The Army and Future Strategic Challenges

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“Thank God all this is over and we can go back to real soldiering again.”  
—British NCO, September 1918

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are going to continue for some years yet, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates—the most nonlame “lame duck” in recent history—has focused his attention on finishing the wars we have, rather than concentrating on future wars we’d rather fight. The Secretary is exactly right. Still, the 2009 Quadrennial Defense Review lurks in the future, and even in the midst of war, the Army has to grapple with the issues of rebuilding to meet the challenges of the years ahead. The Army’s leadership has to juggle two priorities: first, to maintain the war effort in Iraq, Afghanistan and associated theaters until those wars are closed out (which may be a decade or more); second, to rebuild the Army—not just the fighting forces but the whole institution—so as to continue to be strategically decisive in coming decades. This is a tough challenge; the old sergeant’s urge to “get back to real soldiering again” will tempt both recent veterans of the Iraqi counterinsurgency as well as those who yearn for the rapid, decisive operations of the 1990s. Both would be wrong, however.

No matter who takes office after the U.S. elections, the world is far more dangerous now than it was eight years ago. Our security challenges have been transformed. Of all the future scenarios the Army crafted in the late 1990s, none considered that by 2008 the Army would be rotating combat brigades in and out of two theaters for a decade while other terrorist threats sprang up around the world, nuclear weapons proliferated and Russia turned nasty again. So much for out-of-the-box thinking. Operationally, few realized the extent to which warfare would change, becoming more complex, more deadly and more protracted. Army theorists dreamed of the global blitz, the “quick win.” In the real world, though, winning is harder and takes longer—theory colliding with experience.

In the real world, of course, there’s no going back to the “real soldiering” of expeditionary warfare, with all of its associated quick-win doctrines that delivered temporary success but could not deliver strategic victory. Instead, for the reasons outlined below, irregular warfare and all that it enfolds—insurgency and counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, military assistance, foreign internal defense and so forth—is now at the core of the Army’s missions and will be for the foreseeable future.

We have entered a historical period
of constant warfare—in the words of the new National Security Strategy, “a prolonged, irregular campaign,” fought globally. Warfare in this time, irregular or otherwise, will most likely be characterized by what the scholar Frank Hoffman calls hybrid war, in which all forms of warfare occur throughout the same battle area. In fact, hybrid warfare is already happening, as the Israelis discovered fighting Hezbollah and our own soldiers have found in Iraq, where regular combined-arms combat can occur next to irregular skirmishes and nation building. Because hybrid battlefields are increasingly located in populated areas, and because this has become a “Lexus and Olive Tree” world on a 24-hour news cycle, a quiet revolution is occurring in the conduct of American warfare that puts people—civil populations, soldiers, irregulars, aid workers—rather than maneuver, firepower or technology, at the center of strategic and operational planning and elevates the importance of the irregular fight.

As we are relearning in Iraq and Afghanistan, strategic success in irregular warfare comes not from fast armored sweeps—though some may be tactically necessary—but from enabling the host country to take control of its own security and build strong, durable state institutions. This is the second revolution. In future warfare, the Army will always be engaged, to some extent, in the raising and equipping of other armies. The response to then-Maj. Gen. David Petraeus’ famous request—“Tell me how this ends”—is that U.S. troops successfully turn over security responsibilities to local, American-trained forces. This is the Iraq and Afghanistan model, though we are doing it the hard way, building a state and an army under fire.

The third revolution—and the one that poses the most significant challenge to the Army’s adaptability—is a new national strategy (largely the product of the “Gates Revolution” at the Defense Department) that emphasizes U.S. assistance to emerging or threatened nations before irregular war requires the introduction of regular units. Like Sun Tzu’s famous dictum that “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence,” true strategic success for the United States in the future will be helping other nations meet their own security challenges without committing U.S. units. This does not mean that we shouldn’t maintain strong, tough outfits; on the strategic level, however, we need more options than just sending in the 82nd Airborne after things have fallen apart.

Making military assistance a major mission is a new perspective for most U.S. soldiers and requires a new way of strategic thinking. Col. David Maxwell, one of the Army’s best thinkers on irregular warfare, points out: “We can only be the external support to governments that are threatened with insurgency. We can only help them to be successful as the essence of an insurgency is the fight for who will be the legitimate governing power of the indigenous population. As long as we try to employ our forces to ‘win’ the insurgency vice help our friends, partners and allies win their insurgency, we will focus on the wrong tasks.” The recently issued National Defense Strategy of the United States of America clearly recognizes this shift in warfare, as does Defense Secretary Gates. Speaking recently, Gates said, “Building the security capacity of other nations through training and equipping programs has emerged as a core and enduring military requirement, though none of these programs go forward without the approval of the Secretary of State.”

For the Army, this is a major challenge. The move to irregular war—military assistance, advisers, host-nation support—is a permanent shift, not just a fad, as some believe, or the pet rock of a departing Secretary who can be waited out. Regardless of which party wins our next election, Gates’ vision will largely be continued. Unless an essential ally is attacked, another Iraq is not in the cards—“preemptive war” is a dead issue. Providing assistance, sending advisers, providing logistics and combat support—and
sending combat units—is the likely irregular warfare scenario for the Army. How the Army implements this shift is critical to its success.

