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Soft Skills for 21st Century Land Dominance

by

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Be modest about what military force can accomplish, and what technology can accomplish. . . . The advances in precision, sensor, information, and satellite technology have led to extraordinary gains in what the U.S. military can do. . . . But also never neglect the psychological, cultural, political, and human dimensions of warfare, which is inevitably tragic, inefficient, and uncertain.

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates¹

Lately, the conventional vs. unconventional warfare debate has had a resurgence not observed since the lessons of the Vietnam War were batted around by renowned military writers such as Colonel Harry Summers (*On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*) and Major Andrew Krepinevich (*The Army and Vietnam*). The current debate centers on the question of whether the U.S. Army should train and fight as a conventional force or as a counterinsurgent force in preparation for future contingencies. How different or important are these forms of warfare? And are they essential to ensuring that the Army remains the preeminent land dominance force? Do they require different skills altogether? One source for answers to these questions is the Army's landmark manual on counterinsurgency (COIN), Field Manual 3-24. Excerpts from that document provide valuable insights:

A counterinsurgency campaign . . . requires Soldiers and Marines to employ a mix of familiar combat skills more often associated with nonmilitary agencies. . . . Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help reestablish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services.²

[H]istory shows that some tactics that are usually successful against conventional foes may fail against insurgents. . . . Western militaries too often neglect the study of insurgency. They falsely believe that armies trained to win large conventional wars are automatically prepared to win small, unconventional ones. . . . In fact, some capabilities required for conventional success—for example, the ability to execute operational maneuver and

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employ massive firepower—may be of limited utility or even counterproductive in COIN operations. . . . Nonetheless, conventional forces beginning COIN operations often try to use these capabilities to defeat insurgents; they almost always fail. . . . The military forces that successfully defeat insurgencies are usually those able to overcome their institutional inclination to wage conventional war against insurgents.³

How do units train Soldiers and leaders for a mix of familiar combat skills more often associated with nonmilitary agencies? How do they prepare Soldiers for rebuilding infrastructure and basic services? In other words, how does counterinsurgency translate to specific Soldier skills?

To answer this question, one must weigh the combat skills associated with small-unit actions and patrolling with many of the Soldier skills required in counterinsurgency (referred to as “soft” skills). Soft skills are those abilities that fall into the range of human dynamics, interpersonal communications and personal relations categories rather than combat skills associated with engaging the adversary by fire and maneuver or other kinetic means. They are skills that facilitate direct engagement of the population through social interaction.

One soft skill that has a great impact on success in counterinsurgency is foreign language proficiency. Two branches of the Army familiar with the demands of language training are the Military Intelligence (MI) and Special Forces (SF) communities. For years they have struggled with the requirement of maintaining their linguistic proficiency while juggling other Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)-related training demands. Language training often requires after-duty study, availability of computer self-study programs, formal classroom hours and/or even attendance at certified government language training centers such as the Defense Language Institute.

Cultural awareness training falls into a similar category. How many hours are required to become “aware,” and when does an organization achieve mastery in a foreign culture? Where does this fit into the training schedule?

The list of requirements only continues to grow and the effects are more apparent as additional soft skills associated with effective counterinsurgency are added. Verbal communications skills, social interaction, negotiation, and critical and creative thinking are some essential skills for leaders at all levels—from squad to Multi-National Force (MNF). What about the training required for media awareness and multinational and interagency partnering? Add to this list other common sense requirements—such as adaptability, versatility, flexibility, judgment and patience—that Soldiers acquire through time and experience and one begins to realize that going to the firing range to qualify or the motor pool to pull maintenance on vehicles do not seem to be such overwhelming tasks when compared to these training and support requirements.

Everyone at every level shares the load of preparing for full-spectrum operations. But by and large it is the first sergeants (1SGs) and company commanders who are most affected. They probably feel the greatest impact of trying to cram daily and weekly training schedules with additional training requirements, new mandatory “get in touch with” classes and personal Soldier demands, while still having only 24 hours in the day.

