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Complex Military Operations in the 21st Century: Challenges for Field Combat Personnel

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Complex military operations, are those military campaigns including, but not limited to, those military operations by conventional defence and security forces in alliance with paramilitaries and civil groups against non-conventional armed groups (insurgents and terrorists who do not recognise and observe legally-institutionalised municipal and international laws), have taken centre stage in current strategic discourse. This is because insurgency and terrorism pose the greatest challenge to most sovereign state entities who, in most cases, respond without properly appreciating and addressing the numerous challenges, potential and real, which face national armed forces combat personnel in their physical theatres of anti-insurgency/anti-terrorism operations or battle space as the case maybe. This paper posits that it is not possible to adequately contain the nefarious activities of insurgents and terrorists without adequately identifying and addressing the unique challenges which face combat personnel in those theatres or spaces of operation. It goes on to conclude that unless this prevailing situation is reversed, prospects for effective counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism initiatives will likely remain bleak.

Keywords: Complex military operations (CMOs), field combat personnel, counter intelligence (COIN) and human intelligence (HUMINT).

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*The only solution to a bad guy with the gun is a good guy
with the gun.*

**– Wayne Robert La Pierre, Jr., Executive Vice President
and Chief Executive Officer,**

National Rifles Association of the United States

*Buy your enemies over or destroy them; but never make
them martyrs*

– Niccolò Machiavelli

Introduction

In the prevailing complex military environments of the 21st century, modern sovereign entities face hostile violent extremism, global/regional/national in scope, ruthless in character and purpose and insidious in method to the extent that a vital element in keeping the peace is the ability to appreciate and address the unique challenges that face conventional combat armed forces personnel in their complex non-conventional theatres of operation. Complex military operations have been part of the strategic engagements by sovereign states such as the United States (US), Russia, Britain, France and Israel among others, over time. The US involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan since the dawn of the 21st Century; Russian military engagements against the Afghan Mujahadeen in the late 1970s and against the Chechen rebels in the North Caucasus region of Russia since the 1990s; the British counter-terrorism campaigns in Northern Ireland since the 1960s; French military operations in Indo-China and Africa; Israel's successive military operations in Palestinian territories and Nigeria's military operations against insurgents in Nigeria's northeast, among others, are typical examples of complex military operations.

All these operations were, or are, directed against armed groups who had or have no recognition or observance of the municipal laws within their host environments or international laws including the Geneva Conventions on armed conflict. They lasted or are lasting for a very long time; and pitched or pitch the legally-institutionalised and authorised armed forces of the states concerned against organised and armed non-state actors. The peculiarity of the longevity of these complex military operations unveils the reality of enormous human and material costs in protracted periods, thereby calling into question

the reliability of the prevailing measures taken to identify and address the unique challenges confronting the operational personnel and by extension, the strategy applied in the counter-insurgency and counter terrorism in the said operations. Whenever a complex military operation gulps so much human and material resources within so long a time, its entire strategic trajectory could be called into question. Certain contributory factors in this regard could be identified.

Either there is no proper understanding of the unique challenges that confront or are likely to confront combat operational personnel of the states concerned in their theatres of operation or the entire strategic trajectory of the military operations are flawed, or there is a combination of the former and the latter. It is in this context that this paper examines the unique challenges that confront field combat operational personnel of sovereign states – “the good guys with the gun” in their theatres of operation against insurgents and terrorists – “the bad guys with the gun.”

Complex Military Operations

A complex element could be perceived as a phenomenon or representation which consists of various parts or elements making it conglomerate, entangled, mixed, multiple in composition, heterogeneous and by implication, complicated. While complex military operations could be perceived as those military operations including, but not limited to, operations by conventional defence and security forces against non-conventional armed groups, they have been variously perceived as stability operations, operations other than war (OOTW), irregular warfare, hybrid warfare, or counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism by military, paramilitary and civilian activities to restore order within a disordered scenario in a particular environment

(Guttieri, Franke & Civic, 2014). The entire situation is seen as complex because of the constantly-changing combination of actors involved, the frequency at which the strategic and operational scenarios continue to change as well as the constraints and challenges on respond initiatives against insurgency and terrorism.

