John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton

Dirty Windows and Burning Houses: Setting the Record Straight on Irregular Warfare

After a slow start, the U.S. military has made remarkable strides in adapting to irregular warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq, and is beginning to institutionalize those adaptations. Recent Department of Defense (DOD) directives and field manuals have elevated stability operations and counterinsurgency to the same level of importance as conventional military offensive and defensive operations.[1] These changes are the outcome of deep reflection about the nature of current and likely future threats to U.S. national security and the military's role in addressing them. They represent important steps toward transforming a sclerotic organizational culture that long encouraged a "we don't do windows" posture on so-called "military operations other than war," even as the nation's leaders called upon the armed forces to perform those types of missions with increasing frequency.

Despite the clear need for change from a Cold War military to one that can deal with the threats of the current century, numerous military officers and civilian experts have challenged the U.S. military's development of improved theory and practice for irregular warfare. Michael Mazarr's recent *The Washington Quarterly* article, "The Folly of 'Asymmetric War'," presents one of the more cogent arguments against an increasing emphasis on anything other than major combat operations. Mazarr contends that the armed forces should not "be specialized

John A. Nagl is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). A retired army officer who helped write the U.S. *Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), he visited Afghanistan and Iraq in 2008 at the invitation of the U.S. Commands there. Brian M. Burton is a research assistant at CNAS.

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for asymmetric, nontraditional forms of warfare . . . particularly counterinsurgency and nation building." His argument rests on two central points: first, that the challenges presented by insurgencies and failed states are not amenable to externally-imposed military solutions, and second that "deterring and responding to major conventional aggression" is a "much more important global role for U.S. military power."[2]

Mazarr is far from alone in his views. Others share the fear that, as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the capabilities pendulum has swung too far in favor of irregular warfare at the expense of the military's major combat skills.[3] For example, Colonel Gian Gentile, the U.S. Army's most vocal internal critic of military adaptation to the kinds of wars we are currently fighting, warns that "this hyper-emphasis on counterinsurgency puts the American army in a perilous condition. Its ability to fight wars consisting of head-on battles using tanks and mechanized infantry is in danger of atrophy."[4] He also accuses supporters of counterinsurgency adaptation of believing that there are "no limits to what American military power . . . can accomplish."[5]

Such arguments are born of a misunderstanding of the role of irregular warfare in the international system of this century. It is true that military power should not be the tool of choice for resolving complex contingencies involving failed states and internal political violence, and it would certainly be preferable if the U.S. military could focus on conventional interstate warfare and not have to worry about the messier business of counterinsurgency and nation building. These observations, however, do not offer much help in dealing with the current and most likely future security challenges that the United States faces, which include counterinsurgency and reconstruction missions in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as efforts to build the capacity of partner countries in the wider campaign against lethal al Qaeda-type terrorist organizations.

Although military force is not always the tool of choice for complex contingencies, the U.S. military has the responsibility to address those challenges to the best of its ability, particularly since other government agencies do not currently possess viable crisis response capabilities. While preserving its major combat capabilities, the military must continue to improve its ability to conduct post-conflict reconstruction, counterinsurgencies, and train and advise allied security forces. Balance is the key; as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in an important speech at National Defense University in September, "The defining principle driving our strategy is balance . . . [b]etween institutionalizing capabilities such as counterinsurgency and stability operations, as well as helping

partners build capacity, and maintaining our traditional edge–above all, the technological edge–against the military forces of other nation states."[6]

Demilitarizing the Response

There is much truth in the contention that the challenges presented by insurgencies and failed states are not particularly amenable to externally-imposed military solutions. Leading theorists and practitioners from David Galula and Sir Robert Thompson to Gen. David Petraeus and Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli have noted the limitations of military power and the primacy of politics over force in counterinsurgency.[7] Unless the counterinsurgent is willing to employ the so-called Roman method of unrestrained violence to suppress rebellion, the only way to defeat an insurgency is to gain the loyalty of the population, thereby depriving insurgents of the support base they require to destabilize a government.

