The Regularity of Irregular Warfare

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As the United States military continues to extricate itself from both Iraq and Afghanistan through FY 2014, the Department of Defense is shifting its strategic priorities away from the AirLand Battle Concept of the past 20 years to an AirSea Battle Concept. The US Army is struggling to find its purpose within this new framework, and it is finding itself in the difficult position of attempting to redefine itself in a climate of reduced resources. This article aims to address the changing nature of warfare and how the US Army is instrumental in challenging the emerging threats of the 21st Century.

In the recent release of “Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense” by the Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, we see the beginning of a shift in US Defense priorities from a two-war posture to a one-war posture. However, buried within the document is a shift toward AirSea Battle Concept and away from AirLand Battle Concept. Additionally, we see a shift from the Counterterrorism/Non-Proliferation priorities of the past 10-15 years to a priority on Peer v. Peer strategy (i.e. force on force battle). What exactly does this mean for the force in the midst of a rapidly shifting global landscape? Historically, is this a prudent move by the Department of Defense?

First, let us look at the question of whether this makes sense, historically. During the 20th Century, the United States arguably engaged in Peer on Peer battle four times over the 100-year period: World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the first Gulf War. Indeed, from US military involvement in the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 up to the present day our military has regularly fought “irregular” wars and/or operations. However, since World War II our military has greatly increased in size and become increasingly dependent on technology. Our size and dependence on technology in the late 1940s and 1950s placed the military into a traditional model for conventional war.

The United States Marine Corps recognized the frequency with which US forces engaged in irregular war as early at 1940 and codified this type of warfare in the Department of the Navy publication Small Wars Manual. In the introduction of the Small Wars Manual, the authors state, “Small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps. During about 85 of the last 100 years, the Marine Corps has been engaged in small wars in different parts of the world. The Marine Corps landed troops 180 times in 37 countries from 1800 to 1934.”[1] The truth of warfare was as obvious to the Marine Corps following their successes in World War I and before the specter of the growing shadows of another global conflict, as it should be to us today.

The US Army began codifying the “small wars” idea in to doctrine during the Vietnam War with the additions of FM 31-15 Operations Against Irregular Forces, FM 31-16 Counterguerrilla Operations, and FM 31-22(A) US Army Counterinsurgency Forces. Created out of necessity in the 1960s, these field manuals focused on irregular warfare as it was in Vietnam. Following US withdrawal from Vietnam, many of these lessons learned were forgotten and the focus shifted back to regular warfare throughout the latter three decades of the 20th Century. In the 1970s and 80s the focus was firmly on containment of
Soviet expansion and the defense of the Fulda Gap. After the fall of the “Iron Curtain,” the US military began to focus more on stabilization and maintaining the status quo. The Gulf War was a seeming vindication of the post-Vietnam policies of the Department of Defense.

Following the First Gulf War, the United States found itself dealing with humanitarian issues, coups, and insurgencies in Somalia, and with the breakup of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and in Haiti, among others. These actions brought with them doctrine on peacekeeping, stability operations and foreign internal defense. Again, US forces were re-learning lessons since forgotten, but applying them and codifying them as a result of actions in specific theaters. In fact, after the events of September 11, 2001, we found doctrine to be inadequate due to these forgotten lessons and, what doctrine we did have, was written for the last war or action.

Now, at the conclusion of one and the twilight of the other of the two longest wars the United States has ever been engaged in, what have we learned? Most certainly our allies and we have learned that irregular warfare necessitates a long-term view. To engage in peacekeeping, foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, counter-guerrilla, security force assistance, stability operations all of the actions that is encompassed in irregular warfare takes joint coordination, resources, patience, time, and political will. The fear, however, is that once again; these lessons will be forgotten or only remembered within the context of the Afghan and Iraq Wars.

Where is the Battlefield?

Even as we shift from a two war military to one focused on fighting one war against a similarly equipped peer, irregular warfare will continue to be, “regular.” It will be regular in the sense that as the US and NATO forces grow more potent with highly trained personnel with state of the art capabilities for lethality, there will be less of chance for that very peer v. peer scenario that we are now preparing for. As Western forces see themselves in their “conventional” role they also bring with them a “convention” of laws and rules for fighting wars. Additionally, if we look at “conventional” warfare as warfare set to these conventions, would it not make sense that weaker states, trans-national terrorist and criminal organizations, et al, not use “conventional” methods?

Indeed, throughout the latter-half of the 20th Century the nature of warfare has shifted from the “conventional” (symmetric) paradigm of peer v. peer (state v. state) warfare to that of the “unconventional” (asymmetric). Unconventional war is the domain of, “the weak v. the strong,” whether that is: group – group, state – state, group – state, etc. Due to a perceived or real limitation in one or various domains (military, economic, technological, etc.) the weaker state attempts to overcome their limitations by circumventing the “convention.” Senior Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui called this idea Unrestricted Warfare.[2] In this form of warfare, the battlefield exists outside of geographical limits; remaining ever changing and fluid within and without many traditional and non-traditional battlespaces (geographic, technical, economic, moral, legal, cyber, etc.). As Colonels, Liang and Xiangsui’s “young lad” asks, “Where is the Battlefield?”[3] Certainly, it is everywhere.

Within the Department of Defense’s (DoD) 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), irregular warfare is mentioned once within the context of building joint capacity and capabilities, however with the caveat that the DoD will do so without compromising conventional and nuclear superiority.[4] Paradoxically, this policy will further necessitate the development and strengthening of irregular warfare capabilities and capacity. Nevertheless, there is structural and visceral resistance to irregular warfare growing as a major functional concept within the US Army. The question is, simply: Why?

