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Words Matter: Re-imagining Irregular Warfare

by David Gayvert

Current doctrine framing Irregular Warfare is wrong—historically, semantically and conceptually—and should be reexamined to enable decision-makers at all levels to better identify emerging threats, vulnerabilities, and opportunities, better allocate resources, and in the process, enhance our national defense.

Much of the debate over the proper balance between and relative importance of what are now binned as “Irregular” vs. “Conventional” capabilities in our national security strategy reflects a paradigm sorely in need of revision. Rather than the current context that is fundamentally linear, and focused on things and component categories, we need a systems-oriented perspective, centered upon understanding—and influencing—complex, dynamic relationships and environments that constantly interact and give rise to ever-changing threats to our national interests. Treating Irregular Warfare—or as I will propose as an alternative descriptor, *Evolving Threat Operations*—as a collection of defined capabilities, distinct from traditional warfare, rather than as a context and way of thinking about a fluid threat environment, impedes our ability to effectively address questions critical to our collective future. These include, but are certainly not limited to:

- How do we better integrate component military competencies, weapons systems and TTP to be able to more quickly, agilely and synergistically counter threats across and against the full spectrum of operational settings and adversaries?
- How do we better coordinate, integrate, and employ non-military, and even non-governmental knowledge and capability within this threat environment?
- How can we evoke preferred actions and responses in adversaries, and lure/maneuver them onto “battlefields” of our choosing—or better, achieve Sun Tze’ “highest skill” of defeating an enemy without a fight?
- Perhaps most important, how do we identify and counter threats, and reduce or exploit vulnerabilities that may fall outside the scope of all military activities, at least as currently conceived? In other words, to what extent are we “looking where the light is good” instead of where the real emerging threats and vulnerabilities are developing? To use the parlance of a former Secretary of Defense, how do we get better at responding to “known unknowns” and reducing the universe of “unknown unknowns?”

This essay will argue that what in official publications are now referred to as “irregular threats” and the capabilities necessary to respond to them should neither be defined nor understood as things fundamentally different from or in opposition to the threats and capabilities included under the rubric of “conventional” or “traditional” warfare; that words matter—how they are used both reflects and informs thinking; and that we indeed need to think about “irregular warfare”—and all threats to our national interests—but in a significantly different

context than that contained in current doctrine. Finally, it will briefly outline one possible alternative framework for doing just that.

History Matters: Irregular Warfare Activities Aren't

Arguments have raged the past decade over the nature and definition of Irregular Warfare (IW), its doctrine, and the role all that should play in resourcing, training and employing our military forces. For example, the implications and potential ramifications of placing too much or too little emphasis on counterinsurgency (COIN)—currently the reigning (perhaps soon to be waning) *primus inter pares* of IW—is continuously being discussed in fora like *Small Wars Journal*,¹ and reports are now beginning to surface questioning core precepts for COIN and related stability operations.² Having an approved definition,³ Joint Operating Concept(s) for Irregular Warfare, a Department of Defense (DOD) Directive and Instruction, and various other official publications delineating strategy, definitions, relationships and responsibilities for IW have not quelled such foment. Yet in a fundamental way, much of such debates elides an obvious point: COIN, counterterrorism (CT), stability operations (SO), foreign internal defense (FID), and unconventional warfare (UW)—the core Irregular Warfare activities, as currently identified—are profoundly *regular*, in the sense that they are the military operations most often performed historically. Moreover, in many cases, they do not in their conduct meet the definitional criteria of favoring “indirect and asymmetric approaches;” COIN doctrine is about as symmetrical as it gets, and nothing is as direct as the targeted kill/capture operations that are the centerpiece of counterterrorism.⁴ As the Army’s new Irregular Warfare Fusion Cell puts it:

Irregular Warfare (IW) is not so irregular. In fact, it is so prevalent and our Army has been engaged in irregular conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for so long that soldiers in non-Special Forces units have become proficient in key IW and counterinsurgency warfighting tasks.⁵

And thus it has always been. As many recent commentaries have pointed out, despite the military’s penchant for state-on-state set battle scenarios ala World War II, the bulk of conflicts and associated military activities over the span of our republic (and the world as well) have consisted primarily of what we have come to wrong-headedly term “irregular” war. Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen point out in a recent essay, that over the past 200 years, less than 20% of wars have consisted of “conventional” state vs. state/soldier against soldier conflict; more than half have been what we now refer to doctrinally as Irregular Warfare (COIN, CT,

¹ The ongoing debate there and elsewhere between Gian Gentile and John Nagl and their various supporters is emblematic—though certainly not all-inclusive—of this argumentation.

