles.

In light of the threat that the cumulative efforts of LIC constitute, a crucial question logically arises: what is the proper U.S. response? President Reagan has stated:

The fundamental tenet of U.S. strategy for dealing with Low Intensity Conflict directed against our friends and allies is that military instruments in threatened states must become able to provide security for their citizens and governments. U.S. Low Intensity Conflict policy, therefore, recognizes that indirect . . . applications of U.S. military power are the most appropriate and cost effective ways to achieve national goals. The principal military instrument in Low Intensity Conflict . . . is security assistance.[5]

The first thought crossing the mind of someone familiar with the intricacies of security assistance is, "What does the President mean by 'security assistance'?" Without "reinventing the wheel" created in the various courses at the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM),[6], it is useful to take a look at a few salient points about terminology. *The*

*Management of Security Assistance*, a DISAM text, speaks of a "definitional dilemma" about security assistance that is not easily resolved. It mentions the use of "dozens of terms," because of the fact that "security assistance management crosses U.S. Government agency and military department organizational boundaries." [7]

Not surprisingly therefore, the term security assistance has many meanings. Understanding it certainly is a dilemma. With the variety of actors involved, it appears to be another proof of the old adage, "where you sit is where you stand." In the narrowest sense, it is a compilation of budgetary considerations that surround one of many U.S. foreign assistance programs.

The definitional problem serves as a stimulus for keeping an open mind about the problems of LIC. There is a "forest" in sight, but the number and diversity of trees in the "forest" should not impede vision. As a strategic capability, security assistance rises out of the static pages of the law books and fits in a broader context as a primary tool of national power.

In addition to the JCS definition of LIC, there is another definition that merits consideration. It states:

Low Intensity Conflicts . . . take place at levels below conventional war but above the routine, peaceful competition among states . . . They often involve a protracted struggle of competing principles and ideologies. Low Intensity Conflicts may be waged by a combination of means, including the use of political, economic, informational and military instruments. [8]

This definition conveys a greater feel for the strategic impact of LIC. The four means to combat it come right out of "Strategy 101," the basic course. A key element of the definition is its speaking of low intensity conflicts, stressing the plural. This emphasis reinforces the view that LIC is a broad universe involving differing categories of violence-related, discrete, yet similar activities.

A coordinated, national response to LIC will differ according to the particular component of LIC the U.S. is facing. Each situation will involve a correspondingly different blend of the available instruments of national power. To accomplish this task effectively, U.S. decision makers must be aware, first of all, of the existence of a LIC challenge.

Awareness invariably is difficult, especially in the early, insidious stages of an insurgency, for example. It is an area in which the military officer working in security assistance can play a major role., He is among the very few "eyes and ears" the U.S. has in the Third World. In fact, in many Third World nations, where the LIC challenge is most significant, the U.S. military association with the host nation is the key--and sometimes the only--close relationship available to the U.S. As the signs leading to a LIC challenge first begin to manifest themselves, vigilance is of the essence, and responsiveness in getting information into proper reporting channels is the guiding principle. This realization can shed new light on the importance of a well-thought-out, well-coordinated, and well-written Annual Integrated Assessment of Security Assistance. [9]

Once the LIC threat to national interests becomes clear, the U.S. leaders then must mix the proper ingredients of available national capabilities and meld them into a balanced strategy. The result usually will include military aspects and will not always pertain to security assistance alone. It is necessary to remember that security assistance is the principal, but not the sole, means of military response. The following quote clearly bears out this belief:

The core of our efforts to counter . . . Low Intensity Conflicts is the economic and security assistance we provide to help Third World nations to solve the problems of development while combating the threats to their security. Our

conventional and special operations forces, however, are capable of providing direct assistance should the need arise, as . . . in Grenada and . . . against Libya.[10]

Low intensity conflicts, then, are potentially dangerous challenges to the strategic political interests of the U.S. that require coordinated, interagency responses. They normally will involve all the instruments of national power. The employment of the military capability, more often than not in a noncombat role, constitutes primarily a tactic. Its use supports a broader national campaign to attain an essentially political goal.

Since security assistance does play a core role in LIC, the security assistance officer participates intimately in the overall process. At the same time, he needs to remind himself constantly that because of the basically political nature of any particular U.S. response to LIC, the military usually is not in the lead role. Concretely, at the host country level, where the "rubber meets the road," this realization translates into an absolute requirement for unity of effort, through the mechanism of the country team.[11]

It will serve the military person well to review the concept of the country team. He should have a thorough grasp of the dynamics of its operation and learn to exert positive influence on its activities. Each team is different. Some are larger than others. Some are relatively more powerful than others. Regardless, each is a key element that formulates and executes country-level strategy.

