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The US Military and Non-Conventional War: Is Firepower Cheaper than Manpower?

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IN HIS memoirs *Fighting On*, General Sir Walter Walker, a distinguished British army officer who later became the Director of Borneo Operations during Malaysian-Indonesian Konfrontasi in the 1960s, recalls an incident where, as a young second lieutenant in British India in 1933, he was hit on the forehead by a soda bottle while attempting to pacify a communal riot. Bleeding and angry, Walker instinctively drew his pistol from its holster, but was stopped by his older and more experienced platoon sergeant, Green, who gently reminded him: “Minimum force, sir”. Green was referring to the official imperial principle that had been enunciated after the heavy-handed military response to the Amritsar disturbances of 1919 that severely undermined British prestige in India.

The “minimum force” axiom sought to carefully circumscribe the use of coercion in dealing with civil disturbances and insurgencies throughout the Empire, so as not to alienate entire local communities. Walker apparently underwent an epiphany of sorts, and later did his part to enshrine the principle of minimum force into British Army counterinsurgency doctrine. It is worth noting that future post-World War Two British counterinsurgency successes in Malaya and elsewhere were partly the result of ingrained military acceptance of the minimum force ideal.

It is interesting that this ideal of exercising restraint in the use of military force seems relatively less pronounced in American strategic behaviour in its military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in its current war against terror decades later. Fresh plans to further streamline US military forces, as outlined in Defence Secretary Rumsfeld’s statements in the Shangri-la Dialogue recently held in Singapore, only raise further questions over America’s ability to prevail in future counterinsurgency conflicts. The historical record suggests that when force levels drop, reliance on high-technology firepower solutions increases. A US military Vietnam War-era maxim encapsulates this logic aptly: “Firepower is cheaper than manpower”.

Non-conventional Warfare: A Primer

However, while firepower may be cheaper than manpower in conventional force-on-force war, it is a whole lot more expensive in the highly politicised milieu of non-conventional warfare, which encompasses both counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism. In non-conventional warfare a balance has to be struck between military force and so-called “hearts and minds” measures. While military force is important to neutralize immediate terrorist or insurgent threats, it has to be very carefully calibrated. The concern is to prevent civilian

damage that would undercut the positive political value of longer-term socio-economic and other measures crafted to ameliorate the discontent that nudge people into the terrorists' or insurgents' fold. Minimum force and "hearts and minds" are hence two sides of the same coin.

The fundamental objective in non-conventional warfare is the provision of a sense of security amongst the civilian population, the creation and maintenance of a popular belief that their best interests lie in supporting the government forces and not the insurgent or terrorist forces. A population that has lost faith in the government forces and turns to the insurgents provides food, refuge, recruits and most importantly intelligence on government forces. This provision of a sense of security often requires manpower-heavy deployments of infantry forces constantly patrolling population areas and winning over the people through both cultural sensitivity and military restraint. Politically then, in non-conventional war, manpower is always better than firepower.

American Strategic Culture and Military Transformation

Such sentiments, however, do not appear to be held within some elements of the US strategic community. Firepower, particularly high-technology firepower, is seen as the war-winning combination. To be sure, this emphasis on overwhelming firepower has been a predominant pattern of American strategic culture. One reason for this emphasis is the belief in force protection – the idea that American lives ought not to be placed in harm's way where possible. During the Korean War, General Van Fleet, commander of the 8th Army in Korea said: "We must expend steel and fire, not men. I want so many artillery holes that a man can step from one to another all the way to Pyongyang." This concern often results in the related tendency to engage the enemy at standoff ranges, or at least as far as possible. This is evident in the American preference to use airpower to engage enemy forces where possible, in lieu of deploying ground force elements.

What the current American military transformation is doing in this respect is confirming American strategic cultural preferences for overwhelming military force, force protection and engaging the enemy at standoff ranges. The current transformation agenda in the American military emphasises the use of technology – sensor, information, communication, and precision engagement – to provide solutions to the full spectrum of strategic problems. This transformation agenda has certainly borne fruit, as manifested in the use of long-range precision-guided munitions that can engage enemy forces beyond visual ranges, with virtually single-shot kill probabilities. It has also allowed US forces to operate in small, networked bands, instead of the more traditional heavy ground force elements involving brigades and divisions and corps. Combined with precision strike technologies, this allows American military forces to actually play out the mantras of "more bang for the buck" and "fight light, fight fast".

These elements, combined, result in an American military that is simply world-class in conventional war. But they do little to give the US the edge in complex non-conventional military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In these contexts the premium is on a constant and pervasive military presence that assures the civilian population, but carefully calibrated to avoid politically-alienating collateral casualties. In this connection the reported 600 civilian deaths arising from the US Marine attack on Fallujah in April 2004 was not only politically counterproductive, it provided more grist for the radical Islamist propaganda mill in Iraq and worldwide.

Again, in non-conventional contexts, manpower is simply superior to firepower. That the American military is downsizing - reflecting the belief that high technology firepower holds all the answers - is testament to the fact that the Pentagon has got it the other way round.

A Little Self-Awareness May Go A Long Way

In today's complex strategic environment, the military transformation agenda has to be seen as comprising more than just extremely accurate and long-range weapons systems. It has to be regarded as much more than the so-called "shock and awe" capabilities that apparently characterised the American-led coalition offensive against Iraq in the first week of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In this respect strategic culture and the current technology-fixated military transformation agenda need not doom the US military to non-conventional strategic failure. The transformation agenda can be modified to ensure a more balanced force structure for fighting in both conventional and non-conventional conflict. Thomas Barnett in his excellent book *The Pentagon's New Map* makes such an argument.

Strategic culture, on the other hand, ought not to be seen as a straitjacket limiting strategic options and choices. Rather than something cast in stone, culture is necessarily dynamic and ever-changing, whether driven by external environmental forces or by forces promoting change from within the culture. What is required most of all is strategic cultural self-awareness. This is obviously not an easy virtue to cultivate, especially amongst action- and results-oriented military planners and commanders.

Nevertheless, unless and until this self-awareness begins, US military forces in non-conventional conflicts will likely face strategic failure, not success. Nevertheless, the example of General Walker ought to be an encouragement. He learned to appreciate that firepower is not always cheaper than manpower, and as a distinguished senior commander in Malaya and Borneo down the road, he reaped his reward.

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