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Winning the Next War

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The United States has conducted irregular warfare and counterinsurgency campaigns since its inception. In fact, part of America’s war of independence was an insurgency against the British. Since its independence, the U.S. has fought counterinsurgency campaigns against the Native Americans, against the South during the Civil War, in the Philippines, and, of course, in Vietnam. The experiences of America’s friends and allies are similar. Among others, the British fought counterinsurgencies in Malaya and Northern Ireland, the French in Indochina, Algeria, and Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Israelis conducted counterinsurgency operations during the two major Palestinian uprisings (1987-1993 and 2000-2005) in the West Bank and Gaza. Yet, America’s ability to conduct counterinsurgency has been more ad hoc than institutionalized.

The 2006 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Quadrennial Defense Review stated that “[t]he United States is a nation engaged in what will be a long war,” and identified four key areas of emphasis for The Long War: defeating terrorist networks, defending the homeland in depth, shaping the choices of countries at strategic crossroads, and preventing hostile states and non-state actors from acquiring or using weapons of mass destruction. Today, the United States continues to fight The Long War worldwide. At the same time, it is engaged in related operations in what will likely be the longest U.S. conflict since the American Revolution.

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The world has changed significantly in the seven years since 9/11. Major engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have significantly degraded al-Qaeda, with fledgling democracies emerging in both countries. Popular support for the group in the Muslim world is at its lowest point since 2001. However, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the recalcitrance of al-Qaeda cells in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, the return of foreign fighters to al-Qaeda franchises worldwide, and the rise of Hezbollah, Jaysh al-Mahdi, the Special Groups, and other Iranian proxies all suggest that there is still much work to be done.

Recognizing this, the Pentagon’s new U.S. National Defense Strategy, released on July 31, 2008, emphasizes the need for the U.S. military and the entire government to be prepared to fight global terrorism and related small-scale conflicts like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has put it, “… [I]n a world of finite knowledge and limited resources, where we have to make choices and set priorities, it makes sense to lean toward the most likely and lethal scenarios for our military… Smaller, irregular forces—insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists—will find ways, as they always have, to frustrate and neutralize the advantages of larger, regular militaries…”

The National Defense Strategy recognizes that the United States is in the midst of fighting the “next war” and places the Long War against extremism as the top priority of the U.S. military for the foreseeable future, above potential conventional challenges from China and Russia. The “future” fight against global terrorism is ongoing, and will continue to be a top concern for U.S. military and policymakers. The lessons of conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon have been parsed and documented, but, if structural changes are not made to incorporate these findings, they are merely observations recorded. To win in this struggle, the U.S. and its allies must institutionalize lessons learned in order to avoid costly mistakes in unconventional conflicts on the horizon.

From conventional war to counterinsurgency

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Long War is the cultural environment—the human terrain—in which it is being fought. Cultural competence and adaptation are prerequisites for achieving success in any military operation, and particularly so in counterinsurgency operations. Success on the battlefield results from the ability of leaders to understand the human terrain, and to think and adapt faster than the enemy in an environment of uncertainty, ambiguity, and unfamiliarity. The conditions in the Middle East today may be the most difficult facing the U.S. military in a very long time, and the armed forces are making tremendous efforts to become more effective.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces and intelligence officers linked up with tribal leaders and militia elements from the Northern Alliance and other militia groups to drive the Taliban from power. Working through local power-sharing arrangements proved essential in the effort to create a unified, though still nascent, Afghan government.

In Iraq, Coalition Forces prepared for and initially fought a conventional combat operation, not a counterinsurgency. As the nature of the conflict changed, the need to collect nuanced information about the insurgency and local conditions became increasingly
important. Commanders painstakingly analyzed casualty and attack trends to better understand the conflict by trying to determine if an attack was a murder or an execution; against a civilian, Coalition, or Iraqi Security Forces member; a Sunni or Shi’a; criminal or sectarian in nature; carried out by a professional or an amateur; and so on.

Commanders have learned the hard lesson of fighting the wrong war—of using conventional tactics to fight an insurgency. As it became increasingly clear that civilians were becoming the target of attacks and civilian deaths continued to rise, the U.S. military realized it was fighting an insurgency. Some have accused the military of being slow to draw that conclusion, but those early problems laid the foundation for the sophisticated and nuanced approach being taken today.

