

The Changing Character of War: Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

The forces of globalization are eroding state sovereignty, empowering non-state actors, and increasing the prospect of intra-state conflict. Greater interdependence between states has reduced the prospect of state-on-state conflict between powerful industrial age armed forces. However, the likelihood of intra-state conflict with non-state armed groups and conflict with globally networked non-state actors has increased. The United States lacks a credible deterrence for dissuading undesirable behavior in violent non-state armed groups. Consequently, the United States must consider the policy and strategy implications of the changing global environment and the character of war. The author recommends changing USSOF doctrine, organization and training in order to increase success against violent non-state actors and networked insurgents, who take advantage of asymmetries in power, economy, and technology to challenge state sovereignty and the international order.

The Changing Character of War: Challenges and Recommendations

America is more preponderant than it was ten years ago, yet ironically, power has also become more diffuse. Thus, America's ability to employ it to shape the rest of the world has actually decreased.

—Henry Kissinger¹

The pressures of globalization are eroding state sovereignty and blurring the lines between states and non-state entities. The rapid movement of goods, data, money, and people across borders undermines the traditional institutions of power that sovereign states employ to control territories and populations. Conversely, non-state actors are proliferating and becoming more powerful and influential in the international system. Greater interdependence between states has reduced the prospect of state-on-state conflict between powerful industrial age armed forces. However, the likelihood of intra-state conflict with non-state armed groups and conflict with globally networked non-state actors has increased. Simply stated, the forces of globalization are eroding state sovereignty, empowering non-state actors, and increasing the prospect of intra-state conflict. Consequently, the United States must consider the policy and strategy implications of the changing global environment and the character of war.

The United States lacks a credible deterrence for dissuading violent non-state armed groups. Large-scale military interventions are less effective than they were in the past in resolving conflicts; instead, the U.S. military needs smaller, more networked, culturally astute, media savvy, and cyber-enabled forces to conduct long-term peacetime engagements with partner nations. The military must organize and train these forces to work in concert with interagency partners to leverage all the instruments of national power in support of partner nations. US Special Operations Forces

(USSOF) have been performing this role for decades, with varying degrees of success. The author recommends changing USSOF doctrine, organization and training in order to increase success against violent non-state actors and networked insurgents, who take advantage of asymmetries in power, economy, and technology to challenge state sovereignty and the international order.

The Erosion of State Power and Sovereignty

State sovereignty is a relatively new idea that emerged after the 30 Years War in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.² According to political scientist Joseph Nye, “a state is a particular type of political unit that has two crucial characteristics: territoriality and sovereignty.”³ In this context, territoriality refers to control over a specific geographic area, and sovereignty refers to the legitimate authority over the territory.⁴ Nye identifies key characteristics of sovereign states as their ability to tax, control their people, and raise armed forces.⁵ Political scientist Francis Fukuyama explains that “the state is a hierarchical, centralized organization that holds a monopoly on legitimate force over a defined territory.”⁶ He further explains that the power of the state is concentrated in institutions that allow the state to “enforce laws, keep the peace, defend itself against outside enemies, and provide necessary public goods.”⁷ The institutions of power are organizations such as courts, police, and militaries whose legitimacy and ability to monopolize the use of force are essential to the survival and growth of a sovereign state.⁸ David Rothkopf offers the notion of a “social contract” between citizens and the state as another important metric for a true state, asking: “Can it keep them safe, bring order to their lives, preserve their basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”⁹ Diane E. Davis, Professor of Regional Planning and Urbanism, writes about the “reciprocal” arrangement that exists between the state and its citizens,

wherein the citizens are loyal to the state and pay taxes that allow the state to raise armies, and in return the state provides security to its citizens and a viable economy where citizens can work, make money, and provide for their families.¹⁰ Put simply, a sovereign state provides law and order within the confines of its borders and satisfies the needs of its people, who in return provide loyalty and allegiance to the state, which legitimizes the state and its institutions of power.

Since the Treaty of Westphalia, when the concept of state sovereignty emerged, success in international relations has depended on a state's ability to apply a combination of economic power, military power, and political power. Political scientist Glenn Hastedt defines power simply as "the ability to achieve objectives."¹¹ Joseph Nye describes power as "the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do."¹² According to Nye, resources such as "population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces, and political stability"¹³ determine the amount power a state possesses. The ability to harness the natural resources within the borders of a country and create products that can be traded with other countries determines a state's economic power.

