Editorial

Eleven years into the American-led “War on Terror,” terrorism and insurgency remain significant threats to the national security of many countries. In Iraq, coordinated insurgent attacks continue to wreak havoc in the precarious security situation following the American withdrawal. In Afghanistan, Taliban infiltrators in the security forces turn on their trainers, undermining Coalition troop morale even as their leaders struggle for an exit strategy. Globally, the recent “Improved underwear bomb” plot demonstrates that despite the loss of their leader, Al Qaeda retains the capacity to plot mayhem. This issue of POINTER features articles on the many challenges that global terrorism and insurgency pose to conventional militaries, including the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

LTC Goh Churn Yen, Tom explores the military’s role in fighting terrorism. In “With a Helmet or a Badge: Is the Counter-Terrorism Effort More Effectively Undertaken by the Military or the Police?”, LTC Goh draws on case studies of the British and Israeli counter-terrorism efforts to argue that the police is most suited to the task. Given the need to preserve social order and win the public’s confidence, law enforcement, with its emphasis on minimal force and rule of law, is the most effective instrument for countering terrorism. Militaries such as the SAF are thus best employed in a supporting role, particularly in the areas of surveillance, monitoring and disaster management, where they possess advantages in resources and expertise. LTC Goh suggests an integrated approach, centred on civilian law enforcement but supplemented by SAF capabilities when required, as the best means of achieving success. “The Evolution of Insurgency and its Impact on Conventional Armed Forces,” by LTC Tan Giam, explores some of the practical considerations when militaries are faced with insurgency. While as old as war itself, insurgency has evolved over the ages and conventional militaries are constantly challenged to adapt accordingly. In order to handle complex urban environments, heavy civilian presence and intense media scrutiny, the SAF must be willing to learn from past counter-insurgency efforts, placing special emphasis on force reorganisation, full spectrum training and leadership development.

MAJ Samuel Song Yong Chiat examines international counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism efforts in “The Global War on Terror: The Most Extensive and Successful Coalition Ever?” He concludes that while the American-led effort has severely damaged Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, they retain the ability to regenerate their losses and mount further attacks. The Coalition faces a long struggle to dilute the appeal of Al-Qaeda’s ideology and weaken its recruitment base. MAJ Song’s conclusion reinforces the need to tackle terrorism at its roots—body counts and territorial control are inadequate metrics for measuring success against an asymmetric opponent. “Did the Terrorist Attacks of 11 September 2001 Confirm the Thesis that ‘Intelligence Failures are Inevitable?'” by COL Seet Uei Lim addresses the vital role of the intelligence community in averting terrorist attacks by examining its greatest failure in recent times. Instead of the fatalistic conclusion that “intelligence failures are inevitable,” SLTC Seet provides a more nuanced view of the United States (US) Intelligence Community’s performance. Examining the actions of the various agencies, he concludes that the Intelligence Community gave sufficient advance warning of an impending Al-Qaeda attack at both the political and strategic levels, but an effective policymaker response was not forthcoming. Furthermore, while the community failed to anticipate the exact details of the September 11 attacks, this was due as much to Al-Qaeda’s sophisticated counter-intelligence measures as any mistakes on their own part. The US intelligence community thus did not perform as badly as commonly thought—indeed, the real problem was that they were not taken seriously enough. SLTC Seet’s article underscores the need for information to be backed up by action—the best intelligence on terrorist activity is useless without the appropriate policy response.

In this issue’s Tech Edge article, “Opening the Black Box: How do Command Teams Sensemake?,” SLTC Lim Beng Chong, PhD examines the complexities of team sensemaking—while all people can sensemake as individuals, team efforts do not come intuitively and there is a tendency for vital information and alternative viewpoints to be overlooked when teams try to understand a situation. Team sensemaking is a vital skill for the Third Generation SAF as it confronts an increasingly uncertain security landscape.
Finally, “We are the Sons of Singapore: Why Some NSmen Keep Going and Going” by COL (VOL) Leonard Yeow Ghim Chee sheds light on the motivations of long-serving NSmen and serves as a timely reminder of the stake we all have in our national defence. The loyalty and commitment of these NSmen should resonate with us as the SAF prepares to face the future.

POINTER would like to bid PTE Lim Rui Jin a fond farewell as he leaves for medical school. His positive attitude and meticulous work ethic have been a great help despite his short time with us. We wish him all the best in his future endeavours.

The POINTER Editorial Team