



Bond relationship targeting

By Sid Heal

One of the most difficult aspects in implementing an asymmetric strategy¹ is identifying a weakness that can be exploited. A prepared adversary presents few weaknesses and a cunning one guards even those. One of the most overlooked weaknesses is the relationship bonds that link people or organizations together. Like all tactics, bond relationship targeting is equally useful to both sides of a conflict,² but is particularly vulnerable by the criminal element because of the self-serving nature that makes them untrustworthy to begin with.

In its most simple terms, bond relationship targeting may be defined as focusing an attack on the association, connection or cohesion that binds two or more people or organizations. This is often a particularly desirable target because once the relationship is broken, other vulnerabilities are ripe for exploitation. When attacking a bond relationship, trust is especially susceptible to gaining an advantage, and depending on the circumstances, can be exploited by increasing or decreasing the amount of trust in the relationship.

To better understand how this tactic works, let's use an example. Suppose that you are involved in defeating a violent international drug cartel and you've just arrested one of the couriers with 100 kilos of cocaine. The amount of drugs and conditions of arrest will most assuredly result in an extremely long prison sentence, but intelligence indicates that this individual possesses information that would bring the ultimate downfall of the organization. Consequently, the U.S. Attorney offers a deal for the information. If the courier cooperates, he will be set completely free. If not, he will receive a lengthy prison sentence that will keep him incarcerated for the rest of his youth. No one is surprised, however, when the courier rejects the deal out of hand. His decision is understandable given that the worst that is going to happen at the hands of the authorities is a long prison term. If he betrays the drug cartel, however, he can expect death. The bond to the cartel is stronger than the incentive to defect.

This scenario is manifested in real life in any number of ways, but let's add one per-

mutation. When the news of the arrest is released, only 50 kilos of cocaine are reported to have been seized. Still a sizeable amount, and one that will guarantee the same prison term, but what must the cartel think about the other missing 50 kilos? The relationship bond between the courier and the cartel is now strained, if not shattered completely, and since it will be nearly impossible for the courier to adequately explain away the missing drugs, he can realistically envision both the long prison term and death upon his release! Thus, the bond has been targeted and the likelihood of cooperation is increased.

While bond relationship targeting is most often used to weaken the relationship bonds between two or more individuals or organizations, it may also be advantageous to strengthen them. The most common situation in which this method may be useful in domestic law enforcement is when hostages are involved. The well-documented "Stockholm syndrome" is an emotional attachment between hostages and hostage-takers that develops when a hostage is threatened with death and is unable to escape. In coping with the experience, a hostage often comes to see the situation from the perspective of the criminal and loses touch with his original perspective, which is unimportant, or even counterproductive to his survival. But an important aspect of this relationship is that it is bi-directional. That is, the hostage-taker frequently forms a similar, albeit less intense, bond with the hostage, thus making it harder to harm the person he is holding captive. With this understanding comes the logical conclusion that strengthening the relationship bonds between the hostage-takers and the hostages works to the advantage of the eventual safe release of the hostages. (Needless to say, this strategy is not without its drawbacks in that the stronger the bond between the hostages and the hostage-taker, the less likely the hostages are to make attempts to escape on their own and may even aid a hostage-taker or hinder rescue attempts.)

Besides the tactical opportunities provided by bond relationship targeting, it also has strategic implications. This is particularly so

when dealing with terrorists because terrorism, by nature, is an asymmetrical strategy. It relies on weaknesses that can be exploited and avoids open confrontation with stronger forces. Terrorists cannot win pitched battles. Accordingly, bond relationships are not only appealing; they usually offer the only possible chance for success at a strategic level.

The bond relationship that terrorists most often target is that between the people and their government. Since the most fundamental responsibility of any government is the protection of its people, a government that appears ineffectual or inadequate in this regard loses both the people's respect and support. Thus, even though terrorists are relatively weak when compared with the government they attack, they are able to exert an inordinate amount of pressure with a smaller force. It is for this reason that seemingly insignificant physical targets, such as the safety of passengers on mass transportation or the inconvenience of losing electrical power, are especially attractive to terrorists since they are often weakly defended, if at all, and drive an emotional wedge between a government responsible for providing them and the people who rightly expect them.

Clearly, the importance of bond relationships cannot be discounted. While the short durations of most domestic law enforcement tactical interventions make it difficult to attack bond relationships, tacticians and strategists should miss no opportunity to weaken an adversary or exploit an opportunity. By taking a holistic approach to the problem, bond relationship targeting provides targets that are difficult to defend and are often taken for granted, and only the most naïve tactician will downplay the significance of morale as a force multiplier.³ As Napoleon once said, "In war the morale is to the material as three to one." ♦

Endnotes

1. For more information on asymmetric strategies, see "Symmetric and Asymmetric Strategies," *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2001, pp. 59-60.
2. For more information on the nature of conflict, see "Characteristics of Crises and Conflicts," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2002, pp. 57-58.
3. For more information on force multipliers, see "Expressed and Implied Threats," *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 1996, p. 71.