From this perspective, it could be said that complex military operations pose the greatest challenges to conventional armed forces personnel who are basically trained and tutored in conventional warfare against conventional foes. This fact becomes more glaring under the current prevailing circumstances in which conventional armed forces of states (in the absence of international wars) are almost permanently pitched against non-conventional armed non-governmental insurgent/terrorist organisations and groups. The military, paramilitary and civil conglomerates and components of complex military operations tend to confirm its heterogeneous and complex nature. Be it traditional peacekeeping or internal security operations (ISOs) or peace enforcement or peace restoration or counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism or operations other than war, the “complexity” of complex military operations could be gleaned from the fact that the peculiarity bordering its conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation, stands it out as a type of “fourth-dimensional war” – a war that is fought, not necessary with the three conventional tri-service (army, navy and air force) establishments against other conventional forces but, by conventional national forces against non-conventional armed groups (insurgents/terrorists).

Unique Challenges in Counter-Insurgency/Counter-Terrorism

Even though theatres of complex military operations vary to a significant degree in physical and operational terms, the conventional

combat personnel therein face, if not identical, similar challenges which cut across the theatres irrespective of the peculiarities of each operational theatre. These challenges include, but may not be limited to, the following: Reconciling the dictates of strategic plans with the tactical demands of combat operational theatres; applying conventional strategy in non-conventional environments; ensuring adequate and effective synergy between the counter-insurgency military units as well as between military, paramilitary and civil agencies; reconciling the provisions of international laws of armed conflict which combat personnel are subjected to with the “laws of the jungle” adhered to by insurgents and terrorists; the fog of war; obtaining timely, adequate and credible intelligence; ability to predict the intentions of, and act before, the adversary; booby traps, landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs); fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA) or military operations in urban terrain (MOUT); the use of civilians as human shields by insurgent/terrorist gunmen; the challenge of improper and inadequate weapons for combat; collateral damage; internal sabotage by saboteurs within the armed forces, paramilitary agencies and civil class; suicide bombers; physical health challenges (such as combat-induced bronchitis [CIB] resulting from overexposure to toxic explosive fumes); ignorance of the cultures and traditions in operational environments; uncertainty of the terminal point of military operations and finally, the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism personnel.

These factors aforementioned constitute the greatest challenges which face conventional combat military personnel of sovereign states in complex military operations. Examining these challenges, therefore, is important in appreciating the addressing them.

**Reconciling the Provisions
of Broad Strategic Plan
with Tactical Demands
in Combat Operational Theatres**

Sometime the provision of the broad military strategy may contrast with the actual tactical demands on combat personnel in theatres of complex military operations. For example, what happens when the military strategic objectives is to rescue innocent civilians held hostage and used as human shields by insurgent or terrorist gunmen? Can this be achieved without civilian casualties? These questions tend to resonate especially because most insurgents and terrorists do not observe the laws of armed conflict; and more often than not, they seize innocent civilians as hostages and human shields in their confrontation with conventional national armed forces. The insurgents' capture of Chibok girls in north-eastern Nigeria and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL's) taking of western hostages are typical examples. More often than not, the gunmen fissile into civilian-populated areas and are difficult to target and neutralise.

**Ignorance of the Cultures
and Traditions in Counter-Insurgency
and Counter-Terrorism Environments**

Most often, insurgents and terrorists integrate into the host environment and even tend to incorporate the population into their violent subversive activities. They imbibe their cultures and traditions in order to win over the local civilian population to their side. This represents an enormous challenge to national armed forces personnel; and counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations may not succeed if the culture of the operational environment, how their infrastructures are designed, the uniqueness of the values and taboos of the local population and the people that make their decisions, are not understood.