² See for example, Moyar, Mark, *Development in Afghanistan’s Counterinsurgency: A New Guide*, ORBIS Operations, Mar 2011; also see the recent report from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Evaluating US Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan* (S. Prt 112-21) at <http://foreign.senate.gov/reports>, accessed 30 Jun 2011. See also William F. Owen, *Killing Your Way to Control*, *British Army Review*, Number 151, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/07/killing-your-way-to-control/>, accessed 6 Jul 2011.

³ Per JP 1, “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence and will.”

⁴ This is not to say that the activities that comprise IW cannot be used to detect, counter or exploit indirect/ asymmetric threats, but the same could be said of almost any line of military operations.

⁵ US Army Combined Arms Center, IWFC portal page, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/coin/index.asp>, accessed 5 Jul 2011.

UW, etc.).⁶ Similarly, how much sense does it make to continue to refer to all too well known threats such as improvised explosive devices (IED), or Iranian support to militants in Iraq or Afghanistan as “irregular?” There is a whiff of doublespeak about characterizing the bulk of historical (and contemporary) military operations as “irregular,” and an argument for doctrinal reform could be mounted upon this point alone.

But the implications of “mis-conceptualizing”—and thus mischaracterizing—IW extend well beyond lexical imprecision. Significantly, they constrain and can distort discussion of the content and application of important military capabilities like COIN and CT. More importantly, however, they inevitably limit the scope of thinking and action in the rapidly expanding universe of “irregular” threats that confronts the country today.

Words Matter I: Resources

In government, words frequently mean very little—except, of course, when they involve legislative authorizations and appropriations, or executive budgetary guidance—in other words, money. Then great and specific import is attached to particular words, as program dollars, personnel and other resources can rise or fall depending upon how one describes a project initiative or mission activity. “Money follows words” is an oft-cited truism in the world of government program management. Thus how Irregular Warfare (or its successor term and concept) is defined and scoped will have a significant impact on how it is resourced and ultimately conducted. These decisions in turn drive dynamics that shape what and how analysts, decision-makers and staffs care and think about, direct, and execute. Moreover, framing IW primarily in terms of military core and enabling operations—even the use of the term “warfare”—can confuse or alienate needed IW partners in other agencies of the government.⁷ While in no way diminishing the importance of thinking about how best to train, equip, man, fund, and integrate activities like counterterrorism, foreign internal defense and stability operations, placing such analysis, debate and resources for operations that are historically conventional⁸ within the context of a portfolio ostensibly dedicated to countering indirect, asymmetric and emerging threats crowds out the thinking, activities and supporting resources that truly belong there.

Words Matter II: Paradigm Setting

Words and terms convey more than simply their ostensible meaning. They both reflect and influence attitudes, beliefs, and modes of thinking. The words we use to express concepts, perceptions and intentions ultimately are understood within a contextual framework that in no small measure is set by the very words themselves. In short, they play a large part in forming

⁶ Gorka, Sebastian and David Killcullen, *An Actor-centric Theory of War: Understanding the Difference between COIN and Counterinsurgency*, Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 60, 1st Quarter 2011, pp 14-18. They draw relevant data for their analysis from the Correlates of War project, accessible at <http://www.correlatesofwar.org>.

⁷ See Davidson, Janine, *Operationalizing the Comprehensive Approach: The Military as Enabler...*,

<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/02/operationalizing-the-comprehen-1/>, accessed 5 Jul 2011. Relevant excerpt: “But the most toxic and possibly counterproductive term in the current military lexicon is ‘irregular warfare.’ While our allies frown at the intellectual confusion and ambiguity of the term, our own diplomats have more serious problems. Although the term has been useful in generating a paradigm shift among warriors who bristled at sissy terms like ‘peace operations’ or even ‘stability ops,’ diplomats and aid workers rightly resist having their missions cast as a type of ‘war.’”