Gaining the loyalty of the population requires the difficult process of nation building, which consists of improving the ability of a government to secure its citizens and developing its capacity to provide essential services, including security, to the population. In developed countries, civilian police and utility workers perform these functions. As Mazarr aptly points out, an armed force trained for major interstate war is not an ideal tool to carry out such missions. Indeed, without proper doctrine, strategy, and training for counterinsurgency and nation building, military forces can be counterproductive in those situations. In fact, the U.S. military's poor understanding of the nature of irregular warfare contributed to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam and the rise of the insurgency in Iraq.[8]

Mazarr correctly asserts that "an expanded and deepened set of nonmilitary tools," specifically "economic aid, foreign service efforts, and public diplomacy, and cultural outreach," should be the United States' weapons of choice to deal with civil conflicts and failed states in an "anticipatory and collaborative manner."[9] Unfortunately, the necessary civilian tools to deal with failed and failing states do not currently exist in sufficient supply and are unlikely to be developed in the foreseeable future due to inadequate resourcing of the nonmilitary instruments of power. *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* notes that integrated operations with civilian assets in irregular warfare are "always preferred," but civilian agencies are generally incapable of deploying the required numbers of personnel to do the job and have difficulty operating in less-than-permissive environments without armed protection. Thus, "by default . . . military forces often possess the only readily available capability" to do the necessary counterinsurgency and nation building jobs that would be better left to civilians.[10]

The military currently provides the sole U.S. capability to shape irregular warfare.

Clearly this is a problem that should be redressed. Gates has regularly drawn attention to the need for improved civilian capabilities, and even called for "a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security–diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development."[11] While some positive steps in this direction have been taken over the past several years, including creating Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and establishing the State Department's Civilian Response Corps (CRC), the current allocation of funds is woefully inadequate. For example, in fiscal year 2008, Congress provided $75 million to establish the CRC, which only funded 250 active members and 2,000 stand by members.[12] While this represents a positive start, a civilian capacity able to respond to the current needs in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, without any reserve for future contingencies, would clearly have to be orders of magnitude larger.

Aside from overarching resource and manpower limitations, the United States' civilian elements of power are hindered from responding effectively to extreme situations due to bureaucratic cultures that are not conducive to nontraditional field service in active conflict zones. As the controversial fall 2007 call for State Department volunteers to go to Iraq showed, civilian agencies can face difficulty in supplying personnel for difficult assignments.[13] An endemic lack of appropriate career incentives and institutional resistance to changing personnel policies designed for peacetime conditions hurt efforts to bring in civilian expertise from federal departments that do not focus on international affairs. This can and should change over time with stronger leadership at the agencies and more resources, but it is unlikely to do so in time to address the short- to intermediate-term civilian capacity gap.

Without military involvement in counterinsurgency and nation building, the United States would lack the ability to intervene at all in these situations. The military cannot single-handedly defeat insurgencies, resolve civil wars, and build nations, but the sad fact is that it currently provides the sole substantial, existing capability with which the United States can shape outcomes in irregular warfare scenarios.

An Unrealistic Strategy for an Unlikely Future

The second main argument against increasing the military's focus on irregular warfare is that using the military to deal with the Afghanistans and the Iraqs of

the world pales in significance to the potential threat of major conventional aggression from, for example, a rising China and resurgent Russia.[14] According to this argument, interstate conventional war is so much more strategically important than counterinsurgency and nation building that the mere possibility of it should continue to be the main driver of U.S. defense planning. Instead of preparing for irregular warfare, the United States should avoid it and keep doing what it "does best": high-intensity conventional war. This strategy effectively calls for the U.S. military to embrace its own inflexibility and continue to emphasize an "American way of war" based on technology and attritional strategies.[15] Some military officers have made related arguments for continuing to focus on traditional areas of strength rather than seeking to broaden the spectrum of U.S. capabilities to deal with a variety of different threats.[16] These recommendations would unwisely have the U.S. military shun preparations for the types of operations it is most frequently called upon to perform in favor of preparing all but exclusively for threats that may or may not materialize.

