

Persistent Conflict and Special Operations Forces

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The art of war was always to start with...adapting [forces] to the requirements of the particular case.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

AS THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN CLOSES, there is an almost tangible sense of relief within the Army. Military services are shifting their focus toward Asia. The frustration and grief of the last decade have convinced many that guerrilla wars are best left to the guerrillas. Decisive victory in conventional terms has been elusive.

However, special operations forces in Colombia, the Philippines, eastern Africa, and other locations around the globe have achieved successes. Even during the initial phase of the campaign in Afghanistan, special operations forces achieved many objectives. Organized as small task forces, special operations forces worked efficiently and effectively, while the larger staffs of brigade combat teams and divisions tended toward regimentation and institutionalism.

Conventional headquarters and formations in the Army are too slow and bulky to manage small, persistent, irregular conflicts. The massive multinational headquarters during the late phases of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seemed to produce little more than colossal plans for an ever-fleeting victory. Moreover, such military organizations tend to cause massive disruptions in civilians' lives and induce counterstate violence.

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In Afghanistan, conventional military organizations were asked to implement the difficult *social policies* needed to end persistent, irregular conflict—rooted in social problems—while lacking the expertise and experience for the job. It is no wonder conventional forces were marginally successful in Afghanistan; they are designed and resourced to destroy an opposing state's ability to resist. They will always be needed for conventional types of conflict, but irregular warfare needs other types of organizations and tools. United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) assets are better suited to the persistent, low-intensity conflicts likely to characterize operations in the near future. This is because USSOCOM is focused on its role as a partner in long-term, strategic, interagency engagement aimed at resolving conflicts that cannot be settled by purely military means.

Future Conflicts

Irregular conflicts will continue to characterize the global security environment. From 2002 to 2011, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's online *UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia* counted over 370 small or nonstate conflicts—nearly ten times the number of interstate wars.¹ Irregular conflicts take the form of insurgencies, guerrilla wars, terrorism, smuggling, and even simple banditry. Nations are likely to avoid state-versus-state conflict because it is so expensive. Nonstate groups will increasingly seek to achieve their goals using asymmetric and irregular methods because they cannot compete directly against the overwhelming power of U.S. conventional military forces.

A range of conflicts. The United States must remain prepared for very different types of conflicts. On one hand, the U.S. military faces near-peer competitors with the ability to cause significant harm to U.S. interests. The Department of Defense (DOD) will attempt to remain unmatched in its ability to destroy the offensive or defensive capabilities of enemy nations in conventional wars. However, the U.S. military will inevitably find itself confronting more unconventional threats.

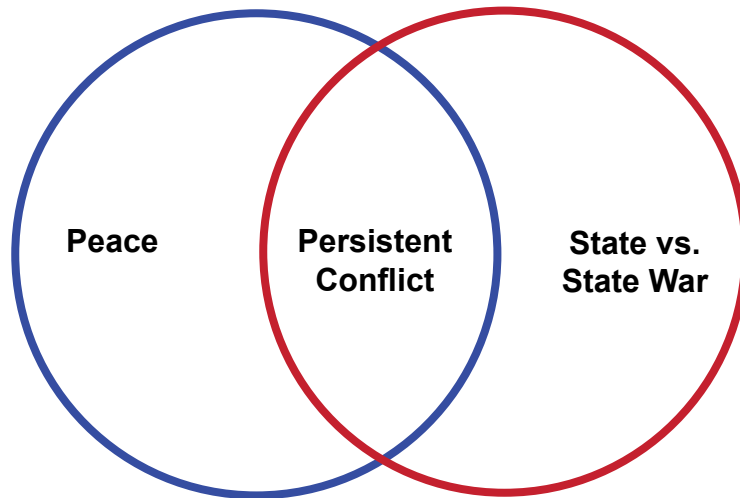
The United States must remain ready to counter insurgencies, state-supported guerrilla wars, and transnational terrorism—the hallmarks of persistent conflict. The United States will not be able to afford large conventional deployments for these types of

persistent conflict. Nor will the nation stomach engagement in large-scale nation building after Iraq and Afghanistan. Calls within the DOD to refocus on high-intensity conflicts are consistent with analyst Martin Van Crevald's prediction that governments will literally contract out their responses to low-intensity conflicts, seeing them as not worth the blood and expense of a military designed to deter global challenges and topple states.² If the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's data are correct, the future of war will look more like the later phases of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the United States will not likely outsource its response to low-intensity threats. Low-intensity and irregular wars will continue to require U.S. action. The ability to acquire devastating weapons means that even fringe elements could strike a serious blow to the U.S. homeland, as 9/11 proved.³ All told, the next several decades will be as busy as the last. Appropriate U.S. response to calls for support from threatened partners likely will fall somewhere between relatively small, predictable peacetime engagements and full-blown deployments of hundreds of thousands of troops, with their staggering price tag. Obviously, a range of military capabilities will be needed.