⁸ That many of the core activities of IW—FID, UW, CT—are exclusively or primarily conducted by Special Operations Forces (SOF) does not make them “irregular” in the sense argued above.

cultures which either foster or impede effective analysis, decision-making and other critical behaviors within groups and institutions. Indeed, the very act of collective understanding—or “sensemaking”—is shaped by the words used describe events and observations. As one organizational expert puts it,

Organizations also have their own language and symbols that have important effects upon sensemaking. . . .vivid words draw attention to new possibilities, suggesting that organizations with access to more varied images will engage in sensemaking that is more adaptive than will organizations with more limited vocabularies.⁹

This is why defining IW as a finite collection of core and enabling capabilities tends to create an artificial, limiting and distorting box around IW that not only determines which activities get funded (and just as importantly, which don't), but inevitably determines which activities get seriously thought about as well. The truism that “if all one has is a hammer, all problems look like nails” applies: if IW is COIN, CT, UW, FID, and SO, then “irregular threats” will tend to be seen in terms of insurgency, terrorism, and areas that lack stability.¹⁰ And as history has demonstrated repeatedly, thinking about the wrong things—or even thinking wrongly about the right things—can lead to ineffective action, missed opportunity, unintended outcomes, and perhaps most seriously, strategic surprise, too often with momentous, even catastrophic consequences. That is why we need a profound shift in the way we frame, scope, and execute activities aimed at identifying, countering, or exploiting indirect or emerging threats and vulnerabilities.

Thinking—and Speaking Differently about IW

If one accepts the line of argument offered thus far, then how to proceed? The first step ought to be replacing Irregular Warfare with a term that more accurately reflects and evokes the reason for and activities of that line of operations. The second is describing the capabilities that ought to reside within the newly crafted and christened paradigm. The third task is to outline the context in which these capabilities may best be employed.

For the reasons argued above, I propose that activities designed to detect and respond to indirect, asymmetric and emergent threats be deemed *Evolving Threat Operations* (ETO). The “evolving” designation acknowledges the non-static nature of known threats, as well as the emergence of new threats as the world itself evolves. “Operations” implies a comprehensive range of missions and tasks, not limited in scope to a handful of military activities, or a particular environment or category of threat or adversary. It thus addresses conceptually what is recognized

⁹ Weick, Karl E., *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996, pp 3-4.

¹⁰ Here, even the traditional concept of stability upon which our doctrine is based--what elements comprise it, how it may be recognized and achieved may be problematic. Researchers in the physical and life sciences talk about “organized instability” as perhaps a better way to understand our environment. See for example, Sole, Ricard, David Alonzo, and Alan McCane, “Self-organized Instability in Complex Ecosystems,” <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1692980/>, accessed online 16 Jul 2011.

to be a “false dichotomy between IW and ‘major combat operations,’”¹¹ and is fully aligned with the doctrine of full spectrum operations.¹²

ETO will not (necessarily) require new capabilities, and instead will be built around the re-alignment, integration, scope, prioritization and application of extant knowledge, disciplines and skill sets. Broadly, it must focus upon:

- Ways to recognize and define fluid threats and developing vulnerabilities
- Continuous critical analysis of a shifting global environment through a collaborative process between analytical disciplines, and highly skilled analysts selected both for their competence and aptitude for non-linear cognition
- Iterative development of a full spectrum array of response options (military/civilian, kinetic/non-kinetic, defensive/offensive, direct/oblique, overt/covert/ clandestine, etc.).
- Some of the specific questions it may address could include:
- Emerging threat recognition, prioritization and pre-emption/deflation—how to counter or exploit the actions of malign actors ranging from states like Iran or Venezuela to “super-empowered” actors like Wikileaks or Anonymous, driven by various anti-US agendas?
- How to evoke preferred actions and responses in adversaries, and lure/maneuver them onto “battlefields” of our choosing, or better, achieve Sun Tze’ “highest skill”—subduing the enemy without a fight?
- How to better understand—and then manipulate—the environments in which our adversaries operate? Instead of “draining the swamp” (impractical/impossible/ineffective—they will simply move), should we think about *poisoning* it, or slow-boiling the “frogs” within it?
- How to better identify/understand and attack network nodes (or “joints”); how can we apply jujitsu/aikido principles to threat response?
- What is /are new models and concepts for deterrence and conflict avoidance—and not creating unintended consequences? How do we better understand and predict the “systems effects” of our decisions and actions?
- How does our understanding of and assumptions about “stability” and rationality impact our perception and analysis? How do Western assumptions about stasis and the (apparent) linearity of events skew our ability to accurately perceive and describe “how the world works?”
- How can we better recruit, assess, select and train analysts and practitioners to build and employ such capabilities?

Innovation—in the way we perceive, understand, analyze and act within the environment of threat and opportunity—ought to be seen as the “core capability” for this new line of operations, around which technologies, organization, roles and responsibilities and TTPs are formed. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and education, Personnel, and Facilities (DOTMLPF) implications of

¹¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations*, Washington, DC: February 2011, Foreword by General Martin Dempsey.

