

NAVAL UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE:

SUPPORTING GWOT ON THE CHEAP

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After half a decade, the U.S. Navy continues the struggle for relevancy in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Several positive programs and a few knee jerk policies have been implemented, such as the stand up of the Naval Expeditionary Combat Command and short notice individual augmentation deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. But an overall operational maritime concept designed to directly support the war remains illusive.

The United States military's ground forces have employed counter-terrorism operations emphasizing unconventional warfare (UW) to counter the fourth generation tactics of a dynamic enemy. By adapting UW doctrine to the maritime environment, the U.S. Navy has an opportunity to secure its role in the GWOT. The Department of Defense defines Unconventional Warfare to include a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations predominately utilizing indigenous or surrogate forces. UW is normally conducted in a low visibility or clandestine manner. Although UW is often seen in the context of supporting a guerilla force trying to overthrow an established government, it also has applicability supporting indigenous or proxy forces working to regain control of terrain from terrorist. A large amount of this terrain is found in the thousands of miles of ungoverned coastlines, rivers, and other littoral waterways around the world. These areas can become a refuge to terrorists because many nations are either unable or unwilling to fully control their own sovereign territory. Specific examples include the expansive riparian networks in South America and Central Asia, archipelagic waters throughout Southeast Asia, and much of coastal Africa.

Naval unconventional warfare (NUW) is the employment of maritime forces in non-traditional ways to accomplish operational goals related to counter-terrorism. NUW operations include some common aspects designed to influence the maritime environment in a way that facilitates U.S. freedom of action and makes an area inhospitable to terrorist elements. The operational foundations for NUW are partner capacity building, intelligence collection, and low profile operations.

CREATING MARITIME PARTNERS

America recognizes that the GWOT cannot be won by unilateral military action. In addition to creating new counter-terrorism capability, utilizing partners in NUW provides a number of advantages over conventional U.S. maritime operations. A properly executed NUW campaign can provide U.S. forces access to other nations' sovereign territorial waters and littoral areas that might otherwise provide safe havens for enemy operations. Building capacity also gives legitimacy to the government or partners that we are trying to assist.

Only relationships built through long-term engagement at the lowest level will provide the access and intelligence required for counter-terrorism operations. Traditional short term engagement

activities such as bilateral naval exercises and community relations projects during port visits will not be sufficient to build the level of trust required for NUW. Instead, whenever possible, we must embed U.S. Sailors with partners for the long term.

Larger near-peer navies who have been reliable U.S. allies in the past should not be the focus of UW. Countries that are wealthy enough to afford high-end naval platforms generally also maintain good control over their sovereign waterways. NUW partner building efforts should be oriented towards less traditional allies in undeveloped countries such as coast guards, maritime police units, and even indigenous mariners, such as those in merchant and fishing fleets.

NUW should avoid the trap of buying new capabilities for a partner maritime force that are unsustainable without ongoing U.S. financial and logistics support. Too often, investments in high end command and control systems such as CENTRIX systems end up becoming expensive paperweights in the “command centers” of our poorer maritime partners. High speed patrol boats end up on cinderblocks, because they can’t be maintained over the long term. Much more value and trust can be gained by having full time U.S. Navy advisors embedded with our partners, no matter the size or resources of their naval forces. NUW advisory teams should strive to transform and improve the maritime capabilities of partners with whatever equipment they can afford to maintain, even if the U.S. considers those platforms to be substandard or incompatible with coalition operations. Ideally, successful long term NUW missions will evolve from just building partner capacity into increasing partner willingness to share intelligence and participate in operations which support U.S. GWOT goals.

BUILDING INTELLIGENCE NETWORKS

Intelligence collection should be integral to all NUW activities. In addition to finding safe harbor in ungoverned regions, terrorists often exploit transnational illicit maritime activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling, and piracy. Human intelligence is critical to countering these types of support to terrorist networks. NUW intelligence efforts should be designed to increase understanding of tribal and familial affiliations, local maritime commerce patterns, and terrorist interaction with commercial and non-governmental organizations. Analyzing these illicit support network nodes will facilitate target development for surrogate or unilateral actions against them. NUW will enable U.S. forces to link into a partner’s informal or formal intelligence networks to gain local knowledge that would be otherwise unobtainable. Furthermore, NUW can afford opportunities for assessing the effects of U.S. information operations and strategic communications efforts through direct feedback from partner forces.