The proposed national strategy of avoiding irregular warfare might be correct if not for the inconvenient truth that the enemy has a vote. It would certainly be preferable if the U.S. military could simply focus on what it does best, ignore other contingencies, and dictate the terms of every engagement. Unfortunately, that world does not exist. Trends like the youth bulge and urbanization in underdeveloped states and the proliferation of weapons and advanced technologies point to a future dominated by chaotic local insecurity and "non-traditional conflict" waged by non-state actors rather than confrontations between the armies and navies of nation-states.[17] This likely future of persistent low-intensity conflict around the globe suggests that U.S. interests are at risk not just from rising peer competitors but also from what has been called a "global security capacity deficit."[18] Gates recently warned that "the most likely catastrophic threats to our homeland—for example, an American city poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack—are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states."[19] As a result, the U.S. military is more likely to be called upon to conduct counterinsurgencies, intervene in civil strife and humanitarian crises, and rebuild nations than to fight mirror-image conventional forces.

In fact, this has been the case throughout U.S. history: "small wars" requiring adaptable U.S. forces to perform counterinsurgency and stability operations have hardly been uncommon.[20] As the army's new stability operations field manual states, "Contrary to popular belief, the military history of the United States is one characterized by stability operations, interrupted by distinct episodes of major combat."[21] Despite protestations of prominent foreign policy elites that the United States "doesn't have a dog" in many of the sub-state fights going on around the globe, U.S. forces have been sent to intervene in strategic backwaters

like the Balkans and Somalia in the recent past, and there have been demands from within and without for the United States to do even more in places like Darfur and Rwanda. Those pressures will only grow in a globalized world in which local problems increasingly do not stay local.

While the demand for U.S. troops for counterinsurgency and stability operations has increased, the conventional military threats to U.S. national security have not. Although a conventional state-on-state war involving the United States is always a possibility, many of the high-intensity combat scenarios put forward appear rather unlikely, particularly those involving ground combat against peer competitors. The Russian attack on Georgia in August 2008 did not mark the return of the Soviet bear, and it is difficult to think of a situation in which the Russian and U.S. armies would directly fight one another. War with China is also not imminent, and even if it were, U.S. ground forces would probably not be involved on a grand scale. It is hard to imagine a plausible role for large numbers of U.S. ground forces, let alone a feasible way to deploy the troops and their heavy equipment, in such a conflict.

Moreover, one key factor that has prevented great power war since 1945 remains firmly in place: nuclear deterrence. China and Russia have large numbers of nuclear weapons. North Korea, another state some think the United States will have to fight, has a small but militarily significant nuclear arsenal that serves as invasion insurance. This fact is rarely addressed by commentators warning of future conflict with militarily powerful states. Anyone contemplating war scenarios between these countries and the United States has to take into account the very real danger of nuclear escalation and its horrific consequences. In this context, high-intensity conflict against states with similar capabilities has become too dangerous for either side, and is therefore increasingly unlikely.[22]

Even if nuclear weapons were somehow not a factor, it is also unclear why any actor, state or non-state, would wish to risk a conventional battlefield decision against the United States. Even if U.S. conventional combat skills have been degraded in counterinsurgency operations over the past several years—a debatable point—U.S. conventional military capabilities still qualitatively outstrip those of potential adversaries to a significant degree. Such capabilities are too costly and infrastructure-intensive for most countries to develop, purchase, or field, and the record of even well-equipped countries that have recently tried to fight the U.S. military in open battle does not indicate a high probability of success.

Instead of playing the U.S. game, current and potential enemies have turned to asymmetric approaches designed to neutralize our strengths and exploit our relative weaknesses. Insurgency is a classic strategy of the weak, and it has been successful in case after case when the stronger power tried to combat it with sheer military might. After witnessing the United States struggle in Afghanistan

and Iraq, both state and non-state actors are likely to adopt a variety of insurgent methods to try to keep the U.S. military off balance.

We will not be able to dictate when, where, and how wars are fought.

Hybrid wars mixing available weapons technology with irregular tactics, including terrorist and guerrilla attacks and information operations, are likely to be the way of future war. Hezbollah employed this strategy in its conflict with Israel in 2006. While inflicting casualties on the Israeli military with advanced weapons, Hezbollah also fought and hid among the people like insurgents, ensuring that Israeli attacks would harm civilians in a visible, politically counterproductive way.[23] To counter this development and prepare for future conflict, the U.S. military must acknowledge that "the enemy gets a vote." The history of the past sixty years demonstrates that we will not be able to dictate when, where, and how wars are fought. Doing more of what the U.S. military "does best" is not the answer to all of the challenges that will be forced upon us.

