

## Nagl and Gentile are Both Right So What Do We Do Now?

**Robert Haddick**

*Small Wars Journal* readers are no doubt familiar with the debate between John Nagl and Gian Gentile about the kinds of threats the U.S. will face in the period ahead and how U.S. ground forces should prepare for those threats. (See [Shawn Brimley's excellent summary of the argument](#) for a refresher.)

I have concluded that both men are right; their arguments are not mutually exclusive. But if both men are right, how should the U.S. organize, train, and employ its ground forces?

The purpose of this paper is to explain how to succeed against irregular adversaries, while restoring a more credible deterrence against conventional high-intensity threats.

### **Main Points**

1. The Long War, characterized by persistent tribal and ethnic conflicts, is a reality. Some of these conflicts will threaten U.S. interests. John Nagl is correct when he argues that the U.S. needs military forces that are specially adapted for success in persistent irregular warfare.
2. But Gian Gentile is also right – the U.S. has an interest in maintaining its military resource commitment low and its strategic flexibility high. The U.S. should not drain away its limited endurance, prestige, and resources on open-ended medium-intensity engagements in the Islamic world or anywhere else.
3. The answer is to create Nagl's Combat Advisor Corps and use it to for Phase 0 and 1 operations – prevention, shaping, and deterrence. The more attention the U.S. gives to Phase 0-1 operations, the fewer Phase 2-4 operations America's general purpose forces will have to fight.
4. Making a greater commitment to Phase 0-1 operations will allow the U.S. to seize the initiative in the irregular warfare domain, control US operational tempo, and regulate U.S. military resource usage.
5. Advisor Corps Phase 0-1 operations are an economy-of-force mission. When successful, they will allow the rest of the U.S. military, including the large majority of

U.S. ground combat power, to prepare for major combat contingencies, thus enhancing strategic deterrence.

6. A professional and well-trained Advisor Corps will also have the mission of establishing relationships with sub-national ethnic and tribal groupings. These relationships will provide U.S. decision-makers with greater flexibility when dealing with future irregular conflicts.

### **Nagl's World, Gentile's Worries**

John Nagl's description of the world and its security challenges is valid. Adversaries of the U.S. have rationally chosen irregular warfare methods to confront U.S. interests. The U.S. military (and the U.S. government and society) must acquire the doctrine, training, and tools necessary to succeed on the irregular battlefield.

But Gian Gentile's warnings about over-committing U.S. general purpose ground forces to counterinsurgency campaigns in Islamic countries are equally valid. The U.S. should not drain away its limited endurance, prestige, and resources on open-ended medium-intensity engagements in the Islamic world or anywhere else. America's capacity, both moral and military, to respond to future contingencies is in jeopardy. Most notably, the U.S. has lost its ability to regulate its military operational tempo, and has forfeited the initiative over current and prospective military engagements.

As Nagl suggests, irregular warfare threats arising from chaotic territories will be a persistent problem for U.S. interests. But as Gentile notes, over any relevant planning horizon, these problems are open-ended and cannot be solved with finality. They can only be managed. Accepting this assertion, the U.S. should address these persistent irregular warfare challenges with the lowest possible commitment of prestige, funding, and manpower. It will be wise for the U.S. to reserve its military endurance for contingencies that are unpredictable and that possess much greater strategic consequences.

Nor should the U.S. remold the majority of its ground combat power into forces strictly suited for the advisory mission. In his [original paper proposing the Combat Advisor Corps](#), Nagl stated that the proposed 20,000-man Advisor Corps would require the sacrifice of four U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams. In the same paper, he suggested that an even larger Advisor Corps might be called for, requiring the sacrifice of additional general purpose ground combat capability.

Although the U.S. needs the Advisor Corps, the U.S. also needs to establish a roadblock on this slippery slope. A conventional high-intensity contingency may appear to be a remote probability. But an American defeat in a future high-stakes, high-intensity conflict could be a crushing blow to America's prestige, strategic position, and economy.

Diverting too much general purpose ground combat power away from the preparation for high-intensity contingencies will result in an unbalanced and risky force structure.