Like politics, culture is local, and counterinsurgency efforts must be tailored to local needs. What works in one area does not necessarily work in another. The situation in Irbil is not the same as that in Mosul, Falluja, or Basra. And Baghdad must be viewed neighborhood by neighborhood, not in its entirety. American soldiers and marines have learned to get beyond a monolithic view of Iraqis. They have learned that not all Sunnis are alike, and neither are all Shi’a. Some followers of Muqtada al-Sadr are reconcilable; some are not. Some of the combatants are true terrorists motivated by religion and ideology, and some combatants are victims themselves, coerced into supporting a cause they do not believe in. Others are motivated in an effort to relieve the miserable circumstances of their families, where there seems to be no other way to do so.

U.S. commanders have learned to recognize different social and political structures that are functional and useful—tribes, for example. Overtime, this approach helped spur the “Awakening” movement, making many of the Sunni tribes part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

They have also understood that they must organize, train, and equip to win unconventional wars. The U.S. military has become more agile and flexible, developing a new doctrine for counterinsurgency in the middle of the conflict. This change from conventional combat operations to counterinsurgency requires leadership, innovation, creativity, and initiative at every level of the military. There are several specific areas where these lessons are most evident:

**Force Structure.** The force structure of the American military was designed for future conventional conflicts based on the lessons learned from the Gulf War. It was—and, in many cases, remains—not ideally situated to support post-conflict stability and support operations or to conduct a counterinsurgency. As the Army began executing a wider range of missions worldwide and increased its commitments in The Long War, it faced challenges in providing the number and types of forces necessary to meet requirements. Light Infantry, Military Police, Engineers, Transporters, Military Intelligence, Foreign Area Officers, Linguists, and Civil Affairs Specialists were required in greater numbers than in the past, while the traditional roles of Field Artillery, Air Defense, Armor, and Heavy Infantry were diminished.

Because these force requirements occasionally exceed the Army’s capability to provide specialized forces, the Defense Department has developed a number of substitute (or “in lieu of”) solutions, from individual augmenta-
tion (when there is no service unit capable of fulfilling the requirement) to remissioning (taking an existing unit and retraining it for a different mission that is outside its core competency). All units and individuals now undergo a set of training drills to ensure they are prepared to succeed in their “in lieu of” mission should the need arise. As the foregoing suggests, the military now has a better understanding of how to meet the personnel and force structure requirements for the Long War, and is seeking the proper balance between the challenges of counterinsurgency and asymmetric warfare and maintaining adequate means to fight conventionally.

**Special Operations Forces, Special Forces, and Civil Affairs.** Another lesson learned is the synergy that can be achieved by closer integration of Special Operations and conventional forces. The armed forces have consistently demonstrated their skill in conducting joint operations. In the past, however, this capability existed almost exclusively on the operational level. During Desert Storm, for example, there were about 30 operational detachment teams of Special Forces working separate missions from the conventional force. By contrast, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, over 100 operational detachment teams were deployed, and Special Operations Forces, Special Forces, and Civil Affairs achieved a new, rare, and effective partnership with conventional forces. The net result was not only precision munitions launched from air and ground, but the development of “precision decision and execution” to guide the integrated campaign.

**Foreign Area Officers.** Soon after September 11th, it became obvious that active force assets and reservist mobilizations could not produce the desired numbers and quality of Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) and language specialists required for what was then referred to as the Global War on Terror. Contract linguists, many of them native speakers, were quickly hired for stateside as well as deployed work. Yet the Pentagon was slow to make the adjustment to better cultural understanding, while American commanders all too often have applied Western standards that are not appropriate for the situation on the ground. Today, little has changed. FAOs and language specialists are still in short supply. So are contract linguists, despite their importance to the war effort; only 4,000 of the approximately 6,000 required positions are currently filled.

This represents a critical short-fall. In the current security environment, understanding foreign cultures and societies has become a national priority. Cultural awareness is necessary both to defeat adversaries and to work successfully with allies. An improved FAO program can significantly contribute to the planning and execution of transitions to and from hostilities, as well as support Defense Department plans to improve Human Intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities and strategic communications.

**Responding to Improvised Explosive Devices.** The Defense Department estimates that Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) are responsible for almost 50 percent of the casualties (both mortal and injured) sustained in Iraq, and nearly 30 percent of those in Afghanistan since the start of combat operations in each theater. Furthermore, in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, deaths from IEDs have steadily increased since the cessation
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of major combat operations in 2003. As a result, defeating this terrorist tactic has become a top priority.