The Strategy and Capabilities the United States Needs

Today's most dangerous threats to U.S. citizens and interests thrive amidst the global security capacity deficit. Former national security advisor Stephen Hadley recently noted that the most serious threat facing the United States today is not a rising power like China or Russia, but a deeply troubled one like Pakistan.[24] For this reason, the new National Defense Strategy (NDS) correctly places more emphasis on defending the homeland, winning the Long War against al Qaeda and its associates, and promoting international security.[25] The achievement of these objectives requires following through with adaptations to irregular warfare.

One of the most pernicious notions about irregular warfare proponents is that they believe that putting more boots on the ground to conduct counterinsurgency provides a one-size-fits-all military solution to many foreign policy problems.[26] Large-scale U.S. military involvement in counterinsurgency and nation building can only be a costly last resort. The United States's preferred approach should focus on strengthening the military and governance capabilities of legitimate partner governments and regional institutions in order to reduce the insecurity that enables terrorists, insurgents, and criminals. As the National Defense Strategy states, "[A]rguably the most important military component of the struggle against violent extremists is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we help prepare our partners to defend and govern themselves . . . We will adopt approaches tailored to local conditions that will vary considerably across regions."[27] Some countries will require significant U.S. military assistance

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to defend themselves from internal threats; others will only need some advice and technical support.

Perhaps the single most important adaptation to the demands of warfare in this "age of persistent conflict" will be an expanded ability to perform this advisory mission. DOD efforts to train and advise the Afghan and Iraqi military and police forces have suffered from the unwillingness of the services to put sufficient resources against a mission that the NDS and all of the senior leadership of the department have acknowledged is "absolutely essential for our long-term success."[28] As the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation concluded last year, although "[t]he Department [of Defense] has recognized that stability operations, including developing indigenous security forces such as the Iraqi Security Forces, are a core U.S. military mission . . . the services lack sufficient standing military advisory capacity to meet current, and potential future, requirements for that mission."[29] Indeed, Major Gen. Robert Cone, the commander responsible for raising and advising Afghanistan National Security Forces, recently noted that he is some 3,300 advisors short for 2009.[30] It is long past time for the services to develop a standing capability to empower and enable allies to bear the primary burden of irregular warfare so that U.S. forces do not have to do so.[31]

Irregular warfare and nation building are not inherently more important than maintaining superior capabilities for conventional combat. The nation's armed forces must retain the skills necessary for high intensity warfare. These skills are required not just to deter and if necessary prevail in interstate conflict, but also to combat well-equipped insurgent and militia forces. The potential for military conflict with countries ranging from Iran to China to North Korea cannot be completely dismissed, even if it is less likely than irregular or hybrid warfare; such conflicts would likely involve the coordinated large-scale use of U.S. ground, naval, and air units. It is precisely because the United States faces threats from across the spectrum of conflict that it requires its armed forces to strike a balance between readiness for major combat operations and vigorous capabilities for irregular warfare in accordance with a rigorous assessment of the global strategic environment. Balancing between competing demands and managing risk are rightly central themes of the National Defense Strategy.[32]

Achieving that balance, however, will be a great challenge, and we are not there yet. Our capacity to win the wars we are not fighting far exceeds our ability to win the ones in which we are currently engaged. Although capabilities like standing advisor units would increase U.S. effectiveness in irregular warfare, the

armed services remain resistant to developing specialized forces and units for major combat or irregular warfare functions.[33] Instead, they prefer to take the path of proceeding with originally planned organization and modernization models, which rely on all units being "full-spectrum" "pentathletes."[34] This approach will perpetuate the current unbalanced status quo in the U.S. military while requiring forces on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq to settle for less effective structures, training, and capabilities than they deserve. U.S. forces are enormously capable and adaptive, and they will find ways to succeed but the United States should not put this burden entirely on their own shoulders. Failing to prepare to fight the insurgencies and hybrid wars of the twenty first century will only make those wars longer and more expensive, in both blood and treasure. We can do better. To paraphrase Gates, these are the wars we are in. And these are the wars we must win.[35]

Notes

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