NUW IN ACTION

The 2006 deployment of the hospital ship *USNS Mercy* to Southeast Asia is a good example of how existing forces can undertake an NUW-like mission. Her crew of U.S and Military Sealift Command sailors, medical corps, foreign military, and non-governmental organizations deployed in a task unit that delivered care to over 60,000 individuals. While this deployment was received with a significant positive response from the people served and had an obvious information operations value for the United States in several Islamic countries, it could also be seen in the context of an NUW partnership

operation. While it would be a public relations coup for the U.S. to take full credit for these types of operations, it is important that these missions are conducted in a way that creates the illusion to the affected population that the partner nation or indigenous partner conducted the operation unilaterally, or at least served a lead role in the operation. Although intelligence collection wasn't an objective of this humanitarian deployment, certainly operating in these types of environment and interacting so closely with the people on the ground played an important role in prepping the environment for future intelligence operations. In another positive step for NUW, similar operations have taken place with a U.S. Navy tender involving several West African partner militaries.

Mercy's deployment also illustrates NUW's capacity as a force multiplier. Traditional naval engagement activities are done with large surface combatants or amphibious ships. With only about 30% of the 278 ships in the U.S. Navy's inventory deployed at any given time, the opportunities for shaping the maritime environment will be limited unless we expand the platforms available to conduct NUW. For example, a civilian crewed Maritime Prepositioning Force ship loaded with humanitarian supplies and an embarked civil affairs teams might perform infrastructure projects throughout Southeast Asia while also gaining intelligence on terrorist supporting piracy activities in the Straits of Malacca. A chartered offshore oil service vessel and embarked helicopter could provide mobility for a combined U.S. and foreign special forces team partnering to conduct counter-terrorism missions in West Africa. These are just a few examples of how NUW could expand the reach and impact of today's navy to shaping the maritime environment more favorably for the GWOT.

NUW could also play a role in naval warfare against a more conventional maritime threat. Naval doctrine seeks to overwhelm the enemy with quantitatively and qualitatively more powerful platforms. NUW can evolve this paradigm into a high leverage form of naval warfighting. Using UW principles, a small number of coalition special operations teams with advanced communications and airpower killed thousands of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. A few U.S. Sailors and their supporting maritime partners on an innocuous looking indigenous vessel would be equally capable of decimating a large waterborne terrorist fast attack craft force using terminally guided smart munitions and direct fire weapons.

DON'T FORGET THE HUMAN FACTOR

Employment of lessons learned and cooperation with joint special operations and other ground component forces experienced in irregular warfare is a good start to implementing NUW. Additional innovative deployments such as *Mercy's* are important too. An even more critical task though, is to develop the human capital necessary to defeat the Islamic extremists-driven global insurgency. One might assume that the only way to achieve that goal is to expand the numbers of naval Foreign Area Officers. Clearly, this program is an important source of regional experts, but our irregular warfare should be drawn from rank and file line and staff officers and enlisted leaders. These Sailors should maintain their warfare qualifications and career path, but bring their unique perspectives gained in NUW operations back into their traditional billets.

The emphasis on naval officer accessions with engineering majors should be reduced and instead, more focus placed on those who have studied outcast subjects such as sociology, history, psychology,

and anthropology. Humans, not hardware, are the center of gravity in the GWOT, and we need naval officers who understand the motivations, inclinations, and fears of people on all levels. We should reduce recruiting targets for “traditional” diversity categories and instead focus on finding and vetting foreign born mariners who can operate culturally in the areas of concern for the GWOT. Of course, these Sailors will need to be put through additional levels of background and security clearance screening, but their innate cultural expertise and utility in NUW intelligence collection cannot be found or developed in American-born recruits.

This war is going to be a long one and parallels to the Cold War are appropriate. During that conflict, the Navy embraced line officers who became Soviet naval experts. Rather than perceiving NUW experts as second class citizens of the officer and enlisted corps, they should be cultivated as a critical link to winning the War on Terror. As many of today’s admirals grew up chasing Soviet submarines in the North Atlantic, tomorrow’s flag officers should be chosen from those with direct experience supporting the GWOT through NUW operations on the littorals and ground.

Many may argue that NUW will reduce the Navy’s readiness for longer range conventional maritime threats. Embracing NUW does not any way mean the U.S. Navy will have to abdicate its blue water missions and dominance of the high seas. On the contrary, because NUW is focused more on people than expensive platforms and technologies, traditional naval operations will not be negatively impacted. The Navy is being dragged kicking and screaming into fighting the messy, human-focused war we must win now rather than the hardware-centric blue water battles most naval officers want. With a little creativity and a small investment in people, Naval Unconventional Warfare will bring a significant pay off in shaping an environment favorable for the GWOT.

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