The team does not operate in a vacuum. It reports back to and receives guidance from the various parent agencies in Washington. In turn, the agencies coordinate their activities in an attempt to balance the requirements at country level with agency, regional, and national priorities. In the security assistance game, it is well to realize that Congress, too, plays a dominant role even in day-to-day affairs.

The process is complex even in peacetime, during which its designers intended it to operate. Exacerbations of a LIC threat cause the system excessive strain. The fact that LIC is the most active threat the U.S. faces in the near future suggests a requirement for fundamental revisions in the security assistance process at the national level.

The security assistance officer is not alone "out in the trenches." The Administration and, in particular, the Defense Department are in the forefront of the efforts to make the system work and to help out the warrior in the field. An excellent example of their work is detailed in Dr. Louis J. Samelson's article in *The DISAM Journal*, Winter 1986-87. Entitled "Congress and the Fiscal Year 87 Security Assistance Budget: A Study in Austerity," the article points out the challenges faced by management at the start of Fiscal Year 87 resulting from the funding of the security assistance program by Congress through the use of a continuing resolution. Experts at the Defense and State Departments literally agonized at the difficulties in restructuring the entire program, worldwide. Congress had "fenced" a significant portion of the available funds. Yet, the experts succeeded in implementing a meaningful, though austere, program.[12]

As a final note on the country team process, it is important to remember that the security assistance officer is also the "eyes and ears" of the Unified Commander he serves. Militarily, then, he has the luxury of an operational look at the position his host country fills in the overall regional strategy. [13] He can play an active role in translating that vision into terms useful to the other members of the country team. His, then, is a key role in the U.S. response to LIC.

While security assistance looms large as an important element in meeting the LIC challenge, it also has other roles in the national strategy. One would be remiss were he not to acknowledge that fact. In terms of its purely peacetime mode, it serves as a key instrument in the overall U.S. strategy of coalition that aims at deterring aggression in any form. Security assistance is really a

bridge that provides continuity for collective security with U.S. friends and allies in times of both peace and crisis.

In the broad context of worldwide competition that takes place mainly between two powerful camps, security assistance personnel face a great challenge. This is especially true for those serving outside the U.S. Some of them are participating in the development of relationships that breathe life into the Nation's peacetime strategy of coalition; others are the front line warriors on the various current LIC battlefields where U.S. interests are at stake. All of them are key actors in the formulation and implementation of the Nation's foreign policy.

## ENDNOTES

1. Speech to the graduating class, U.S. Air Force Academy, 28 May 1986.
2. "Memorandum for the Director, Joint Staff (SM-793-85)," The Joint Chief of Staff, 21 November 1985. The definition is to be published in the next edition of JCS Publication 1, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 1 January 1986, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.
3. See "Operational Considerations for Military Involvement in Low Intensity Conflict," *CLIC PAPERS*, Army-Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict, June 1987.
4. For a discussion of the overall definitional issue, see Dr. William J. Olson, *Low Intensity Conflict and the Principles and Strategies of War*, ACN 86004, The Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks PA 17013-5050, particularly pp. 3-5. Dr. Olson has worked extensively on the topic of LIC, in many fora. A contribution that deserves attention for its comprehensive analysis is "U.S. Objectives and Constraints: An Overview," a presentation at the 16th Annual Conference of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy on *Protracted Warfare--The Third World Arena: A Dimension of US-Soviet Conflict*, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 23 April 1987. The proceedings of the conference are scheduled for publication.
5. *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, Washington, January 1987, p. 33.
6. DISAM is located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH. It is the primary Department of Defense school for personnel involved in any way in the defense security assistance process.
7. Sixth Edition, November 1985, p. 2-10.
8. *National Security Strategy of the United States*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
9. The "AIASA" is a "report submitted by the U.S. Diplomatic Mission which ... (provides) an assessment of the host country's capabilities ... (and) contains recommended and projected levels of security assistance, for preparation of the Congressional Presentation Document." *The Management of Security Assistance*, *op. cit.*, p. B-2.
10. *Soviet Military Power 1987*, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 154.
11. The country team is an advisory body for the chief of a U.S. diplomatic mission. It is a forum for consultation made up of the chief representatives from all U.S. Government agencies and departments present in the mission. It is an instrument for coordinating the total U.S. effort in a particular country.

12. Pp. 10-30. The article examines the funding and related security assistance provisions of the FY 1987 Continuing Resolution which are contained in a separate section of Public Law 99-591 entitled, "Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1987."

13. See Chapter 2, "Fundamentals of Air Land Battle Doctrine," *U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations*, for a discussion of "operational art" and military strategy. Because of the breadth of their operational concerns, the commander of a unified command and his planners have a regional view that is unique among their peers in other U.S. government agencies located outside the nation's capital. Few non-military members of country teams have the opportunity to meet the challenges that a broad regional vision entails.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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