Given the magnitude of the IED threat, in October 2003, the office of the Army Chief of Staff established the Army IED Task Force. Its job was to reach out to Army components, its sister services, the private sector, and academia to improve threat-intelligence gathering, acquire counter-IED technologies, and develop counter-IED training. Early efforts of the Army IED Task Force resulted in a marked reduction in casualty rates per IED attack despite the increased use of such weapons in the theater. Subsequently, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz spearheaded efforts to transform the entity into a Joint IED Task Force. In February 2006, in a testament to the enduring importance of that mission, the joint task force was converted into a permanently-manned entity, the Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO)—one chartered to “focus (lead, advocate, coordinate) all DoD actions in support of the Combatant Commanders and their respective Joint Task Force efforts to defeat IEDs as weapons of strategic influence.”

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. Understanding an adversary requires more than finished intelligence and satellite photos. It requires an appreciation of their interests, habits, intentions, beliefs, social organizations, and political symbols. Fighting a counterinsurgency involves a spectrum of operations, from humanitarian missions, peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations to full-blown combat—all possibly within a single brigade’s competence. To transition between these elements as smoothly and seamlessly as possible, military leaders need situational awareness. The success of the mission depends on the ability to bridge the cultural gaps both in war-fighting and in intelligence-gathering. From a military perspective, cultural intelligence provides a means of capturing the nonmilitary elements of information that are especially relevant in stability and support operations.

Balancing force protection and risk. The need for force protection both drives and complicates a broader role for Coalition forces. On one hand, engagement with Iraqis will improve intelligence to better counter the insurgency, thereby increasing security. On the other, closer contact and urban visibility will expose Coalition forces to further attacks and suicide bombings. The U.S. military has seen a cultural evolution from protecting its forces at all costs (in early deployments) to taking calculated risks and mitigating them as best as possible (in a series of subsequent rotations). This is a key point: commanders cannot allow their only metric to be how many terrorists were killed, and how few of their own men were. This mind-set leads to tactics and a culture contradictory to the evolving doctrine of how best to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign.

Developing indigenous security forces. Ungoverned spaces—geographic areas where governments do not exercise effective control—present significant challenges to counterinsurgency operations. Terrorist groups, insurgents, foreign fighters, narco-traffickers, and other malignant actors use these areas as sanctuaries to train, plan, and organize, relatively free from interference. Ungoverned spaces include sparsely populated areas, as well as densely populated cities, where terrorists can
congregate and prepare for operations with relative impunity.

In trying to assert its control over these places, the U.S. military quickly recognized that building the capacity of indigenous security forces is a critical investment. This includes not only the training and equipping of a nation’s security forces, but also the development of its combat support and combat service support capability—all while simultaneously building the government’s ministerial functions.

**Military Transition Teams.** One of the primary missions of the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan is the training of competent local security forces. Military Transition Teams (MiTT) are critical to this effort. The primary mission of these units—composed of 10-15 members who live and train with the armed forces of allies in the Long War—is to advise the security forces of Iraq, and those of Afghanistan, in the areas of intelligence, communications, fire support, logistics, and infantry tactics. Military Transition Teams also perform the critical role of liaising between the foreign unit and nearby U.S. forces to ensure that each is aware of and can assist the other in their operations. Transition teams also monitor and report on the capabilities of the fledgling security force.

But finding funding for these teams has historically been a thorny issue. The reason is that training and equipping national security forces cannot be done in one or two years. It requires a sustained effort, for which current U.S. budget processes—such as supplemental spending bills and Foreign Military Financing (FMF)—are not ideally suited. This will require multi-year appropriations to ensure the predictable streams of funding needed to plan long-term development of a partner nation’s security forces.

**Developing Internal Security Forces and Rule of Law.** The training of police and other internal security forces is, by law, a State Department function. However, because of the size, scope, and complexity of State’s established training programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its limited capacity and capability to conduct training and equipping on such a large scale, the Department of Defense was given authority over a measure of the efforts to organize, train, and equip the Afghan National Security Forces and the Iraqi Police Force. This has been a huge challenge; the U.S. military is not ideally suited for this task, and is still actively learning.

What it has already discovered, however, is that, in order to win the peace, the stability and political credibility of the government is essential. Police and internal security forces are irrelevant without the requisite investigators, courts, lawyers, laws, prisons, correctional officers, judicial system, etc. According to the United Nations, the restoration of the rule of law is a sine qua non for the sustainable resolution of conflict and the rebuilding of secure, orderly, and humane societies. And yet, the United Nations has failed to give this critical sector the importance it is due in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving the development of these institutions to the United States. To ask the State Department to take on this task, however, is simply unrealistic—it has not been given anything close to the resources required to accomplish this mission. To this end, additional resources, and authorities, must be provided to the State Department. And more technical assistance must be demanded from the United Nations.
**Toward a “whole of government” approach**

Insurgencies are not defeated by military might alone. We must have capacity to improve lives and governance. We need an interagency that is prepared to operate in austere environments. A key lesson learned by the U.S. military is that security gains must be quickly followed by humanitarian assistance, economic assistance, delivery of essential services, and other types of aid if those gains are to be consolidated and built upon. Once basic security is established, food, water, money, jobs, law and order, economic assistance, and jobs must follow. By connecting the local, provincial, and national governments with those improvements the U.S. government is able to boost their credibility and acceptance.