Historically military power has been dependent on the population size and industrial capacity of a country. Internally, political power is derived from the strength of leaders and institutions and the degree of support from the citizens; externally, political power depends on the degree of support a state can draw from other states.¹⁴ In short, states derive power from the resources under their control and achieve their goals through the actual or implied use of that power. However, Nye observes that the traditional power resources such as geography, population size, and military force are

less important when assessing international power today, and that “factors such as technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more important.”¹⁵ The chart below shows the changing power resources of leading world powers since the sixteenth century.

Table 1. Sources of Power since the Sixteenth Century¹⁶

Leading State	Major Power Resources
Sixteenth Century Spain	Gold bullion, colonial trade, mercenary armies, dynastic ties
Seventeenth Century Netherlands	Trade, capital markets, navy
Eighteenth Century France	Population, rural industry, public administration, army
Nineteenth Century Britain	Industry, political cohesion, finance and credit, navy, liberal norms, island location (easy to defend)
Twentieth Century United States	Economic scale, scientific and technical leadership, universalistic culture, military forces and alliances, liberal international regimes, hub of transnational communication

The pressures of globalization are eroding many of the elements that traditionally safeguarded state sovereignty. Nye describes globalization as “worldwide networks of interdependence.”¹⁷ Political scientist Jonathan Kirshner describes globalization as “the flow of goods, data, money, and people across borders” and as “an array of phenomena that derive from unorganized and stateless forces but that generate pressures that are felt by states.”¹⁸ Kirshner further explains, “the most obvious consequence of globalization is the diminishing of the power and influence of the sovereign state.”¹⁹ The ease with which goods, money, and people can now pass between states has reduced government control over traditional sources of power. Globalization “is a dynamic mix of economic, political, social, and cultural forces” says

Hastedt.²⁰ He further describes that globalization “also affects the ability of governments to control their domestic economies and the ability of publics to hold their elected officials accountable, the solidarity of values of cultures, and the homogeneity of societies.”²¹ Globalization redistributes power from the institutions used by states to control populations—courts, police, militaries—into the hands of individuals and groups that are not aligned with the state. State institutions served as barriers to power and according to Moises Naim, “over the course of the last three decades, the barriers to power have weakened at a very fast pace.”²² Through the weakening of institutions of power, state sovereignty is weakened as is a state’s relative power in the international system.

The Pressures of Globalization

According to political scientist Stanley Hoffman, globalization has three forms—economic, cultural, and political.²³ “Globalization is often thought of as first and foremost an economic phenomenon—the increase in the volume and intensity of cross-border market transactions” writes Jonathan Kirshner.²⁴ According to Stanley Hoffman, “economic globalization results from recent revolutions in technology, information, trade, foreign investment, and international business.” It appears, then, that the desire to increase wealth through trade and access to new information and communications technology is a significant driver of globalization. David Rothkopf describes a growing interdependence and drive toward a common financial system: “markets that had previously been less connected—national markets, regional markets, markets in specific financial instruments or commodities—have all become part of global capital markets.”²⁵ This increased economic interdependence has reduced the likelihood of state-on-state conflict.²⁶ Kirshner explains, “the macroeconomic discipline demanded by

world financial markets, lending institutions, and powerful credit agencies is incompatible with military adventurism.”²⁷ Therefore, the military growth of China, disconcerting as it may be to the U.S., is unlikely to result in a military conflict due to the interconnected nature of our economies. However, greater interdependence between states blurs the lines of sovereignty and further erodes the power of states in that they have less control over their economies to “manipulate domestic politics” and “garner resources for war.”²⁸ It appears then that economic globalization and the resulting network of interdependence decreases the prospect of state-on-state conflict at the same time that it reduces the sovereignty and power of states. This is evident in Greece, which after three bailouts by the European Union, has for all practical purposes “turned into a colony of Germany” according to Paola Subacchi, Director of International Economics Research at Chatham House.²⁹

Related to economic globalization is the concept of cultural globalization. Stanley Hoffman explains that cultural globalization “stems from the technological revolution and economic globalization, which together foster the flow of cultural goods.”³⁰ In other words, the global network of trade and markets means that goods from a particular country now have access to global markets and are no longer confined within the country’s borders. However, not all countries benefit equally from greater access to global markets. Larger economies have greater access to international markets, resulting in unequal dispersion of culture. Indeed, Stanley Hoffman writes of the global proliferation of American culture: “Since the end of the Cold War, America as the sole super power and economic powerhouse has become the face of globalization and the diffusion of its culture, often referred to ‘Americanization,’ is widespread.”³¹ The

preponderance of American culture may have a negative impact on American foreign policy and interests abroad. Jonathan Kirshner warns that “some of the backlash against globalization finds its expression in anti-Americanism, as well as broader opposition to Western cultural and economic values.”³²