## **The U.S. Regains its Irregular Warfare Culture. But it Needs to Do More.**

U.S. general purpose ground forces have successfully adapted to the irregular warfare environments in Iraq and Afghanistan. But this occurred only after years of repetition in those particular war zones, generous funding directed to the particular cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, and at a sacrifice of other important high-intensity ground combat capabilities.

In order to manage the persistent irregular warfare challenges threatening U.S. interests in the Islamic world and beyond, the U.S. Defense Department should establish Nagl's Combat Advisor Corps in the size and form he described in his CNAS paper. The Advisor Corps should be a combined and joint command, welcoming participation from all U.S. services and U.S. allies. The Congress should fund the Advisor Corps generously. The Secretary of Defense should make certain that it receives frequent high-level civilian attention, and he should ensure that its commanding general and top staff are among the U.S. military's "best and brightest." The services should ensure that their promotion policies reward officers and NCOs who complete tours with the Advisor Corps. Most important, the Advisor Corps should have a global mandate, with attention focused on sub-Saharan Africa, all parts of Asia, and Latin America, in addition to the Islamic world.

The mission of the Advisor Corps should be limited to Phase Zero (prevention and shaping) and Phase One (deterrence) operations. In terms of grand strategy, the Advisor Corps will conduct an economy-of-force operation; at a tactical and operational level, Advisor Corps teams will develop allied indigenous military capabilities, with either nation-state or sub-nation-state partners. The Advisor Corps will achieve the greatest success when it prevents instability from occurring in the first place. The creation of friendly indigenous military capability will almost always be the best method of deterring or fighting irregular adversaries. Developing such indigenous military capabilities will also provide U.S. policymakers with additional tools and flexibility when managing other threats to U.S. interests.

### **Ways, Means, and Ends**

Why would Advisor Corps operations be economy-of-force missions? Advisor Corps teams and their indigenous force partners will fight America's irregular wars so America's general purpose forces won't have to. In the language of U.S. joint planning doctrine:

The **end** is to prevent, deter, or minimize the consequences of irregular conflict. A **corollary end** is to minimize the participation of U.S. general purpose ground forces in irregular conflicts.

The **means to achieving this end** is to establish Nagl's Advisor Corps, a U.S. military tool specialized for fighting irregular wars and operating comfortably on a continuous basis in foreign cultures in every corner of the globe.

The **way** to use the **means** to achieve the **end** is to employ the Advisor Corps with the mission of developing the capabilities of friendly indigenous forces. These friendly indigenous forces, with Advisor Corps assistance, will become the primary weapon employed in most irregular conflicts that affect U.S. interests.

Under this proposed doctrine, the employment of the Advisor Corps in Phase 0 and Phase 1 operations is intended to achieve three outcomes. First, U.S. advisor forces will establish persistent relationships with a wide variety of groups at the formal nation-state level, and also at provincial, ethnic, and tribal levels. Beyond providing mutual benefits as a result of these relationships, such relationships will provide U.S. policymakers options and flexibility during future contingencies.

A second intention of this doctrine will be to reduce the probability of U.S. requirements for defensive or offensive major combat and follow-on stability operations (Phase 2-4 operations). The intention is that the more the U.S. government attends to Phase 0-1 operations, the less likelihood there will be for escalation. With more engagement in prevention, shaping, and deterrence, the U.S. will have greater preparation and means to avoid higher-intensity forms of conflict. The U.S. has long employed this principle with respect to strategic nuclear and high-intensity conventional threats. Employing the Advisor Corps in Phase 0-1 operations should be America's method of achieving the same result with respect to irregular warfare.

### **Let's Regain the Initiative**

Third, employment of the Advisor Corps in Phase 0-1 operations will allow the U.S. to regain the initiative against irregular warfare threats. For the past three decades, the U.S. has been reactive to the irregular warfare problem. Various adversaries have controlled the pace, timing, and scale of operations, to which the U.S. has had to react. The operational tempo of U.S. intelligence, special operations, global mobility, aerospace, and later, general purpose ground combat power began to accelerate during the 1990s in response to a growing variety of terror-based and ethnic irregular conflicts. After 9/11, op-tempo leaped higher as the Bush administration attempted early on to regain the initiative.