**Applying Conventional Strategy
in Non-Conventional Environment**

National armed forces combat personnel are basically and primarily trained to fight conventional wars between nations not necessarily complex military operations in synergy with paramilitary and civil personnel against non-conventional armed groups. Most often, the armed insurgent/terrorist groups exploit this apparent handicap by adopting all-out non-conventional strategies and tactics against national armed forces personnel who are guided by conventional municipal and international laws. The recognition of this apparent strategic limitation by national governments fighting insurgency and terrorism has actualised the integration of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism training into the curricular of institutions in national military academies, colleges and training schools in countries such as the United States, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, among others. However, the degree of effectiveness of these initiatives of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism is subject to debate (Ricks, 2009).

**Ensuring Adequate
and Effective Synergy among
the Conglomerate Units
in Counter-Insurgency
and Counter-Terrorism Operations**

Complex military operations are often referred to as "fourth-dimensional" war involving the conventional tri-service organs of the military in synergy with paramilitary and civil agencies of government against non-conventional armed groups. Consequently, a successful counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism operation is predicated to the degree of synergy between the various contributing units. Most often than not, absence of synergy within the counter-insurgency conglomeration could lead to limited success or

outright mission failure. This situation could be seen in the previous complex military operations in Nigeria's northeast and in Iraqi government's offensives against ISIL.

**Reconciling the Provisions
of the International Laws
of Armed Conflict (LOAC)
with the "Laws of the Jungle"**

In complex military operations such as counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism, two opposing entities are pitched against each other – the conventional armed forces combat units and the insurgent/terrorist armed groups. The former is expected to recognise and abide by the LOAC as reflected in the series of Geneva Conventions 1, 2, 3 and 4 of 1949 (Solis, 2010), while the latter is guided by the "laws of the jungle" characterised by organised lawlessness, genocide, savage brutal killings and decapitations of innocent civilians and non-combatants. In combating the armed groups, the conventional combat personnel are faced with the challenge of facing a hostile enemy too disguised to be easily identified, too lawless to be treated with soft hands and too savage and brutal to be spared whenever confronted. The question in this regard is: In complex military operations, should humanitarian law apply to non-governmental armed group members? Do these non-conventional gunmen qualify as prisoners of war, or enemy combatants or unclassified gunmen? How should they be perceived in complex military operations? This appears to be a big challenge in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

The Fog of War

The unpredictability and uncertainty in combat circumstances is a major challenge in complex military operations. One thing predictable about armed groups is the unpredictability of the strategy, tactics and timing of their attack. This

makes it almost impossible for conventional armed forces personnel to predict the intentions and modus operandi of the gunmen. Weather unpredictability is another challenging factor as was the case with the US in Iran in 1980. When the then President, Jimmy Carter, sent American special forces on a rescue mission to free US hostages held in Teheran, little did he know that dust storms could interfere with the flight landing and takeoff at the remote Iranian desert from where the American rescue team would storm Teheran. The complex military operation ended in a debacle when, blinded by dust storms, the pilots of the two US helicopter choppers conveying the rescue personnel collided, killing everyone on board. Also, the possibility of insurgents and terrorists disguising and melting into the civil population makes conventional armed units vulnerable to their violent attacks.

**Obtaining Timely, Adequate
and Credible Human Intelligence
(HUMINT)**

In complex military environments, utilising timely, adequate and credible human intelligence (HUMINT) is very important. This is especially so because insurgents and terrorists, most often, melt and blend into the civil population environment disguised as ordinary harmless civilians; and from there, they plan and execute their operations against conventional armed forces personnel or their civil colleagues and sympathisers. Pre-empting, dismantling and incapacitating insurgent or terrorist gunmen require infiltrating their ranks, possibly with civil undercover agents recruited from within the social-cultural and linguistic environment of the insurgents/terrorists. Since insurgents and terrorists sometimes infiltrate the rank and file of conventional combat soldiers as well as the larger society and striking at soft civilian targets, one feasible counter-initiative is to penetrate them

and act before they act. This is because a major solution to the design of the “bad guys with the gun”(the insurgents) is the pre-emptive action of the “good guys with the gun”(the counter-insurgency operatives).