A range of capabilities from USSOCOM. As part of a unified effort with other U.S. government agencies, USSOCOM has been providing support around the world that is appropriate to the context for each situation and crucial to a national strategy of persistent engagement. Historically, DOD's most public actions in foreign assistance have been responses during natural disasters. Less well known is DOD's support for strengthening foreign governments' ability to manage internal and international threats. DOD contributes through state building and assistance to foreign militaries.⁴ These operations represent an in-between world with peace on one side and complex maneuver warfare with large deployments on the other (see figure).

Nature of the Adversary

Many adversaries in persistent, irregular conflicts organize as loose, distributed networks rather than large, hierarchical military or political structures. Functioning as distributed networks helps terrorists, insurgents, and criminals remain adaptive. They form amorphous entities not bound by traditional



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political borders or even by international law. Adversaries of this nature continually adapt to changing political and social environments, and these irregular conflicts become “contests for influence and legitimacy.”⁵ The defining characteristics of the conflicts come from the relationships between individuals, families, and ethnic or religious groups. The conflicts simmer over generations because of family, ethnic, or religious ties between the fighters. Persistent conflict itself becomes a network in which trust and intimate contact between individuals predominate.

According to David Tucker, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, the overwhelming evidence from psychology and sociology shows that the decision to pursue violence is made in the context of an established social network that aids the mobilization and recruitment of members.⁶ Ties from family, kin and tribe, ethnic group, religious organization, workplace, education, and area of residence influence choices and objectives. Conflicts drag on because the underlying causes of the violence extend across generations, regions, and countries. The nature of adversarial networks and the characteristics of persistent conflicts—including how long they continue—require a light

touch from the United States. When the United States gets involved in these conflicts, overwhelming offensive power will not be the solution.

Success in Irregular Conflicts

The United States has successfully supported partners against nonstate adversaries in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines—and not entirely through military means. In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration found itself fighting a violent insurgency in El Salvador. In the same decade, the war on drugs was focused on the country of Colombia, where a significant portion of the world’s cocaine is still produced.⁷ In 2002, as part of the Global War on Terror, the Bush administration created a small task force in the Philippines to combat the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas.⁸ These efforts could be called “economy of force” actions, while the bulk of the U.S. defense establishment was engaged elsewhere. The Cold War military establishment was still protecting Europe; El Salvador was seen as a secondary theater. Sustained support to Colombia and the Philippines continued even while the focus of DOD became Afghanistan and then Iraq.

In the 1990s, the ultraviolent tri-war between the Colombian military, the independent United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC), and the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People’s Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC) was threatening to drag the country into anarchy. In 2000, under the Clinton Administration, Congress approved a security assistance package worth over \$1 billion.⁹ In Colombia, the AUC demobilized as the Colombian security forces were better able to contain the FARC. In 2012, Colombian president Santos finally announced that FARC was willing to negotiate an end to the longest conflict in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁰ While there have been no such negotiations in the Philippines, the influx of security assistance appears to have set the stage for a peaceful settlement. The U.S. military and government agencies have been instrumental in helping the armed forces of the Philippines capture or kill leaders of the militant group Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, antigovernment organizations operating in the south.¹¹ Conversely, hundreds of thousands of men and vast expenditures of money failed to turn the tide in Vietnam. The Afghan surge appears to have done little, while Iraq is poised to slip back into chaos.

Why the Difference?

Common to our successes is the careful application of limited resources appropriate to each situation and over the long run. Analysts at the RAND Corporation uncovered similar conclusions in the study, *Victory Has A Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*.¹² Perhaps unsurprising to some, the length of time needed for concerted interagency support to a counterinsurgency (COIN) effort was inverse to how the United States preferred to fight its conventional wars. Plans in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines were designed to last years, while the war against Iraq was meant to last weeks. During a COIN operation, resources were used inversely to logistically heavy conventional war.¹³ Instead of turning on the spigot to support a COIN effort, resources—both personnel and material—were

tightly controlled and often subject to regular congressional oversight.¹⁴

This strategy of persistent engagement over the long term could solve some vexing problems. First, it is an economy-of-force effort needing relatively few resources. If applied early, then the United States may be able to avoid massive and costly deployments of direct combat forces. The range of threats described in the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020* can be engaged early, before larger and more lethal options might be needed. Second, small special operations task forces executing a strategy of persistent engagement can avoid the public war weariness associated with long campaigns.¹⁵ Conducting persistent engagement on a small scale helps avoid drawing media attention. Remaining out of the public eye extends national perseverance.