To a large extent, the current brand of Islamic terrorism is a result of globalization and a growing resistance to the spread of Western culture, which according to Stanley Hoffman is “deemed threatening to local religions and cultures.”³³ Nowhere is this resistance more obvious, perhaps, than in the Nigerian-based Islamic extremist organization that calls itself Boko Haram, which literally means “Western education is forbidden.”³⁴ “As American and Western cultures continue to permeate every corner of the globe, more incidences of backlash in the form of terrorism or nationalism are likely to manifest as cultures seek to preserve their unique identities,” warns Hoffman.³⁵ Although many American cultural exports have resulted in great social and economic benefits across the globe, makers of U.S. foreign policy should consider the fact that certain cultures may react negatively to “Americanization” and resort to violent cultural protectionism.

Similar to America’s domination of cultural globalization is its domination of political globalization. Stanley Hoffman writes that “political globalization is characterized by the preponderance of the United States and its political institutions and by a vast array of international and regional organizations and trans-governmental networks.” Former Secretary of State and political scientist Henry Kissinger notes that “President Wilson saw the spread of democracy to other states as a benefit to the United States and consequently made it policy.”³⁶ Encouraging democratic

transformation and establishing international institutions that reinforce democracies has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War I. America's global political influence is visible in the proliferation of democracies around the world since the adoption of this policy. According to Francis Fukuyama, "between 1970 and 2010, the number of democracies around the world increased from about 35 to nearly 120, or some 60% of the world's countries."³⁷ The pressures of globalization accelerated the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which produced many of these new democracies.

Another key feature of modern globalization that is eroding state sovereignty is the proliferation of information and communication technology that allows unrestricted access to cyberspace. On the topic of cyberspace, Henry Kissinger writes that it "challenges all historical experience. It is ubiquitous, but not threatening in itself; its menace depends on its use."³⁸ No longer limited by geography or borders, individuals can connect to a global network and join virtual communities of like-minded individuals. The internet has raised public awareness about the actions of governments around the world. Individuals and groups can use the internet to hold governments accountable in the international court of public opinion by shedding light on abuses or misdeeds. The Government Accountability Project, which maintains a website dedicated to supporting government whistleblowers, exposed U.S. government efforts to alter scientific reports on climate change as well as illegal government wiretapping and surveillance activities.³⁹

The highly publicized release of classified information related to U.S. government surveillance programs by Edward Snowden is another recent example of one individual

using the internet to hold a government accountable for perceived wrongdoings. Social movements and government opposition groups, using the internet to organize, communicate ideas, and coordinate activities, pose an increasing threat to governments.⁴⁰ “Before the cyber age, nations’ capabilities could still be assessed through an amalgam of manpower, equipment, geography, economics, and morale,” writes Kissinger.⁴¹ Unlike the industrial age, which concentrated power and strength of the state, the information age, which has acted as an accelerant for globalization, has had the opposite effect on states. Cheap and pervasive information and communication technology, a feature of the information revolution, accelerates the redistribution of power among states, reduces the influence of sovereign states, and weakens the sovereignty of states.⁴² According to Jonathan Kirshner, “It is now necessary to factor in the information environment in order to accurately assess state power, capacity, and international relations.”⁴³ Consequently, states must exercise greater restraint and consider how domestic and international audiences will judge their actions or risk losing credibility and legitimacy.

Non-state actors are using advanced information and communication technologies to advance their causes locally and globally. According to author David Rothkopf, “non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become aggressive actors in local politics, seizing the initiative from traditional political parties and politicians by harnessing this technology.”⁴⁴ Non-state actors have seized on the latest advances in information and communication technologies to build “flat, essentially leaderless groups unified more by pursuit of a common goal than any kind of central control.”⁴⁵ Indeed, before the creation of the internet it would have been difficult to imagine a globally

networked terrorist organization with the ability to plan and organize acts of terror in multiple countries. Insurgencies gain an asymmetric advantage through access to global internet communities by using propaganda to shape international public opinion in their favor and to gain new allies or rally more people to their cause.⁴⁶ The U.S. military's experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated how powerful industrial militaries are disadvantaged in a conflict against a smaller networked adversary.⁴⁷