In the end, the U.S. government lost control over its operational tempo and resource utilization. By 2004, the employment of intelligence, special operations, global mobility, and general purpose ground forces were all "maxed out." The U.S. passed through a dangerous period where it would have had great difficulty responding to other contingencies. The U.S. has seemingly managed to regain the initiative in Iraq, which promises to allow the reconstruction of a strategic reserve. But for much of this decade, the U.S. endured a risky situation and one future policymakers will wish to avoid.

## **What About the Rest of the World?**

The U.S. is currently undertaking Phase 0-1 operations in the Horn of Africa, the Maghreb, the Sahel, in several Gulf of Guinea countries, in Latin America, in the Philippines, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. For now, these Phase 0-1 operations are protecting U.S. interests by preventing irregular conflicts in these areas from expanding into threats to U.S. and allied interests.

However, these efforts have not received sufficient attention or resources and thus do not provide the level of insurance the U.S. should have. The development of a highly trained and professional Advisor Corps on the lines Nagl suggests would provide a higher level of insurance for U.S. interests.

Frequently, current Phase 0-1 operations are conducted by special operations forces, which are unable to give more than sporadic attention to areas outside the current war zones, due the extreme demand for direct action and special reconnaissance missions within the war zones. To make up this gap, ad hoc teams composed of soldiers from general purpose units are occasionally sent out for short training missions with indigenous allied forces. These ad hoc units typically receive minimal training for this work and are not able to establish the critical relationships that result from a persistent presence. The employment of Nagl's Advisor Corps for Phase 0-1 operations will provide the higher level of preventive and deterrent insurance against threats to U.S. interests in those regions outside the current war zones.

## **Objections**

Naturally, new doctrinal proposals will generate objections – if it was such a good and obvious idea, it would already be an established doctrine. Here, I will attempt to address some likely objections to this proposal:

*1) Missions such as foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and much of Phase 0-1 operations are the province of Army Special Forces or other special operating forces.*

Under this proposed doctrine, the requirement for globally wide-ranging and more persistent Phase 0-1 operations will greatly expand. Meanwhile, special operating forces have more intense taskings to Iraq and Afghanistan and in direct action and special reconnaissance missions, tasking which will not be reduced any time soon. The U.S. military thus needs to add additional capability designed for training and advising allied indigenous forces.

*2) U.S. general purpose ground forces have demonstrated their ability to perform advisor missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.*

Agreed, but after years of repetition and resources focused on those particular areas. Meanwhile, what about the rest of the world? Further, the more general purpose forces

perform advisor-type tasks, the less time and resources they will have preparing for other general purpose missions.

*3) Nagl's Combat Advisor Corps, and its persistent employment in global Phase 0-1 operations, will create a Two Armies Problem. The U.S. will have one army, the Advisor Army, composed of self-selected cultural intellectuals, who risk "going native" after so much time spent with foreign indigenous forces (often irregular). Meanwhile, these U.S. soldiers will lack experience in the "Real Army." Meanwhile, if the doctrine works properly, that "Real Army" will be stuck forever at Fort Polk, Fort Riley, Fort Hood, etc. deterring the next mythical high-intensity peer competitor. If the proposed doctrine succeeds, leaders in the Advisor Army will have little experience commanding significant numbers of U.S. troops, while the Real Army will rarely get off the training ranges.*

U.S. officers and NCOs should have tours in both "Armies" during their careers. In fact, such a practice should be mandatory for upper-level promotions. What if individual soldiers don't have the aptitude for acquiring language or cultural skills or otherwise performing in the Advisor Corps? Such skills and aptitude should become a feature of armed forces recruiting. If this further limits the already shrinking pool of those in U.S. society fit for military service, the services can adapt by revisiting the current end-strength targets. After all, one of the main goals of Advisor Corps Phase 0-1 operations is to substitute indigenous forces for U.S. general purpose forces in irregular warfare missions.