To prepare for this era of irregular warfare, the Army needs to begin by ditching the term conventional forces and the baggage associated with it. Nothing is conventional anymore. Strong regular combat and support units are still vitally necessary, for three reasons: first, as the operational last resort—deploying U.S. power to assist an ally in extremis—and second, for deterring would-be aggressors. (For those reasons alone, the Army should fight for all the combat-ready brigades it can afford.) A third critical reason is that regular fighting and support formations are the incubators of the top-notch military professionalism and equipment that are so important to supporting allies threatened by insurgency or outright aggression.

The Army needs to greatly expand its understanding of the “irregular” in irregular warfare. The rise of irregular warfare, for example, does not obviate the need for top-notch regular units. Nor does it threaten (in fact, it reinforces) the need for the Future Combat Systems (FCS), the Army’s major modernization program. Admittedly, FCS has had a troubled history. Over-sold in the global blitzkrieg days of the late 1990s, its legacy continues to struggle against the irregular warfare chic now engulfing the Defense Department and Congress. In fact, irregular hybrid battlefields of the future effectively validate the need for FCS, just as the bloody battles of the irregular Iraq war proved the value of armored vehicles and precision fires in urban warfare—contrary to the opinions of many of the Army’s best thinkers. Future hybrid battlefields will potentially be as tactically deadly as any state-on-state warfare; irregular threats are getting more and more dangerous and more “state-like” in terms of armament and training. In recent war games against a Hezbollah-like enemy armed with precision fires and secure communications obtained on the open market, an FCS-equipped force did quite well. In fact, FCS can provide the margin of superiority in the ground fight on the hybrid battlefield.

There is another dimension to Army modernization, however. Since American security strategy is evolving into one of “building the security capability of other nations through training and equipping programs,” the Army’s leadership should look closely at how new technologies, including FCS, can be incorporated into security assistance programs. This is not something we have always done well, and we should never forget the earliest days of Iraqi security assistance, when the fledgling Iraqi army was fighting with castoff American gear and making their own body armor out of scrap metal, hardly good commentary on our ability to support critical allies.

Clearly, the whole subject of security assistance is complex and badly in need of depot-level maintenance by Congress and DoD. Work is currently under way to overhaul the worst parts
of the system. The Army, for its part, should continue to support technology and weapons transfers wherever appropriate through military-to-military programs. Effective materiel support and a few advisers on the ground are preferable in every way to committing U.S. regular units to someone else’s war.

Similarly, the business of “advisers” and “advising” is one of the most-discussed and least-understood facets of the new strategy. An adviser, in American military parlance, is a soldier assigned in a host country to advise or train a host-country army. The adviser is usually assigned to a military detachment generically called a military group (or Milgroup), a military assistance advisory group (MAAG) or one of a dozen other terms acceptable to the host country. The Milgroup is attached to the U.S. country team and works under the direction of the U.S. ambassador and the regional commander. Advisers work closely with counterparts in the host country’s military services and usually develop personal relationships with host-country personnel. A second type of routine military assistance is provided by units or specially organized teams that temporarily deploy to a host country for a joint exercise, mutual training or assisting the host country in fielding new equipment. This mobile training team (MTT) mission is familiar to most soldiers. Indeed, the Army maintains a security assistance training program that last year deployed more than 400 Army personnel to conduct more than 60 MTT-style security assistance visits in 37 countries.

Advising, whether through permanently stationed units or an MTT, is not a special military skill in itself. Advisers should be highly trained military professionals, proficient in whatever skill the host country requires and not necessarily in that country’s culture. For this reason, advisers and MTT should come out of regular Army units, get some preparation, deploy while skills are fresh and then return to mainstream assignments after an advisory tour. Since the number of advisers afield—like the numbers of MTT—will vary depending on host-country needs, State Department requirements and DoD priorities, the Army should concentrate on building a schoolhouse—by either expanding the present security assistance training management office at Fort Bragg, N.C., or rebuilding an expanded course somewhere else. In addition, the Army should maintain a slight surplus of officers and senior NCOs in the total force structure to account for Milgroup assignments. The numbers will not be backbreakers, though the change of attitudes in the Army should be profound. Advising has to move into career mainstreams, now and in the future. The Chief of Staff of the Army recently issued helpful assignment and promotion guidance for advisers in Iraq and Afghanistan. One can only hope that perspective will continue for other theaters as U.S. strategy shifts toward having more soldiers assigned to military assistance duties.
Army doctrine—the bedrock of how the Army adapts to new strategic challenges—has lagged behind the rise of irregular war, despite the publication of the now famous manual FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency. The Army should move on these issues before a new administration, perceiving service foot-dragging, begins to legislate change. Irregular warfare, the hybrid battlefield and military assistance programs are not new to the Army; pieces are present in current operations, in current doctrine and in various specialized parts of the service. They only need to be brought together. Defense Secretary Gates’ strategic vision and his new National Security Strategy are going to endure beyond his tenure, and the brunt—and the opportunity—of carrying this out will fall first on the Army.

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