The simplest answer would be that irregular warfare is a low-technology intensive activity. Within the realm of assessing, shaping, and influencing environments the needs for $billion resourcing is minimal.
However, within an environment of constrained resourcing; those projects that require $billion resourcing are deemed more worthy.\[5\] To be sure, inside an irregular battlespace, a highly trained, culturally intelligent, lethally capable battalion is worth more than a wing of F-35s in terms of real effectiveness on the ground. Yet, the prevailing view is that technology is more worthy of resources than soldiers and training.

This is not to say, of course, that there are not uses for high technology within an irregular warfare battlespace. Several items within the US arsenal have been used with great effect from Unmanned Arial Vehicles (UAV) to the Hand-Held Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE). Yet, in this same environment a large swath of the US arsenal is “mission obsolete,” ineffective, or counterproductive (e.g. fighters, bombers, tanks, large artillery batteries, etc.). Typically, in an irregular environment the machines of war only serve to intimidate the populace and inflict so much collateral damage as to be counterproductive.

The reliance on technology by the Army in an irregular battlespace has also lent itself to separation between the populace and the soldier. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, we have found that soldiers are more effective at collecting information, understanding the environment and facilitating the Host Nation Government (HNG) when patrolling dismounted, actively interacting with the populace and with a minimized effective offensive posture. Again, this is not to say that technology does not have its place on the battlefield. Yet, with an understanding that the future battlefield will necessitate irregular warfare capabilities, how effective is it to resource a self-propelled, fully automated howitzer versus developing a training program that creates highly trained, culturally intelligent, and lethal soldiers that are equipped to analyze their operational environment and empowered to make decisions that advance the commander’s end-state?

A second difficulty is the nebulousness inherent in irregular warfare. Irregular warfare, within the United States military, inhabits several mutually inclusive spheres: security force assistance (SFA), counterinsurgency (COIN), unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), peace keeping, stability operations, and counter-terrorism (CT). Not one of these domains exists in a vacuum; they are all facets of the same form of warfare. Yet, in the Army’s view, these tend to be looked upon as somewhat mutually exclusive. Peacekeeping and stability operations are lumped together, yet SFA is a separate domain. FID exists within the purview of Special Operations, yet both Special Operations Forces and the Conventional Force handle COIN. In light of the fact that there is not overarching irregular warfare concept for the Army, this disjointedness is unsurprising.

Due to the complexities of the irregular operational environment, there is a greater tendency toward micromanaging the battlespace by higher commands. Unfortunately, this top down decision-making is largely ineffective and counterproductive in the irregular battlespace for a couple of reasons: 1. an effective unit in an irregular battlespace will have the majority of its information requirements (IR) fulfilled and developed at the squad/platoon level; 2. Higher commands tend to be “above the fray” and do not receive a genuine view of the battlespace at the micro-level; and, 3. Short-term requirements typically sabotage long-term gains (e.g. higher focus on immediate metrics without the proper analysis of those metrics effects on the larger end-state at the micro-level of battlespace.). Irregular war lends itself to a particular “bottom-up” approach to the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), military decision-making process (MDMP), and mission command.

This “bottom-up” approach does not marginalize one echelon from another, but recognizes the fact that in an irregular warfare environment, tactical units are the main drivers on activities within their battlespace, in concert with the strategic unit’s end-state. The complexities of irregular warfare necessitate the tactical units having their pulse on both the strategic aims of their higher command and the on the aims and needs
of the local populace/government. The difficulty lies within the old saw that, “one cannot serve two masters,” yet within both Iraq and Afghanistan we have required this from our tactical commanders, albeit with mixed results.[i]

Finally, there is an inherent resistance from the force due to the long-term view of warfare that the irregular paradigm demands and the lack of a clear vision for “victory.” The United States has been engaged in Afghanistan for, as of this writing, almost twelve years and opinion both within and without the Department of Defense have been mixed with regard to our military effectiveness. The truth of the matter is that the Army’s conventional force is, by and large, not designed for an irregular fight.

The Way Forward

The efficacy of irregular warfare is clear; however the way forward for the Army is muddled. As of this writing, TRADOC has removed the term “irregular warfare” from its doctrinal lexicon, however has not offered a replacement. While the Army Irregular Warfare Fusion Cell (AIWFC) remains, what does this mean for the future of Irregular Warfare for the Army. Unfortunately, the Army’s sister services have invested large amounts of resourcing and mental capital, while the Army is seemingly moving away from the very concept of Irregular War.

It should be clear that Irregular Warfare is both a reality of our past and future. As long as there is militarily weaker opponent, irregular tactics will remain in the fore. The United States Army is a product of this very concept. Militarily, the Continental Army was not strong enough to meet the British Army on the field in the “regular” fashion. By utilizing irregular tactics and shaping the battlespace to suit their needs, the Continental Army shifted the military balance of power to their favor. The realities of the 1770’s are no different from the realities of the 2010’s when it comes to use of non-standard tactics for a group to gain advantage when at a disadvantage.

As our world becomes smaller and resources become more scarce, states, groups and organizations will rise and fall in an attempt to solidify their power. In doing so they will use whatever tactics are at their disposal to maintain the balance of power. The US Army should recognize that as this reality unfolds, the opportunity for peer v. peer battle will diminish for the aforementioned reason.

Bibliography


[3] Ibid., p. 43.


[i] I would maintain that the mixed results were more a product of noise within the communications between tactical and strategic levels.

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