U.S. forces deployed to El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines were from the special operations community. In Colombia’s case, increased support via the “Plan Colombia” began shortly before 9/11. American media attention naturally gravitated to the Middle East. In El Salvador’s case, news media did report heavily on U.S. involvement there, sensing a potential repeat of the Vietnam disaster of the previous decade. In most cases, Americans were aware of U.S. involvement in El Salvador, and they opposed large-scale intervention.¹⁶ The few U.S. casualties that did occur were framed as criminal activity, usually in cities, and far from the combat patrols of the El Salvadoran army. Additionally, since Congress had prohibited U.S. personnel from patrolling with the units they trained, only a few news reports attempted to link U.S. advisory efforts to human rights abuses. Because of its low cost and limited media attention, engagement can continue for as many years as needed. This allows a generational approach—appropriate when engaging insurgent or terrorist networks. This soft approach, with small numbers of personnel concentrating on training and appropriate nonlethal support, often decreases casualties.

The hallmark of the campaigns in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines is that the main effort has not been the military, and the primary tools used by the military have not been lethal.

In El Salvador, the national campaign plan was largely the product of the U.S. embassy in San Salvador. In Colombia, the idea of the Plan Colombia was presented as early as 1998 to the Clinton administration. The support began in 2000 as an effort to stabilize Colombia with foreign military sales and Andean counterdrug initiative money. Funding from 2000 through 2010 for all types of support came to over \$7 billion.¹⁷ The original 1990s plan, Plan Colombia, has given way to a new initiative under the current Colombian administration, the National Consolidation Plan, and the Colombian government created a cabinet-level Center for Coordinated Integrated Action in 2004. The center was instrumental in integrating the overall efforts of the Colombian government (military, police, political, and economic) to consolidate gains made in the COIN effort against the FARC.¹⁸ In the Philippines, various programs such as the Peace and Order Council and the Council for Peace and Development were created by the Philippine government to coordinate national, provincial, and lower-level development plans. These have proven effective at implementing the security and civil reforms needed to bring the insurgency to an end.¹⁹

The U.S. Congress has mandated constraints on the scope of U.S. military activities in all three countries. In Colombia, U.S. military involvement began in 2000 and was limited to training Colombian counternarcotics units, although U.S. forces now train the Colombian military in COIN operations.²⁰ About 200 special forces soldiers work in Colombia, where they are limited to training in garrison, and planning and intelligence support at headquarters.²¹ U.S. forces do not accompany or serve as advisors to Colombian units conducting combat operations. In the Philippines, U.S. military operations are limited by the Philippine constitution. Foreign military forces are not permitted to participate in combat operations on Philippine territory. The U.S. military is restricted to conducting training in COIN and counterterrorism tactics, advising Philippine units, and participating in civil-military operations.²²

The Joint Combined Exchange Training conducted under Section 2011 of Title 10, United States Code; theater security cooperation plans; and the Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and

Civic Aid program, have provided a stable platform for unified U.S. government efforts in Colombia and the Philippines. The Joint Combined Exchange Training exercises with friendly foreign militaries are conducted ostensibly for training U.S. special operations forces. Humanitarian assistance programs such as medical and veterinary

Force caps reflect congressional and public reluctance to allow the military to expand conflicts by introducing ever-greater numbers of troops.

visits may be added to cultivate goodwill among local populations and as part of the training for foreign troops.

In 2006, Congress authorized a new “global train and equip” fund and has renewed it every year since.²³ Section 1206 of Public Law 109-163 provides the first major DOD authority to be used expressly for the purpose of training and equipping the national military forces of foreign countries. For the past half-century, DOD has trained and equipped foreign military forces under State Department Title 22 authority and through State Department programs. While there are some congressional misgivings with this blurring of State Department and DOD boundaries, combatant commanders consider the Section 1206 program “the single most important tool for the Department to shape the environment and counter terrorism.”²⁴ This authority allows USSOCOM to train and equip foreign military forces and foreign maritime security forces to perform counterterrorism operations and to participate in or support military and stability operations with the United States.²⁵ It has been used in Colombia, the Philippines, and even the Arabian Peninsula.