The U.S. military defines strategy as “a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.” During the Cold War, the instruments of national power were generally considered to be diplomatic, economic, informational, and military (DIME). Today, however, new techniques to deal with changing circumstances which rely more on Coalition partners, high technology, the private sector, and additional roles for the Armed Forces, have prompted a marked realignment of the instruments of national power which are available to the United States in pursuing its interests around the world.

To win the next war, America’s leadership must continue to emphasize the need for the entire government to be prepared to fight global terrorism and related small-scale conflicts like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This requires the full integration of all instruments of national power, the cooperation and participation of friends and allies, and the support of the American people. Because of this, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism and the National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism have expanded the DIME construct to include financial, intelligence, and law enforcement as well (DIMEFIL).

To date, however, only the military approaches strategy and operations this way. Over the past decade, policymakers have tended to overemphasize America’s military capabilities as instruments of national power, and underplay its “non-kinetic” ones. This is seen in the notorious inability of the current National Security Council to integrate all the elements of national power in order to implement policy and execute a highly complex contingency operation. These shortfalls are mirrored in other parts of the government as well. Interagency reform is essential to ensure that all federal departments and agencies are structured and resourced, and that lines of authority and responsibility are clearly delineated.

**Older and wiser**

The trend line is clear. In the future, the United States military is more likely to undertake missions requiring irregular warfare capabilities, as opposed to traditional large-scale ground combat operations. These conflicts do not occur in a vacuum. Complex sectarian, ethnic, and tribal affiliations cross boundaries and require consideration of regional realities that impact the conflict. A key component of military readiness will be the ability to understand the cultures of, and communicate with, people from many regions...
of the world. Increased language and culture training will ultimately prove to be a powerful weapon in the American military’s arsenal.\textsuperscript{13}

The U.S. military now understands that it cannot deal with Iraq, Afghanistan, or Iran in isolation. Some of Iraq’s neighbors are facilitating the flow of terrorists, financing, and weapons into the country, and must be dealt with.

So, too, does Iran’s malignant influence in the region. There are, however, opportunities to change Iran’s strategic calculus. The Arab nations fear Iran. They fear Iran’s desire to control the region. They fear Iran’s nuclear program and the possibility of Tehran’s acquiring a weapon. They fear Iran’s ballistic missiles. And they fear the terror and chaos that Iranian proxies can create within their own populations. These common fears create a common interest in dealing with Iran and, therefore, an opportunity for unprecedented cooperation that could change the complexion of the region.

These are just a few of the major lessons—lessons that the military is still learning. What remains to be seen is: can and will the U.S. government make the necessary adjustments to truly learn from these experiences?

\textsuperscript{1} The authors would like to acknowledge Colonel Kenneth Dahl (USA). His remarks to the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) 2008 Spring Board Meeting Panel Discussion entitled “Lessons Learned from Iraq and Lebanon” provided the basis for this paper.
\textsuperscript{3} In 2007, there were 30 armed conflicts in 26 countries. Forty percent were in Africa, 36.7 percent in Asia, 13.3 percent in the Middle East, 3.3 percent in Europe, and 6.7 percent in the Americas. See Swords and Ploughshares 2008, Project Ploughshares, n.d., http://www.ploughshares.ca/libraries/Statements/Swordsplough2008.pdf.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Foreign Area Officers are commissioned officers from all services who have regional expertise, language competency, and political-military awareness. FAOs serve as attaches or security assistance officers at U.S. embassies to implement U.S. national security strategy, often as the sole DoD representative in country. FAOs may also serve on joint staffs to provide a regional and cultural perspective for the planning and execution of military operations and to advise senior leaders.
\textsuperscript{9} Foreign Military Financing is a U.S. government program for financing U.S. regional stability goals, and enables friends and allies to improve their defense capabilities. FMF helps countries meet their legitimate defense needs, promotes U.S. national security interests by strengthening coalitions with friends and allies, cements cooperative bilateral military relationships, and enhances interoperability with U.S. forces.