From a training perspective is it feasible or realistic for a combat unit to be proficient in all aspects of full-spectrum operations? Conventional wisdom dictates that one cannot do everything well. An artillery battery cannot spend 12 months distributing food at a refugee camp and then

be expected to immediately and skillfully qualify at the artillery range with their M198 155mm howitzer. The question is not whether that same battery can do both; the question is with what degree of proficiency can they move freely from one end of the spectrum of conflict to the other and still complete all essential tasks to a high degree of excellence? Can they maintain their skills within the proverbial “band of excellence?”

Paratroopers on jump status face a similar problem. By regulation they are required to jump every six months; otherwise they lose proficiency and jump pay. More important, from a safety perspective, how long can a jumper remain on non-jump status and still be considered qualified to jump again? There may or may not be an answer to this question, but the reasonable expectation is that after a certain amount of time, proficiency is lost.

The concern over this problem and its impact on artillery units was presented on the Government Executive.com website under the title “Army Officers Warn of Atrophy in Critical Skills.” The article states that “the service’s intense focus on counterinsurgency warfare has led to a decline in its ability to fight large conventional battles . . . [and that] limited training opportunities [for deployed artillerymen] have led to unsafe practices and a rising number of accidents when units do fire their big guns during pre-deployment exercises.”⁴ This web posting was based on a 2008 white paper, “The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery’s Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders.” In it the authors—three U.S. Army colonels—claim that the U.S. Army risks a fate similar to that of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in a clash with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon; after “years of COIN-focused operations . . . the IDF attempted to return to [high-intensity conflict] operations [and] found itself unable to effectively plan fires, conduct terminal control or deconflict airspace.”⁵

This dilemma often results in arguments for the need for two armies—a conventional army and an unconventional one. The conventional army would train and fight in large-scale maneuver warfare, while the unconventional one would train and fight in counterinsurgency; in this way each army could focus on one unique skill set. In a sense, though, an unconventional army already exists in the form of a Special Forces branch and a Ranger regiment, and the use of their unique skills for more unconventional warfare. Perhaps the solution is already in place. A larger pool of special operations forces could address even more unconventional missions, while the “bigger Army” trained for and executed large-scale conventional maneuver warfare. This approach is highly emotional and controversial, and it may not sit well with the senior leadership who are convinced that the U.S. Army can accomplish any mission. The one advantage, of course, is that it does allow for units to focus on segments of the operational spectrum rather than on the spectrum in total.

In conclusion, soft skills are critical to successful unconventional warfare, but they also add to the training demands of units and organizations. Since they are particularly perishable, soft skills require continued sustainment, like other combat skills; language proficiency is just one of those perishable soft skills that must be practiced and used to maintain a basic level of proficiency. And finally, although highly trained and effective combat units can move up and down the spectrum of warfare, the real question is how effectively can they reasonably perform at all levels of the spectrum? Rhetoric notwithstanding, the history of America and its first battles indicates that it cannot all be done very well, and certainly not without prior preparation to achieve a minimum level of proficiency. This, then, becomes the most important issue to confront and address as the U.S. Army faces the challenges of a perilous and not so bright future of persistent conflict . . . from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Endnotes

- ¹ “Defense Chief Criticizes Bureaucracy at the Pentagon,” *New York Times*, 30 September 2008, p. 20.
- ² Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-3.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army/Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, December 2006), Foreword.
- ³ FM 3-24/ MCWP 3-3.5, Introduction, p. ix.
- ⁴ Greg Grant, “Army Officers Warn of Atrophy in Critical Skills,” Government Executive.com, 6 May 2008, <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0508/050608g1.htm>.
- ⁵ Colonel Sean MacFarland, Colonel Michael Shields, Colonel Jeffrey Snow, “The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery’s Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders,” May 2008, <http://www.npr.org/documents/2008/may/artillerywhitepaper.pdf>.

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