US Military Doctrine since the Cold War

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The American military at the end of the Cold War was a formidable force, large in size, very well equipped, and quite capable of meeting any conceivable Soviet warfare challenge, nuclear or conventional. Its recovery from Vietnam was total. The Reagan Build-up, a major infusion of funds and technology that occurred in the 1980s, had allowed the military to modernize its weapons, doctrine, and training. It had learned to recruit and motivate effectively an all-volunteer force, a no small feat for a military long used to the cheap labor of conscription. Thoughts of honing its fast fading counter-insurgency skills or of a search to discover how best to participate in peace-keeping and nation-building ventures were far from its doctrinal priorities. Instead, the American military rejoiced in its smashingly fast and near cost-free defeat of Iraqi forces in Kuwait and planned to implement further improvements in its conventional war-fighting capabilities.

These improvements, often referred to as the Precision Revolution, were based on advances in sensor, radar masking, robotic, and targeting technologies and were intended to allow American forces to detect, classify, and destroy targets precisely with low risk and at expanding distances. The high casualty rate of Vietnam is unsustainable with an all volunteer force. And absent a serious threat to its own security, the American public's tolerance for civilian casualties inflicted by American forces-collateral damage-is very limited. The rapid and seemingly decisive victories in the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq featured such advances, the product of a decade long effort by the military to implement the operational lessons of the Gulf War while trimming force structure to adjust to the Soviet Union's demise.

But the Afghanistan and Iraq victories were anything but decisive. American forces soon become entangled in difficult counter-insurgency operations in both countries. Plans for a quick transition to local rule and a minimal American presence slid into persistent combat and a troop rotational pattern that strained American forces. American commanders seemed confused and unprepared, at a loss to control the violence that included inter-communal attacks and to initiate the reconstruction of vital infrastructure that both countries needed. The resulting "hard slog", as the now discredited Donald Rumsfeld once described the counter-insurgencies, is blamed on many factors, but mostly on a supposed blind spot in the US Army's doctrinal vision. The Army, it is said, is culturally resistant to creating effective doctrine for counter-insurgencies, preferring always to focus on large scale conventional operations.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates chides the entire US military for being absorbed in "Nextwaritis" even as it fights the current difficult wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army he notes has designed its Future Combat System. a network of manned and unmanned vehicles, to defeat up-dated versions of Soviet motorized rifle regiments while the Air Force keeps promoting additional purchases of its expensive F-22 which is optimized for air-to-air combat, a non-existent set these days. The next war in the US military's planning concepts may look like the last, but certainly not like the current ones. But America's future, the critics and the Secretary say, is more of the same culturally sensitive, all-agency, coalition-partnered interventions that require the coordinated management of complex security and development operations.

There are two defenses that the military could offer to this critique if it were allowed to do so. First, this is new guidance for military preparedness. In the years between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks, political direction was minimal and certainly not united on counter-insurgency. When President George H. W. Bush

said in the wake of the Gulf War that America's Vietnam Syndrome was vanquished he meant that it was now possible again for the US to use military force in a big way, and not that the US was free once again to become engaged in counter-insurgency. In fact, he passed by the opportunity to invade Iraq to replace Saddam in large part because of the possibility that it would require a long effort to suppress regime supporters or other elements of Iraq's fractured society.

Each of the interventions of the 1990s-Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo-had significant opposition within and outside of government. Although all were low casualty events, the public was fearful of the risks. The military saw them as diverting from a mission to be ready to meet a rising China or a resurgent Russia, both conveniently masked behind the proxies of North Korea and Iran or Iraq. Big militaries require big opponents and Haiti and Serbia just did not match up. The Democrats largely left the military planners alone, and the Republicans reflexively defended anything they did. It was largely a self-guided military during the 1990s, aware that there was strong domestic opposition to interventions in on-going ethnic conflicts, and intrigued by the technological advantages that the Precision Revolution seemed to offer to the US in conventional operations. It was time to plan the post-Cold War military and to make large investments in new equipment. What better way than to make the US military the lean, mean wireless machine that many observers said was just over the horizon.

Second, although the current administration and secretary may want the focus to remain on counter-insurgent operations, the US military likely calculates that this is a politically unsustainable policy. A modern, professional military, one dependent on volunteers, has a great deal of difficulty providing the 18-20 brigades of ground combat troops that the counter-insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan required. Many soldiers are now contemplating their fourth or fifth combat rotation with up to 18 months separation from their families. Conscription, which would share these burdens more evenly in the population, is politically impossible to reinstate. Hunting down al Qaeda is still popular. Making the world safe for democracy or saving the Somalians, Sudanese or South Congolese from local war lords is only in the nice idea category, especially when such missions are likely to be done with few partners and amidst much brutal fighting. And after Iraq and Afghanistan it would take an insane American politician, one likely to be carted away to an institution, to make an invasion of Iran or North Korea anything but an empty threat.

It is relatively easy for the American military to defeat conventional forces arrayed against it for they are basically targets that can be identified and destroyed at safe ranges. Coping with insurgents is a much more difficult task because the insurgents hide among civilians and attack from great advantage. Only when the stakes are very high will the American public tolerate the harsh, often brutal, measures and significant sacrifices that need to be sustained over years to suppress insurgencies. New manuals that repeat old truths about providing security, vital infrastructure, good government, and economic opportunity to local populations in order to isolate and defeat the stealthy enemy do not eliminate this test of wills. The American military knows that for marginal interests that "will" will not be there long. Each generation of American politicians apparently learns this anew. The American military's doctrine is to avoid fighting counter-insurgencies.

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