The Rise of Non-State Armed Groups

A consequence of globalization and the diminishing power of sovereign states is the proliferation of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs). "Things that we used to think could be done only by government are now being done by sub-state actors, groups, gangs, even individuals" explains General Michael Hayden regarding the effects of globalization.⁴⁸ Keith Krause and Jennifer Miliken arrange NSAGs into five categories: "(1) insurgent groups; (2) militant groups; (3) urban gangs and warlords; (4) private militias, police forces and security companies; and (5) transnational groups."⁴⁹ NSAGs tend to emerge when states fail to provide law and order and satisfy the basic needs of their citizens. When the "reciprocal" arrangement, described by Diane Davis, between the state and the citizen breaks down, citizens can shift their alliance and loyalty to "imagined communities" that can provide the security or economic opportunities the state cannot or will not.⁵⁰ The speed and ease with which information, money, and people can now move has made it easier to shift allegiances to imaginary communities which are acting as "functional equivalents of states," or non-states, by providing security and basic needs to their citizens.⁵¹ Diane Davis further explains how increasingly violent and armed non-state actors are challenging the sovereign states' previously held monopoly on violence. This violence by non-state actors may be the

result of unmet social, economic, or political needs, or simply the desire for self-protection from an increasingly insecure environment.⁵² Thus NSAGs are increasingly filling the gap left by weak governments, thereby gaining the loyalty of citizens and challenging the power and legitimacy of the traditional sovereign state.⁵³

The frequency and intensity of conflicts between NSAGs and sovereign states appear to be on the rise. The economic, political, and cultural pressures of globalization pose a particular challenge to states with weaker government institutions by increasing their vulnerability to NSAGs that challenge their sovereignty.⁵⁴ In these fragile states, Kirshner explains, globalization “creates fertile ground for terrorists, insurgents, and separatists to thrive.”⁵⁵ Consequently, the added pressure of globalization on states with weak or ineffective governments increases the likelihood of internal conflicts with NSAGs. This phenomena was evident during the 2011 Arab Spring when a combination of violent and non-violent uprisings against the ruling governments took place across the Middle East and North Africa. Several of these uprisings, such as those in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, provided the opportunity for insurgent groups, militant groups, and transnational groups to advance their political agendas, and violence against these governments continues to this day.

Given the number of fragile states in the world, it is not difficult to anticipate the large scale proliferation of NSAGs and subsequent intra-state conflicts. For 11 years, the Fund for Peace has produced a 162-country Index of Fragile States.⁵⁶ The index measures a number of social, economic, political, and military indicators, such as rule of law, security, uneven economic development, human flight, and group grievances, to determine each state’s level of fragility. The 2015 fragile state index listed 38 countries

at alert levels of fragility, including 16 which are at high alert or very high alert levels, indicating the highest risk of failure. States in this highest risk category include Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen.⁵⁷ The NSAGs that have emerged from these fragile countries are well known—the Taliban and al Qaida in Afghanistan, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Al Shabaab in Somalia. It is easy to see how states that failed to live up to the reciprocal arrangement with their citizens fostered the development of these NSAGs, which have destabilized the region and posed global security threats. The fragile states index is a sobering indicator of potential sources of conflict between weak governments and NSAGs that produce regional and global instability and insecurity.

The Global Terrorism Index, produced by the Institute of Economics and Peace, is another indicator of conflict which has measured trends in terrorism for 15 years. In the Institute of Economics and Peace's 2015 report, the Global Terrorism Index indicates that political violence and a country's level of safety and security are key drivers of terrorism.⁵⁸ The report shows that "92 percent of all terrorist attacks between 1989 and 2014 occurred in countries where political violence by the government was widespread."⁵⁹ "In the last 25 years, 88 per cent of all terrorist attacks occurred in countries that were experiencing or involved in violent conflicts. Less than 0.6 percent of all terrorist attacks occurred in countries without any ongoing conflict and any form of political terror."⁶⁰ According to the index, "lack of respect for human rights and for international organizations also correlates with terrorism."⁶¹ Based on a side-by-side comparison of the fragile state index and the global terrorism index, it is not overly difficult to anticipate emerging threats from NSAGs.