*4) In the early years of the Vietnam conflict, the U.S. employed large numbers of advisors in an attempt to build up indigenous military power. Not only did that effort fail, it caused U.S. policymakers to fall into a commitment-escalation trap, whereby the U.S. had to commit U.S. general purpose forces in an attempt to rescue a failed strategy and avoid an embarrassing climb-down. With a large-scale world-wide expansion of Phase 0-1 operations, won't the U.S. potentially be stumbling into other such commitment-escalation traps?*

In Vietnam, the decision to escalate in 1965 was made not to rescue the advisor mission itself, but rather to rescue a broader U.S. policy in South Vietnam. The commitment of U.S. prestige in Vietnam went far beyond the military advisor mission.

Today (and in the future), deployed U.S. advisor teams should perform their duties in the background and out of camera. The U.S. government should expect a high failure rate with its advisor missions and many will have to be withdrawn from time to time for a variety of reasons. With a low visibility to Phase 0-1 operations, inevitable failures should not be a blow to U.S. prestige. Thus, the U.S. should normally be able to avoid commitment-escalation traps.

*5) This doctrine proposes using the Advisor Corps for the traditional nation-state foreign internal defense mission. But it also seeks to opportunistically establish relationships between U.S. military advisors and non-nation-state groups on an ethnic or tribal basis.*

*Would not such a doctrine undermine the nation-state system? And might foreign host nations object to U.S. advisor missions because of this?*

The fragility of the nation-state system, and the opportunities that fragility presents for irregular warfare adversaries, is the real world in which the U.S. must find a way to succeed. Having a military organization, such as the Advisor Corps, that is trained to operate in this world on a broad scale will give future U.S. policymakers more options and flexibility. Host nation governments should see the benefits to their interests in welcoming U.S. advisor missions into their countries.

*6) Military analysts such as Frederick Kagan and Bing West have asserted that recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated that only a large-scale employment of U.S. general purpose ground forces is effective against modern insurgencies. Highly trained, well-equipped, and disciplined U.S. general purposes forces are required to protect the population from insurgents and to create enough confidence for indigenous forces to assert themselves. Without the large-scale support of U.S. general purpose forces, many advisor missions will not be able to stand on their own, especially against determined adversaries.*

That may be true in some cases, but the domestic and international backlash from recent U.S. military operations, especially in Iraq, demonstrates that the U.S. needs a new doctrine to address these situations. Large-scale and open-ended deployments of U.S. general purpose ground forces into irregular warfare situations will not likely be an option for the foreseeable future. As an alternative, an Advisor Corps operating in Phases 0-1 can avoid having to use U.S. general purpose forces in Phases 2-4. In any case, the U.S. needs to find a way to make the indigenous manpower-for-U.S manpower substitution work.

## **Conclusion**

John Nagl's description of a chaotic world rife with irregular wars is accurate. He is correct that the U.S. needs to develop a new tool, an Advisor Corps, to operate successfully in this world.

But Gian Gentile is also correct when he warns against squandering U.S. prestige and military resources on numerous open-ended, medium-intensity conflicts. He is also correct when he warns against reshaping most of America's ground forces into solely irregular warfighters at the sacrifice of conventional high-intensity capabilities. Although seemingly a remote probability, an American defeat in a future high-stakes, high-intensity conflict could be a crushing blow to America's prestige, strategic position, and economy.

Those who wish to take no risks with such a disaster should support the establishment of Nagl's Advisor Corps. A robust Advisor Corps that focused on prevention, shaping, and deterrence (an economy-of-force Phase 0-1 operation) would protect the majority of U.S.

ground forces from dissipation in irregular wars. These forces could then prepare for high-intensity major combat operations that have been neglected for too long.

America's potential adversaries have been watching and calculating. Will one of these adversaries conclude, correctly or incorrectly, that the U.S. has run down its options to respond to either irregular or conventional contingencies?

Using the Advisor Corps for Phase 0-1 missions will accelerate the buildup of friendly indigenous military capacities. The Advisor Corps will also establish relationships with mutually beneficial allies. These actions will free up the majority of America's ground combat power for the main effort, deterring major combat contingencies or responding with crushing strength if deterrence fails. America's potential adversaries will also take note when the U.S. uses this doctrine to broaden its military options and reestablish its strategic flexibility.

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