

NGA Advances in the Post-Sept. 11 Environment

BY THE OFFICE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

After the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the 9/11

Commission Report emphasized the Intelligence Community's responsibility to communicate and share information between federal agencies to ensure the success of the security and defense missions of the nation.

Eight years after Sept. 11, NGA has made significant strides in this endeavor and has become a leading example in the Intelligence Community for sharing information.

"We are a nation at war. As such we will support our partners with a heightened sense of urgency as a unified GEOINT [geospatial intelligence] community," Vice Adm. Robert B. Murrett, Director of NGA, said. "GEOINT plays a critical role in virtually every Intelligence Community and Department of Defense mission; we will not fail to partner as closely as possible with our counterpart agencies and ensure that GEOINT is effectively utilized whenever and wherever it is needed," said Murrett.

Demonstrating a commitment to acceleration, integration and standardization of GEOINT, NGA is one of the largest users of the new information networks that the 9/11 Commission Report recommended.

During the time preceding Sept. 11, the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) developed programs that involved the creation of support teams, integration of work roles and functional management oversight. The 9/11 Commission Report, directed by Congress, identified a "need to restructure the Intelligence Community." Specifically, the commission recommended that procedures for sharing information should provide a better balance between security and disclosure and be accessible through networks that connected multiple agencies. The report presented opportunities for NGA to demonstrate itself as a pioneer in collaboration.

The report propelled the Intelligence Community, as well as the nation, into a new frame of reference: before and after Sept. 11. At NIMA, the report was a catalyst for progress, spurring the integration of mapping and imagery, and emphasizing wider dissemination for national security.

Less than a month prior to Sept. 11, retired Air Force Lt. Gen. James R. Clapper Jr. took the helm of what was still known as NIMA; it was renamed the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency in 2003 as a symbol of its unifying discipline and doctrine. The agency's mission called for consistent reintegration of cultures and work roles and provided a foundation upon which to face future challenges.

Acceleration of Support Through Deployers

For the past eight years, one of the most significant changes in NGA's posture has been the increase in subject-matter expert support to federal agencies and military partners. By concentrating on the rapid development of a program to train and deploy analysts and support staff, NGA is able to ensure the most accurate GEOINT will be in the hands of the mission partner quickly.

For example, NGA's predecessor organization sent one team to provide GEOINT to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during Hurricane Andrew in 1992. In contrast, in the post-Sept. 11 years, the agency stood up an entire division, offering assistance to federal agencies in support of all hazards, natural and man-made. These included large-scope, high-attendance events such as the Olympics in Beijing 2008, the G-20 Summit in Philadelphia, Penn., in 2009 and the inauguration of the president of the United States in Washington, D.C., in 2009.

The "Tribute in Light" memorial honors those who lost their lives in the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attacks.

DOD Photo



In addition, NGA, along with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), developed the Homeland Security Infrastructure Program, which provides a foundation to improve collaboration and joint decision-making regarding homeland security and defense missions throughout federal agencies, including but not limited to the Department of Homeland Security, FBI and U.S. Northern Command.

To aid this enhancement, NGA leadership believed that the analyst could best support the GEOINT partner by providing in-theater geospatial knowledge and products, as well as ensuring round-the-clock assistance back home called “reachback.”

According to NGA historian Dr. Gary Weir, the reachback program began when NIMA analysts were sent to support Special Operations in Afghanistan in 2001. “Analysts were equipped with a standard satellite communications suite and a robust laptop loaded with specific software designed to manipulate images and map data to create nonstandard products,” said Weir. This program for developing response teams has grown exponentially.

In 2009, nearly one-third of NGA’s workforce was deployed to more than 150 sites worldwide, and its number of people deployed has grown 175 percent since 2007 alone. As a result, NGA has provided support to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Columbia space shuttle recovery in 2003 and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, as well as other disasters such as the California wildfires in 2008.

Integration of Tradecraft

Slowly and steadily, NGA moved towards integrating a multitude of work roles and products into one solid tradecraft. NIMA’s product makers were largely segregated into two camps: cartographers making maps and imagery analysts making sense of images. The creation of NGA began a shift toward GEOINT, which is a fusion of skills and products that can be customized for decision makers to access information that can only be understood visually in reference to a geographic location.

Later, NGA’s technology evolved to a platform-neutral stance, meaning information previously located in disparate workstations could now be accessed via a single one, streamlining the physical and virtual world of analysis. In 2009, the Director announced the creation of a single, overarching analytical job known as a geospatial intelligence analyst, which would encompass the wide range of analytical occupations at the agency. This change further solidified NGA’s move towards cultural and logistical solidarity.

Standardization of Products and Policy

With 33 different organizations using GEOINT regularly, consistency regarding its production, dissemination and usage is essential. According to Weir, “Intelligence analysts needed high-quality imagery available uniformly across the Intelligence Community.” Progress came gradually when review authority was granted in 2000, followed by the creation of the National Geospatial Program that assumed control “first over advanced geospatial intelligence in 2003 and then overhead persistent infrared imaging in 2004,” said Weir.

Executive Order 12333, amended in 2008, and the DOD Directive 5105.06, July 2009, formally designate NGA as the functional manager for GEOINT and embody the recommendations made in the 9/11 Commission Report that intelligence be “distributed according to the same quality standards, whether it is collected in Pakistan or in Texas.”

As a result, these partnerships have extended to an ever-increasing number of countries and regions and have resulted in collections in areas that have previously gone unrecorded, such as Africa. NGA, and through it the National System for Geospatial Intelligence, is ensuring and enabling GEOINT collaboration on a national and international level that is unprecedented.

Preparing for the Future

Since one of the main criticisms of the Intelligence Community from the 9/11 report dealt with the lack of sharing among agencies, the Intelligence Community has made significant strides to correct the issue, and NGA has been an active participant using social networking applications. The document recommended that “agencies would still have their own databases, but those databases would be searchable across agency lines.”

The Intelligence Community as a whole has responded to this through use of a social software platform called Intelink to encourage collaboration at all levels. With a combination of information-sharing networks including wikis and blogs, the Intelligence Community is able to share information using a variety of methods and at a speed that was only imagined in decades prior.

Overall, the use of deployers, integrated tradecraft, united oversight and formalized collaborative tools in execution of the mission signifies a cultural shift towards collaboration in the Intelligence Community. NGA stands united with its fellow agencies not only in mission, cooperation and communications but also in its resolution that a tragedy of Sept. 11’s magnitude never happen again. P