The Changing Character of War

The forces of globalization, the erosion of state sovereignty, and the proliferation of NSAGs are changing the character of war. The powerful industrial age military the United States built to defeat the Axis forces during World War II and to deter Soviet aggression during the Cold War is less effective against numerically smaller and less well-equipped adversaries. Recent experiences of the U.S. armed forces show that conflicts with relatively small NSAGs inflict a disproportionately high economic cost on large technologically advanced military formations. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States employed a large conventional military against a comparatively small network of terrorists and insurgents. In nearly 15 years of combat operations, the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan, despite possessing the most advanced weapons and technology, has been unsuccessful at subduing the Taliban, which is estimated to be one-twelfth the size of the coalition.⁶² A similar mismatch in number and technology was seen during the height of the surge in Iraq in 2007, when nearly 280,000 coalition forces were opposed by an estimated 20,000 insurgents.⁶³ Despite a clear numerical advantage, as well as superior equipment and technology, the outcome of both wars remains inconclusive. The cost to fight these wars is probably the greatest mismatch of all.

In his article "The New Rules of War," international relations analyst John Arquilla estimates that the Iraq war cost the U.S. between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion.⁶⁴ These figures do not take into account the human cost of fighting two wars against a numerically and technologically inferior adversary with inconclusive results. Arquilla adds, "U.S. troops are exhausted by repeated lengthy deployments against foes who, if they were lined up, would hardly fill a single division of Marines. In a very real sense, the United States has come close to punching itself out since 9/11."⁶⁵

A larger, more modern military force is no longer a guarantee for victory. Ivan Arreguin-Toft presents evidence of this trend in his article “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict.”⁶⁶ Research by Arreguin-Toft covering the 200 years of data obtained from the Correlates of War Project shows that in conflicts between weak and strong actors, the weak actors are winning at increasing rate. Toft presents data showing weak actors winning against strong actors in only 11.8% of conflicts between 1800 and 1849. In contrast, during the time period of 1950-1998, weak actors prevailed over stronger actors in 55% of the conflicts.⁶⁷ This trend is certainly consistent with the U.S. military’s experience in the past 50 years in asymmetric conflicts with NSAGs. Arreguin-Toft concludes that for the U.S. to prevail in similar “small wars” in the future it will require preparing the public for a protracted war and the deployment of forces trained and equipped for COIN operations.⁶⁸

The United States can scarcely afford to fight small, networked, violent non-state actors with the large industrial age military as it has in the past. The economic and human cost is too high, and the strategy produces no clear victory. Globally networked NSAGs have an asymmetrical advantage over large industrial militaries in that they are nimble, geographically dispersed, and difficult to mass forces against. As the prospect of conflicts with violent non-state actors increases, as indicated by the Global Terrorism Index and the Index of Fragile States, the United States military will have to find new ways to confront these threats. The cost of failing to learn from the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq is too high, both economically and psychologically. A similar cost can be seen in past wars where armies have failed to recognize the changing character of warfare. In World War I, both sides failed to understand how industrialization had

changed the character of war, leading “not only to senseless slaughter, but also to the end of great empires and the bankruptcy of others.”⁶⁹ Globalization has changed the character of war; accordingly, the U.S. military should change its strategies to contend with adversaries that are relatively small in size, stateless, and networked globally.

Policy and Strategy Considerations

Several national security policy implications emerge from the changing character of war caused by the pressures of globalization. First, due to greater interdependence among states, the prospect of violent state-on-state conflict is decreasing. The international system is organized around sovereign states and provides a dedicated forum to resolve conflicts between states in the form of the United Nations (UN). There is however, no similar mechanism for states and violent NSAGs to resolve differences. While the possibility for inter-state conflict cannot be entirely ruled out, it is much more likely that future conflicts will be intra-state, involving citizens who are dissatisfied with a government that has failed to satisfy its social contract or involving globally networked violent non-state actors seeking to protect their group identity from the globalization of Western culture. President Obama emphasized this point in his 2016 State of the Union Address, stating, “In today’s world, we’re threatened less by evil empires and more by failing states.”⁷⁰

Second, intra-state conflicts will occur more frequently and in a reasonably predictable pattern. The large number of states with a weak ability to govern and who fail to fulfill their social contracts, as indicated by the fragile states index, will be increasingly susceptible to violence from NSAGs that challenge their legitimacy and offer alternatives to disenfranchised populations. As Derek Reveron posits it in his book

Exporting Security, “conflict, it appears, tends to be internal, tends to be in poor countries, and requires external actors to provide for or supplement security.”⁷¹

Third, the U.S. will respond to the security dilemmas posed by intra-state conflicts. Greater interdependence among states means that the U.S. and other countries will be drawn into intra-state conflicts to maintain international order. The interconnected nature of economics, politics, and culture increases the stakes of conflicts for all countries, making such conflicts more difficult to avoid. Increased U.S. involvement in intrastate conflict is manifested by the U.S. application of the instruments of national power in countries such as Libya, Nigeria, and Somalia. As the sole super power and lead architect of the current world order, it is particularly difficult for the U.S. to avoid involvement in conflicts that threaten the international system.