Booby Traps, Landmines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)

One of the greatest dangers and challenges in complex military operations is that of insurgents and terrorists using booby traps, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and even landmines in attacking combat soldiers and soft civilian targets. Indications in complex military environments over time, show that the greatest casualties among counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism armed forces result from booby traps, IEDs, landmines and other unconventional weapons of war. Therefore, the big question is: How can soldiers on counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism operations cope with this challenge?

Insurgents/Terrorists Using Civilians as Human Shields

The use of non-combatant civilians as human shields by insurgents and terrorists is another major challenge for conventional soldiers engaged in complex military operations. This creates a serious dilemma on the course of the right action to be taken against the armed groups. This situation confirms the traditional Igbo language reference to the proverbial tse-tse fly which perched on the human male genital. Hitting it with a decisive blow is dangerous and allowing it to continue perching and sucking blood is even more dangerous. Perhaps, the rational thing is to tacitly and stealthily infiltrate the gunmen, rescue the civilians with minimal collateral damage and eliminate the insurgents/terrorists. This delicate operation, undoubtedly, requires very careful planning and execution. Presently, the rescue of the Chibok girls in north-eastern Nigeria remains

a major challenge to the military joint task force combating insurgency and terrorism in the area.

The Challenge of Inadequate and Improper Weapon for Counter-Insurgency/ Counter-Terrorism Operations

CMOs require, not only adequate but the proper weapons for success to be achieved in counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism operations. It is common knowledge that insurgent/terrorist groups source for and receive sophisticated weapons of war, most often, from the black market. These weapons include, but are not limited to, various models of assault rifles, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, mounted guns, etc. and in certain cases, armoured personnel carriers (APCs), landmines and even artillery guns captured from conventional forces. It is on record that most of the sophisticated weapons used by ISIL insurgents in Iraq and the insurgents in north east Nigeria, were captured from Iraqi government forces and the Nigerian government soldiers respectively. The mere fact that the insurgency/terrorist armed men used very sophisticated weapons creates a very big challenge for counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism. Perhaps, the only way to reverse this scenario is for counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism personnel to possess and utilise adequate and appropriate arms and ammunition during their operations.

Internal Sabotage by Saboteurs within the Armed Forces, Paramilitary Agencies and the Civil Class

The most subordinate and obedient animals are lower class ones such as horses, dogs, camels, donkeys, domestic cats, among others. Unless they are badly treated, they hardly disobey their masters. The same may not be said of higher class animals like human beings. This is because a

well-trained, well-catered for, well-remunerated and well-to-do human being (soldier or civilian), out of ideological or religious extremism, could decide to sabotage counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism operations by colluding with armed groups against his country. Military commanders, soldiers, civilians, intelligence officials and staff of paramilitary agencies who disclose classified information to insurgents and terrorists are saboteurs not only to their country but to the patriotic counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism operatives. They are more dangerous than the terrorists and insurgents themselves and they constitute a very big challenge in CMOs.

Suicide Bombers

The phenomenon of suicide bombing in CMOs has gained centre stage in recent times and has been witnessed in complex military environments. Unlike the “fifth column” which targeted government infrastructure and facilities, modern day suicide bombing focuses not only on military, but also on “soft targets” such as populated places of worship, markets, shopping malls, institutions of learning, motor parks and traffic queues. The end is to inflict heavy casualties on non-suspecting military and non-military individuals. Most times, the bombers are disguised as ordinary civilians, carrying out their normal daily activities; they do not wear identification uniforms neither do they disclose their intentions and weapons. They melt and fizzle into the civilian communities thereby making their prompt identification difficult. Most often, they take their victims by surprise through suicide explosive detonations. This is a huge challenge in CMOs.

Ambush by Insurgents/Terrorists

Most casualties among the soldiers resulting in CMOs are as a result of military ambush by insurgent/terrorist armed groups against

conventional anti-insurgent/anti-terrorist forces. The phenomenon of ambush plays out when the armed groups deceive the conventional soldiers into believing that they are not pitched to take them unawares in a surprise attack when, in actual fact, they are. Whether in internal security operations against terrorists or in counter-insurgency operations against insurgents in designated theatres, the issue of ambush poses a great challenge for armed forces personnel in complex military environments.

