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Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Program



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Non-Lethal Weapons: Essential Capabilities for Irregular Warfare

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Posted March 18, 2009



Non-lethal weapons can play a critical role in unconventional warfare, where distinguishing between adversaries and innocent civilians is sometimes nearly impossible.

U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class James Wagner

There's no denying the changing landscape of warfare. More and more, the emergence of non-state groups is making conventional warfare less common. Several new Department of Defense (DoD) publications indicate how the DoD is gradually integrating these changes into its culture. As warfare transforms, non-lethal weapons can play an increasingly important role in helping the U.S. achieve its goals abroad.

In November 2008, U.S. Joint Forces Command published "The Joint Operating Environment 2008: Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force" (JOE). The 50-page document outlines global trends and factors that will alter the way U.S. forces operate over the next 25 years. In December 2008, the DoD issued DoD Directive 3000.07,

establishing a policy for irregular warfare. Also in December, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates authored an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine entitled, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age." All these publications reflect how the international environment is changing the DoD's mindset and strategy on warfare.

So, how do non-lethal weapons come into play as warfare changes? All three documents stress how asymmetric warfare will increasingly bring combat into crowded urban areas. Urban warfare greatly increases the possibility of civilian casualties. The documents also emphasize that winning conflicts will be as much about diplomacy and securing the support of local populations as about combat. DoD Directive 3000.07 recognizes that irregular warfare "is as strategically important as traditional warfare" and stability operations are to "be given priority comparable to combat operations."

According to the JOE, "... operations in urban terrain will confront joint force commanders with a number of conundrums. The very density of building and population will inhibit the use of kinetic means, given the potential for collateral damage as well as large numbers of civilian casualties. Such inhibitions could increase U.S. casualties. On the other hand, any collateral damage carries with it difficulties in winning the 'battle of the narrative,' " or the effort to win a battle politically and socially. Many urban situations make distinguishing between adversaries and innocent civilians nearly impossible. In these situations, non-lethal weapons can enable warfighters to discern intent, discriminate targets and non-lethally delay and deter potentially dangerous individuals. Non-lethal weapons can help warfighters accomplish their missions while minimizing unnecessary fatalities and collateral damage.

The new DoD documents also note that the military will continue to engage in humanitarian and disaster relief operations. According to the JOE, "Urban operations will inevitably require the balancing of the disruptive and destructive military operations with the requirements of humanitarian, security, and relief and reconstruction operations. What may be militarily effective may also create the potential for large civilian casualties, which in turn would most probably result in a political disaster, especially given the ubiquitous presence of the media."

Non-lethal weapons can play a critical role in these situations. They can assist military service members in safely managing crowds in areas where local civilians need food and water relief to survive. Non-lethal weapons can provide additional tools to handle challenging situations where lethal force is not a viable option.

These are just a few examples of how non-lethal weapons can help fill critical capability gaps as irregular warfare becomes more and more prevalent. "Non-lethal weapons can provide essential capabilities in situations where reducing civilian casualties and unnecessary damage to property is crucial to mission success," commented U.S. Marine Corps Colonel Kirk Hymes, Director of the Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Directorate. "As the DoD continues to adjust its strategies to meet the changing global environment, new non-lethal technologies will become even more important in helping the U.S. achieve its military objectives."

As Secretary Gates notes in his "Balanced Strategy" article, "What is dubbed the war on terror is, in grim reality, a prolonged, worldwide irregular campaign—a struggle between the forces of violent extremism and those of moderation. Direct military force will continue to play a role in the long-term effort against terrorists and other extremists. But over the long term, the United States cannot kill or capture its way to victory." As the shift from conventional to irregular warfare escalates, the U.S. will continue to modernize its approach to international conflict. Non-lethal weapons can help the U.S. meet these changing demands and succeed on the international stage.