Finally, there is no credible deterrent to dissuade the political ambitions of violent NSAGs. Therefore, instead of deterring NSAGs, U.S. policy should focus on preventing the emergence of NSAGs. The threat of massive conventional forces or even the use of nuclear weapons deters sovereign states from undesirable behavior; however, there is no equivalent deterrence for violent NSAGs. Upon threat of military action, NSAGs can disappear into the population or cross borders into other countries where they cannot be followed. Hiding among the population or in another country, NSAGs can attack conventional forces at a time and place of their choosing, not unlike the way the Taliban continues to operate within Afghanistan from the safety of Pakistan. A policy that focuses on restoring the reciprocal agreement between fragile states and their citizens, through the application of all the instruments of national power, may prevent the emergence of violent NSAGs and the need for large scale military intervention.

The changing character of war presents several related implications for the U.S. military to consider. First, in order to prevent conflicts, the U.S. military must be prepared to operate in foreign countries where the Department of State (DOS), not the Department of Defense (DOD), is the lead representative to the Host Nation Government. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, U.S. ambassadors are responsible for implementing U.S. policy in their assigned country; consequently, DOD efforts may be a lower priority than other instruments of national power and may require cooperation, collaboration, and compromise to implement. Next, any U.S. military presence should be small, able to maintain a persistent presence, and maintain a low profile. A small, persistent military presence demonstrates commitment to the host nation without drawing the undue attention of the public and potentially undermining the legitimacy of the host nation government or providing a lucrative target for NSAGs. Furthermore, DOD efforts should be focused on increasing the legitimacy of host nation governments as part of a whole-of-government approach. DOD efforts must contribute to restoring the social contract between the host nation government and its citizens in order to increase trust and confidence in the government and reduce the appeal of NSAGs seeking to undermine or supplant it. Finally, the potential for a large state-on-state conflict remains a possibility that can't be ignored. Therefore, maintaining a large and capable conventional military that serves as a credible deterrent to potential state adversaries will be necessary.

The Indirect Approach

Throughout the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. armed forces attempted to adapt to the changing threat. Notably, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps developed and implemented new counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, codified in FM 3-24

Counterinsurgency, in response to growing insurgencies in both wars.⁷² The new Army and Marine Corps doctrine provides an approach to address existing violent NSAGs that requires a long-term commitment of a large military force. Perhaps the most visionary change, however, came from USSOCOM. Tasked with synchronizing global Counter Terrorism (CT), USSOCOM proceeded to establish a “global SOF network” and an operational approach that included direct and indirect methods of confronting terrorism. The global SOF network is a response to the need for an organizational structure that is globally networked in a manner similar to al Qaeda, and USSOCOM’s two-pronged operational approach confronts terror threats directly and seeks long-term solutions that address the underlying causes of terrorism. The resulting global SOF network and indirect approach provide the foundation to prevent the emergence of violent NSAGs.

According to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), USSOF are currently “in approximately eighty countries around the world... building enduring relationships through training with partner forces and assisting like-minded nations as they address the underlying causes of extremism.”⁷³ Since 9/11 the USSOCOM mission has expanded beyond being the SOF force provider to include being the “lead combatant command for planning, synchronizing, and as directed, conducting DOD operations against terrorist networks.”⁷⁴ To better accomplish this expanded mission, USSOCOM has made several organizational and doctrinal changes to include growing the size of USSOF, nearly doubling the size of the USSOCOM budget, gaining Combatant Command of the Theater Special Operations Commands, and developing a global SOF network.⁷⁵

The global SOF network is a web of interconnected nodes centered on USSOCOM and expanding out through Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs), Joint Special Operations Task Forces (JSOTFs), Special Operations Command Forwards (SOC-FWDs) and other SOF elements. The global SOF network is a significant development since 9/11 and a recognition of the need for a friendly global network to defeat a globally networked adversary. This network provides an enduring USSOF presence within host nations and integrated with foreign partners that facilitates the command and control of forward-deployed SOF, enables inter-agency coordination, builds partner capacity, and most importantly, fosters lasting relationships with host nation counterparts. While these changes have led to considerable progress in confronting the emerging challenges of globally networked terrorists, there are additional organizational and doctrinal changes USSOCOM should enact.