Congress also placed limits on the number of personnel in country, called force caps. Force caps reflect congressional and public reluctance to allow the military to expand conflicts by introducing ever-greater numbers of troops. In El

Salvador, the initial force cap was 55, although various add-ons eventually swelled the number to 150.²⁶ In Colombia, Congress has prohibited U.S. personnel from participating directly in combat and has mandated a personnel cap of 800. In an acknowledgement of the growing role of contractors, Congress capped their number in Colombia at 600.²⁷ The growth of the force cap between the two cases is reflective of each country's conflict and military capacity. The U.S. Military Group, El Salvador, was training an infantry-based force armed with simple weapons and using relatively simple tactics. In Colombia, the higher force cap reflected the need to train the Colombian navy on drug interdiction tactics and the Colombian air force in the use of sophisticated Blackhawk helicopters. In the Philippines, the United States created the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines in 2002 to train the armed forces of the Philippines and to combat militants with ties to al-Qaida. The average force strength was 500

to 600, but there were surges in personnel, mostly in support of a large, annual exercise called *Balikatan*.²⁸

Despite the dilemmas force caps have posed to the military planners and commanders on the ground, they do not seem to have impaired DOD's ability to achieve its mission. The idea that using more personnel might be more effective by allowing forces to achieve objectives more quickly has two major flaws. First, Congress must weigh continuing commitments of personnel and money against future unknowns—and the certainty that increasing the number of personnel would also increase public scrutiny. Second, tens of thousands of U.S. service members in a country feed negative perceptions of invasion and occupation, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The emphasis on checks and balances in the interagency approach has meant that the purely military element could not overwhelm planning and resources. Moreover, it appears successes



Competitors conduct a static line jump from a C-130 aircraft during Fuerzas Comando 2012, a special forces skills competition at the Colombian National Training Center on Fort Tolomaida, 13 June 2012.

have included improving the ability of the host nations to contain insurgencies effectively while U.S. military influence in planning and execution waned.²⁹ This transition from open insurgency to normal political and economic life was the goal in each plan, the same as Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the evidence indicates that while the military is the best instrument to provide immediate, stabilizing security, the introduction of more military units tends to aggravate the population, driving more into insurgent activities. During these successful COIN campaigns, the interagency process worked to ensure that the military operations did not crowd out the political and economic work that was the fundamental key to success. These “whole-country” plans were developed relatively early in the campaign. In all three countries, immediate military assistance from the U.S. task forces sought to stabilize battered host-nation security forces. Military support concentrated on weapons and tactics training. There was no attempt to transform the society, as was the case in Afghanistan with the International Security Assistance Force’s focus on governance and development.

Conclusion

The Joint Force 2020 concept identifies a future security environment in which armed conflict will be inevitable and enduring.³⁰ As they always have, irreconcilable wills continue trying to dominate each other through violence. When the United States responds to conflict, its approach needs to account for political and fiscal constraints. This means working with partners and avoiding large



Sgt. Jordano Hernandez, Company A, 163rd Military Intelligence Battalion, 504th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, speaks with members of the Afghan Border Police before attacking a possible weapons cache site during Operation Southern Strike II near Yaro Kalay, Afghanistan, 4 June 2012. (U.S. Army, Sgt. Brendan Mackie)

deployments of direct combat forces. Myriad tools and authorities that fall under theater security cooperation will allow robust and persistent engagement. Experiences in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines illustrate three ongoing constraints that need not impair effectiveness:

Congressionally mandated constraints on military activities. Far from causing problems while assisting partners, congressional guidance in the form of policies and laws actually serve to clarify the working relationships between the military services and the rest of the U.S. government. Occasional hearings and mandated reports ensure that the ultimate arbiter of foreign policy—the American public—supports military involvement.

Force caps. Mandating upper limits on the deployments of personnel forces headquarters

staffs to streamline their planning processes. This necessitates delegating nonmilitary tasks to the agencies best suited to achieve objectives.

Resource limits. Limiting resources forces local U.S. commanders to innovate to achieve their goals. It helps partner nations understand they must plan and execute the hard work of COIN operations without receiving billions of dollars in aid.

Persistent conflict presents a vexing and difficult problem. Americans are adverse to the idea of limited, never-ending wars of any kind. They prefer the

clean ending of a fight to the finish against enemies seen in terms of absolute evil.³² However, DOD and the U.S. government must respond to the low-level conflicts that threaten our interests around the world. In an era of fiscal restraint, the United States must be able to influence and shape future conflicts and achieve success. Traditionally, choices were limited. The United States could stand by while partner nations engaged in their own persistent conflicts, or deploy massive resources in order to support our partners. There is a middle way. **MR**

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