Uncertainty of the Terminal/Exit Point of the Military Operations

As in every human engagement, CMOs are expected to have a starting point and an end point. Uncertainty of the terminal/exit point in hybrid warfare often leads to low morale, frustrations, desertions, suicides, friendly fire and possibility of mission failure. For example, the protracted military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan by the Americans, and the ongoing operations in northeast Nigeria are typical examples in this regard. Whenever ab-initio, there is no clear-cut exit strategy in CMOs and national armed forces are consequently suddenly stampeded of operational areas, it leads to limited success or even failure in achieving the objectives of the military operations. This is evident in Iraq and Afghanistan where the withdrawal of US forces exacerbated rather than reduced the tempo of violence.

The Possibility of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Other Affiliated Health Problems among Anti-Insurgency/ Anti-Terrorism Operatives

Experience has shown that most military personnel who are, or who were, engaged in CMOs, just as the case in conventional warfare, suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD). Some also even suffer from Combat-induced Bronchitis (CIB) as a result of repeated exposure to toxic explosive fumes in the operational theatres. These health problems and other related ones are combat-induced and they constitute potential or real challenges to active duty personnel in CMOs.

Taking all the above challenges into consideration, the big question is: How can they be surmounted? The question could be addressed by making some valid recommendations. Tackling challenges or problems does not start and end with identifying them and conceptualising solutions geared towards solving them. It also entails putting into practice necessary measures. In this context, therefore, the following measures below are recommended.

Recommendation

1. **Provision and utilisation of timely, credible and adequate human intelligence (HUMIT).** Intelligence should not only be credible, it should also be timely and adequate enough for practical strategic and tactical execution. Penetrating the rank and file of insurgents and terrorists through pretentious religious or cult solidarity, ideological leaning and social identity is a possible tool in this direction. This counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism strategy has proved successful for the Americans in their global war on terrorism (GWOT).

2. **Providing counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism forces with adequate military hardware and supplies.** Experience has shown that whenever combat soldiers in hybrid warfare are well-equipped with the appropriate weapons, they tend to achieve success over the armed groups. However, the situation is the reverse if they are poorly-equipped.

3. **Taking adequate care of the welfare of counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism**

operatives. In addition to being adequately equipped with arms and ammunition, soldiers on operational duties, in complex military environments, regardless of whatever circumstances prevail, should have their personal welfare adequately taken care of. This is because failure to do so could result in low morale and in some cases, desertions or mutiny among the service personnel. A situation where some Nigerian soldiers on security and peace operations have to go on demonstration to protest either non-payment or underpayment in their financial welfare is absurd in conventional military tradition. Among other things, it triggers insubordination among service personnel and possibility of mission stagnation or failure in hybrid warfare. This fact might have informed the statement by the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, on the occasion of the Presidential ceremony for decorating the new defence service chiefs on August 13, 2015 in Abuja, Nigeria where he charged them to have the welfare of their troops uppermost in their minds (Channels Television News Report, August 14, 2015).

The President's statement is a morale booster, not only to the defence service chiefs, but also to the combat operational personnel serving under them in counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism theatres of operation in the northeast of Nigeria. The follow-up promotion of not less than 5,000 Nigerian soldiers engaged in counter-insurgency operations in the northeast of Nigeria by the Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant-General Tukur Buratai in September 2015, is another indication of sensitivity and concern for the welfare of the Nigerian soldiers fighting the insurgents. These gestures appear to have paid off going by the recent successes in counter-insurgency operations in Nigeria's northeast region.