Achieving lasting effects in the international environment will require USSOCOM to develop more comprehensive systems and procedures for planning and implementing a strategy that incorporates the “indirect approach.” Military historian and theorist B.H. Liddell is generally credited for developing the strategy of indirect approach, in which the main idea is to “dislocate the opponent’s balance” by moving against the “enemy line of least resistance” or “line of least expectation.”⁷⁶ The indirect approach seeks to place the adversary at such a position of disadvantage that a battle is quick and decisive or is avoided all together. Since 9/11 USSOCOM has adapted the concept of an indirect approach to the employment of SOF that “includes empowering host nation forces, providing appropriate assistance to humanitarian agencies, and engaging key populations.”⁷⁷ In his 2012 Posture Statement to Congress, then

USSOCOM Commander Admiral McRaven described the indirect approach as “long-term efforts” to “increase partner capabilities to generate sufficient security and rule of law, address local needs, and advance ideas that discredit and defeat the appeal of violent extremism.”⁷⁸ The indirect approach is population centric and recognizes the importance of working with partner nations to satisfy their social contract with their citizens in order to maintain the trust and confidence of the population and prevent violent NSAGs from challenging the legitimate authority of sovereign states. Thus the indirect approach Admiral McRaven described produces lasting effects by addressing the underlying causes of conflict. There is, however, insufficient SOF doctrine to adequately describe how the indirect approach is employed.

Insufficient SOF doctrine causes inconsistent application of the indirect approach, which in turn produces mixed results. Joint Publication (JP) 3-05 Special Operations makes no reference to the indirect approach except, interestingly, as an activity favored by non-state actors.⁷⁹ The indirect approach Admiral McRaven described in the preceding paragraph resembles a combination of several SOF core tasks including: unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, foreign humanitarian assistance, military information support operations, and civil affairs operations. However, the manner in which these SOF core tasks support an overall indirect approach strategy is unclear and left to interpretation.

The indirect approach may be best understood by what it is not—the direct approach. “The direct approach is characterized by technologically-enabled small-unit precision lethality, focused intelligence, and interagency cooperation integrated on a digitally-networked battlefield.”⁸⁰ Accordingly, the direct approach encompasses short

duration, kinetic activities that are highly visible to the public, as in the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden, whereas the indirect approach involves long duration non-kinetic activities that rarely gain public attention. The direct approach is based on a process of find, fix, finish, exploit, assess, and disseminate which effectively eliminates ambiguity from the situation. In contrast, complexity and ambiguity are intrinsic to the indirect approach. The highly visible and often spectacular nature of the direct approach has caused the general population and many policy makers and law makers to associate SOF primarily with these kinetic activities.⁸¹ Consequently, the priority for USSOCOM since the outset of the war on terror has been developing the skills and acquiring the resources to execute the direct approach over the indirect approach.⁸²

However, Admiral McRaven described the indirect approach as “decisive in importance” and stated that “the direct approach alone is not the solution to the challenges our nation faces today as it ultimately only buys time and space for the indirect approach and broader governmental elements to take effect.” Despite the acknowledgement of the decisive nature of the indirect approach, the direct approach receives the greatest attention and resources, resulting in a lopsided strategy that favors short duration kinetic activities over long duration population-focused strategies that achieve lasting effects. Inadequate SOF doctrine and lack of clarity and common understanding for the indirect approach exacerbate the unevenly heavy use of the direct approach, which is easier to understand and tends to produce visible and easily measurable results.

Recommendations

During the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, USSOF have refined their capability to target and destroy threat networks. However, this approach only addresses a symptom

of the disease; it does not contend with the underlying cause of the networks' existence. Future SOF missions will require a greater balance of the "indirect approach" designed to increase the legitimacy of host nation governments and restore the reciprocal agreement with their citizens in order to prevent the emergence of violent non-state actors. In a special report for the Council on Foreign Relations, Linda Robinson writes, "in the absence of another major war, it is likely that Special Operations will increasingly focus on enabling or empowering other countries' forces to address threats within their own borders."⁸³ As USSOF evolved to contend with the challenge of terrorist networks in Afghanistan in Iraq, it must continue to evolve with the changing character of war involving violent NSAGs challenging the legitimacy of sovereign states. USSOCOM should implement the following recommendations to remain aligned with the evolving operating environment.

