



Windows of opportunity

By Sid Heal

Even the most fledgling tactician quickly comes to understand and appreciate the significance of controlling certain types of terrain. Terrain can provide advantages like affording observation or concealment, preventing the escape of a suspect or even protection from a suspect's weapons. The control of terrain, however, deals with only the dimension of space. Timing is just as important, for while the control of terrain may be lost and regained, a loss of time is lost forever. While the identification and exploitation of key terrain is the principal objective for maneuvering in space,¹ the

it creates a *window of opportunity*. In the simplest terms, a window of opportunity is a set of favorable circumstances that offer an advantage if appropriately exploited. While the more naïve often attribute these opportunities to chance or good fortune, in reality there has never been a tactical situation in which one or more of these windows were not present, albeit sometimes only recognized in retrospect. Accordingly, the better tactical commanders attempt to discern and anticipate them in advance and prepare to exploit them when they occur.

when creating an exploitation window any expansion of the duration or increase in the effect understandably provides a greater advantage. An aggregate of even minor distractions or multiple stimuli at close intervals can be confusing to the point of stupefying.

Competing interest: Another method is by creating a *competing interest*. A competing interest is anything that engages the attention and results in a division of attention or resources. To be effective, a competing interest need not be so startling that it diverts attention. It is sufficient that it just can't be completely ignored. Competing interests occur naturally, as when a suspect is torn between defending a location and preventing the interference and escape of hostages. Moreover, these natural competing interests occur to both sides of a conflict, and so routinely that commanders of tactical situations are required to prioritize them³ to avoid the adverse effects on their own organization. While a competing interest is not usually as powerful as a distraction, its principal advantage is that it lasts longer. Indeed, some will be present throughout the entire operation. One of the most common methods for creating a competing interest is when a deployment of personnel creates a situation in which a suspect is vulnerable from more than one avenue of approach. Regardless of how a competing interest is accomplished, the stronger the competition, and the more of them, the more difficult they are to effectively oppose.

Window of vulnerability: Closely related to an exploitation window is another type of window of opportunity called the *window of vulnerability*. A window of vulnerability occurs when conditions exist that place a tactical team at a disadvantage. Windows of vulnerability are nearly insepa-

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recognition and exploitation of opportunities is the principal objective when maneuvering in time.²

Without exception, every tactical situation is composed of a temporary combination of factors and influences that make each one different from any other. While they all share some commonalities, the distinguishing characteristic of each incident is that it is comprised of a series of unique unfolding events that serve to aggravate or mitigate a favorable resolution. It should go without saying then, that the more effective commanders seek to promote those things that are favorable while trying to prevent those that are not. Sometimes a set of favorable circumstances is so advantageous that

Exploitation window: In tactical situations, some windows of opportunity are more predictable than others and can even be intentionally created; so much so that they have been given names. The most familiar is probably the *exploitation window*. An exploitation window is a period of time in which an individual or unit is at some sort of disadvantage as a result of an intentional action by their opponent. One of the most common methods for creating an exploitation window is by dividing attention, frequently with a distraction of some sort, because when a suspect's attention is even temporarily diverted he is less capable of quickly employing effective countermeasures. It hardly needs to be emphasized, but

rable with certain activities, especially those involving movement of some kind, such as movements to contact or entries and assaults. Because windows of vulnerability are difficult to completely eliminate, efforts are usually directed toward diminishing their duration or reducing their effects.

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ability occurs with the use of a distraction device.⁴ The intent is to create surprise with a combination of sound, light and pressure to temporarily overwhelm a suspect's senses and prevent an effective response. Because of the human body's tremendous ability to recover, however, this exploitation window generally lasts only from six to eight seconds. Even more troublesome, however, is that if a suspect becomes aware of the intervention effort, such as observing a door being opened as the device is being thrown into the room, there are a few seconds in which a team is vulnerable before the flashbang ignites. This window of vulnerability is generally very short, almost always less than two seconds, but has proven sufficient for armed suspects to seek cover and even fire on an assault team. In this case, the exploitation window begins not when the flashbang is thrown, but when the suspect comes under its effects. Moreover, a window of vulnerability exists at the instant a suspect becomes aware of the intervention and before the device ignites.

One of the great ironies is that while opportunities are always elusive, sporadic and fleeting, they are also omnipresent. There has never been a tactical operation in which opportunities were not available. Once this fact is accepted, an ability to exploit them becomes a tactical imperative. As in exploiting terrain, this requires flexibility in thought and plans coupled with mobility to enable prompt actions and reactions. While it has been said that time and chance favor no one, an ability to take advantage

of a temporary set of favorable circumstances has momentous tactical significance and at times has been decisive. All things considered, both time and chance favor the prepared mind. ◀

Endnotes

1. For more information on the value of terrain, see "Terrain

Analysis," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2000, p. 73.

2. For more information on maneuvering in time see "Maneuvering in Time," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2001, pp. 60-61.

3. For more information on avoiding prioritizing competing interests, see "Focus of Effort and Main Effort," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1996, p. 7.

4. Sometimes called a "flashbang," "diversionary device" or "flash/sound distraction device."

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