4. **The use of military propaganda.** Since the insurgent/terrorist groups use electronic media (the social media and other internet networks) to disseminate false information to people, it is imperative that counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism forces should counter these propaganda with greater and more overwhelming propaganda. This will deprive the insurgents/terrorists of mass popular support they anticipate. It will also de-popularise them and win greater legitimacy, acceptance and support for the government's counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism initiatives and personnel. War is war; be it conventional or non-conventional (hybrid, complex, counter-insurgent or counter-terrorist). The use of military propaganda could be a precipitating factor in victory. Its relegation or non-utilisation in complex military environments could also contribute to mission failure.

5. **Denying the insurgents/terrorists logistical supplies and safe haven.** This is what could what be referred to as the "termitaria decimation strategy" (TDS). Insurgency (to a large extent) and terrorism (to a less extent) could have widespread support among the local population. Denying them logistical supplies and safe haven is therefore necessary in defeating them in CMOs (Zamba, 2016). One feasible option, in the opinion of Smith (2008) is to fragment, diminish and dismantle the armed groups' support base, alienate them from the local population and cut off their supply lines. This strategy appears to have yielded widespread positive result with the recent joint Nigerian Army and Nigerian Air Force capture and seizure of large cache of arms and ammunition as well as lorry loads of dried fish meant for insurgent fighters in north-eastern Nigeria in the middle of 2015. The TDS, as conceptualised by the authors of this text, is centred on the realisation of the fact that you cannot annihilate the population of soldier ants trooping out from their source and environment

(the termitaria or anthill) without destroying the termitaria itself from where they emerge for attack in organised convoys. It may not be an overstatement to say that the TDS appears to be a contributing factor in the recent successes by the Nigerian armed forces in the northeast of the country.

6. **Government's implementation of "soft power" policy.** This measure will actualise the winning over of extremist insurgent/terrorist converts and potential recruits to the government side. It involves, among other things, accepting, re-orientating and rehabilitating insurgent/terrorist elements that renounce insurgency/terrorism and surrender to government forces. This will have the positive effect of dampening the morale of the insurgent/terrorist group and boosting the fighting spirit of the government forces.

7. **Introducing a definite legislation to insulate government counter-insurgency / counter-terrorism operatives who observe the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC)/International Humanitarian Law (IHL) from indiscriminate allegations of human right violations and other related criminal accusations.** This is very necessary to avoid dampening the spirit and lowering the morale of military operatives in complex military environments.

Conclusion

Recognising the multiple challenges that face military operatives in CMOs, and putting in place measures to address these challenges, are vital aspects in succeeding in hybrid warfare. Notable is the fact that for an operation in complex military environment to succeed, the counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism personnel should have neither empty nor tied hands. This will not only effect the fulfilment of mission objectives, it is likely to actualise an early exit or terminal point in the military operations.

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Комплексные военные операции XXI века: проблемы личного состава боевых подразделений

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Нигерийская академия обороны

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Комплексные военные операции – это военные кампании, включающие, помимо прочего, операции, проводимые традиционными силами обороны и охраны при содействии полувоенных образований и гражданских групп против нетрадиционных вооруженных группировок (повстанцы и террористы, не признающие и не соблюдающие общепринятых местных и международных законов). Такие операции заняли центральное место в нынешнем стратегическом дискурсе. Это происходит по причине того, что повстанческие силы и терроризм представляют сегодня наибольший вызов большинству суверенных государств, которые чаще всего не оценивают потенциальных и реальных трудностей, с которыми сталкивается боевой состав национальных вооруженных сил в ходе противоповстанческих/антитеррористических операций или на поле боя, и оттого не справляются с ними. В основе данного исследования лежит утверждение о том, что для эффективной борьбы против злонамеренных действий повстанцев и террористов необходимо определить и решить уникальные проблемы, с которыми сталкивается личный состав на поле боя или на месте проведения операции. В заключении статьи говорится о том, что до тех пор, пока ситуация не будет рассматриваться с этой позиции, перспективы эффективного противодействия повстанческим и террористическим силам остаются малообещающими.

Ключевые слова: комплексные военные операции (КВО), полевой боевой состав, контрразведка и агентурная разведка.

Научная специальность: 23.00.00 – политология.