First, USSOCOM should clarify doctrine concerning the indirect approach. Clear doctrine in this area will ensure a more consistent and balanced application of the approach by USSOF. A clearer and more consistent vision of SOF use of the indirect approach will help convey its decisive role in the current operating environment to policy and law makers, an important consideration for receiving funding for these activities. Army Special Operations has replaced the ill-defined indirect approach doctrine and terminology with "Special Warfare," which is "an umbrella term" for a combination of activities, including "unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), military information support operations (MISO), Counter Terrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN)," conducted "through and with indigenous personnel."⁸⁴

USSOCOM should adopt the term Special Warfare (SW) and associated doctrine as a replacement for the unclear indirect approach terminology.

Second, USSOCOM should organize a Joint Command under USSOCOM to serve as the proponent for SW. SW requires multi-functional teams with specialties and skills from all services. The Joint Command would ensure common doctrine and training of SW across USSOF; innovate and seek funding for new technology and equipment; capture lessons learned; and disseminate new tactics, techniques and procedures across the force. A single Joint Command could tailor multi-functional SOF teams, trained in SW, from across all services to source TSOC mission requirements. Furthermore, a Joint Command that manages all available SW elements could support TSOC campaign planning with SW planners as needed for deliberate or crisis action planning. This added planning capacity would provide significant benefit the TSOCs, which typically are not adequately staffed to meet all of their planning requirements.⁸⁵

Third, SOF requires increased cyber capabilities and training. As mentioned previously, cyberspace is a key feature of modern globalization. It can be decisive in the struggle for perceived legitimacy of weaker nations. During the Arab Spring, social media played a key role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing government opposition. SW teams must be trained and equipped with the right technologies to leverage the cyber domain in the execution of their activities in support of partner nations.

Fourth, SOF should increase training with interagency partners. Leveraging all the instruments of national power as part of a whole-of-government approach is critical for building legitimacy of fragile states and restoring the social contract with the states'

citizens. Training with interagency partners will improve cooperation and collaboration between agencies, reduce cultural barriers, and improve whole-of-government approaches. A dedicated training venue, where U.S. government departments and agencies can gather to train, would improve SW support to interagency partners.

Finally, SOF must continue to foster interdependence with the Conventional Force (CF). During the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, SOF-CF interdependence improved significantly. Increased interdependence grew out of the relatively small size of SOF in relation to the high demand for its capabilities. Given the increasingly uncertain and volatile operating environment, the high demand for SOF is unlikely to diminish and probably will continue to grow. Therefore, USSOCOM should seek opportunities for increased SOF-CF collaboration and mutually beneficial support to relieve the pressure caused by high demand on the small USSOCOM force. These efforts should include options to incorporate CF into SOF multi-functional teams at the lowest level. CF capabilities in communications, intelligence, logistics, and contract support are just a few of the elements that would be beneficial to SOF-CF multi-functional teams.

Conclusion

A global economy and interdependent states have reduced the potential for state-on-state conflicts. The greatest and most immediate threat to U.S. interests of security, prosperity, international order, and universal values is the emergence of violent NSAGs. The erosion of state sovereignty and power, a consequence of globalization, has given rise to NSAGs which further challenge the legitimacy of sovereign states and international order. Fragile states that fail to deliver security needs and economic opportunities to their citizens are particularly susceptible to non-state actors that

challenge legitimate authority. The result of global interdependence means that even intra-state conflicts can have a broad regional or global impact that affects the economy and international order. Preventing the emergence of violent NSAGs is therefore of vital interest to the U.S. In the absence of a viable deterrence to violent NSAGs, applying the instruments of national power toward helping fragile states adjust to the pressures of globalization will prevent the emergence of NSAGs and reduce the potential for intra-state conflicts.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq USSOCOM pioneered the organizational and doctrinal foundations for preventing the emergence of violent NSAGs by establishing the global SOF network and the indirect approach. Combined with a whole-of-government approach in conjunction with host nation counterparts, interagency partners, and conventional forces, the indirect approach (Special Warfare) may be the best alternative to deterring NSAGs. Continuing to evolve by incorporating the recommended modifications to doctrine, organization, and training outlined above, will further align USSOCOM with the changing operating environment and position it for success as the character of war continues to evolve.

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