¹² Ibid., p 3-1. ETO also would comport with “Design” the problem-solving approach the Army currently advocates. See FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*, Ch 3.

operationalizing a concept like ETO. However, it may be questioned whether “doctrine,” for example—at least in the usual sense of the term—is useful in describing and improving our ability to accurately and quickly perceive, understand and respond to indirect, asymmetric and emerging threats and vulnerabilities. As Albert Einstein famously observed, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” So if what we need most is the capability to rapidly and continuously achieve perceptual/ cognitive innovation, what is to be the doctrine for that? There are of course, a number of practices that can foster innovation: flat organizational hierarchies to enable rapid decision-making at the lowest possible level; high tolerance for experimentation and failure; rewarding rational risk-taking and non-conventional thinking, etc. In other words, practices not often prominently featured in the various bureaucracies of our national security agglomeration. It seems likely then, that the critical factors in creating ETO will lie in the realm of organization, personnel, and training, and instilling structures and practices that promote a culture of cognitive innovation.

Drawing upon insights from the natural and social sciences, leading organizational and leadership experts have often stressed the importance of “systems thinking” in planning and executing effective operations—understanding and exploiting the influences, interplay and interstices between disparate parts within a whole. Management expert Peter Senge in particular emphasizes the power of leverage within systems, and discovering non-obvious ways in which it may be applied. Using the analogy of trim tabs on the rudders of large ships, he illustrates how small, low cost/low effort actions can create big impacts, just as the relatively tiny movement of a trim tab at the very rear of the ship can ultimately change the direction of a huge oil tanker or ocean liner.¹³ ETO must embody this sort of systems approach, in which new sources of leverage are constantly sought, discovered and applied.

ETO as a context and design for perceiving and making sense of irregular threats necessarily must transcend organizational boundaries and equities, seeking and sharing inputs from any and all sources as it constantly works to better understand and influence the system(s) that comprise the threat environment. Perhaps the two most critical questions practitioners must continuously and evermore deeply ask as actions are contemplated, and *before* decisions are made are “Why...?” and “What if...?” At the heart of such an approach must be a ruthless and on-going examination of assumptions—about our adversaries, environment, and most importantly, ourselves—and how those assumptions shape what we see, think about, and ultimately come to believe.

This process must also drive a continuous, reality-based assessment of the nexus between policy and strategy on the one hand, and the efficacy of our national security efforts on the other. For example, in an age of persistent conflict with diverse and shifting state, non-state, proxy, and individual actors, what are the implications for the Treaty of Westphalia-based international system? In particular, do the conventional definitions (and understandings) of “war” and “peace” still apply? Policy and strategy will flow from how that question is answered, which in turn will either advance or impede options considered to deter, counter, exploit, or defeat adversaries.

¹³ Senge, Peter M., *The Fifth Discipline—The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990, pp 64-65.

Closing Thoughts

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn notes that revolutions (whether scientific or political) occur when existing institutions or paradigms have “ceased adequately to meet the problems posed by an environment that they have in part created.”¹⁴ I submit that within our inter-agency security bureaucracy we have reached precisely that point, and that a real revolution in our thinking and organization is desperately needed. Yet as all who have worked within that often dysfunctional system knows, creating the conditions, structures, culture and relationships necessary for a concept like Evolving Threat Operations as outlined above would seem all but impossible.¹⁵ Even a preventable catastrophe like 9-11 could not shake us from our hide-bound modes of thinking and problem-solving; despite recognizing the fundamental role that bureaucratic parochialism and risk aversion played in the failure to understand and disrupt the plot, our collective solution was to create and layer over our extant structures, two huge new bureaucracies, which in many ways have only reinforced the worst aspects of the status quo ante.

Whatever the difficulties in achieving substantive change in how we understand and respond to threats to our national interests and security, however, those of good will must continue to advocate for it in all ways they can. Evolving Threat Operations as described above may not be the answer, but something like it almost certainly is.

David Gayvert is an avid reader of Small Wars Journal, and he currently works as a program consultant within the Department of Defense. The views expressed in this essay are his own, and do not reflect the positions or policies of the US Department of Defense.

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¹⁴ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 (Second Edition), p 92.

¹⁵ For one possible way to address this inertia, see Allard, Kenneth, “Changes and the American Security Paradigm,” in *Orbis*, vol 54, no 1, Winter 2010, pp 87-97. He argues that we should establish decentralized, non-bureaucratic analysis and communications centers (like the Urban Warfare Analysis Center in Oklahoma) that tie into, but operate independently of the ossified national security apparatus in Washington, DC.