

TACTICAL TERMINOLOGY

Planning & Implementation

(Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerability)

By Sid Heal

A key requirement in planning tactical operations is to identify those factors which can be favorably influenced to achieve a successful resolution. Two of these critical factors are particularly significant in that effectively exploiting them will almost certainly result in a successful operation. These are **center of gravity** and **critical vulnerability**.

Center of Gravity

A *center of gravity* refers to something on which a suspect is dependent for success and which – if eliminated, damaged, diminished, or destroyed – will severely hamper his opportunities for success. To illustrate this concept, consider a barricaded suspect situation. The suspect's center of gravity is most often the structure itself. The structure provides a sanctuary which prevents the authorities from observing his actions and may even shield him from bullets. In order to defeat him, this protection must be removed in some manner. This is often done with an entry but may be done in a variety of other ways. For instance, inserting chemical agents may force him outside; his movements may be observed with infrared night vision scopes; or a garage door may be pulled open.

THE SUSPECT PRIMARILY DERIVES POWER FROM HIS ABILITY TO HARM THE HOSTAGES. THUS THE HOSTAGES ARE HIS CENTER OF GRAVITY AND YOUR FOCUS OF EFFORT AS OFFICERS SHOULD BE DIRECTED TOWARD REMOVING THEM FROM HARM'S WAY.

Critical Vulnerability

A *critical vulnerability* identifies a weakness which, if exploited, will create failure. Common examples of critical vulnerabilities for suspects include lack of mobility, lack of relief (will tire over time) or lack of logistical sustainment (food, water, power, ammunition and so forth). Because none of these are normally a problem with authorities, it may be possible to defeat a suspect by simply waiting him out. It hardly merits comment, but to avoid unfavorable outcomes we must also examine our own organization for its critical vulnerabilities.

To further illustrate the importance of these concepts, let's use a hostage situation. The suspect primarily derives power from his ability to harm the hostages. Thus the hostages are his center of gravity and your focus of effort as officers should be directed toward removing them from harm's way. This might be done by rescuing them, but could also be achieved by merely separating them from the suspect or by neutralizing the suspect in some manner. The suspect's critical vulnerability might be his inability to prepare for a tactical intervention and watch the hostages at the same time.

In this case, there is a direct relationship between the suspect's center of gravity and his critical vulnerability.

Early identification of centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities provides direction and substance for sound tactical planning. They can easily become the cornerstones in developing and implementing effective intervention strategies. ■

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