Failing To Train: Conventional Forces In Irregular Warfare

Description

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A recent election saw a nationalist Estonian party take control of the government. Frustrated by the election outcome and lack of citizenship, the ethnic Russian minority, 20 percent of the population, demonstrated against the outcome. The Russian government released statements of support and launched a covert campaign to shape perceptions with more than two hundred thousand Twitter accounts sending 3.6 million tweets using #protectRussiansinEstonia. It also initiated snap exercises by ground, naval, and air forces in the region.

A week later, a group of demonstrators gathered in the town square of Narva, a town in eastern Estonia on the border with Russia. Protesting that their human rights had been violated, the demonstrators demanded autonomy for Narva, official status for the Russian language, and Estonian citizenship. When Estonian police moved in to break up the demonstration, they were confronted by an armed group of Russian-speaking, military-age men. Fearing the loss of innocent lives, the police left the area. At the same time, a group of armed demonstrators attacked the Estonian border post, forcing it to be abandoned. A third group of demonstrators took over the local telecommunications center, cutting internet, radio, and telephone links to and from Narva. They then stormed the town hall, forcing the mayor to resign. A spokesman for the demonstrators declared the establishment of the Narva People's Republic. He asked Russia for assistance "to ensure peace and public order against nationalists and fascists." These actions were supported by cyberattacks that took Estonian government, media, telecommunication, and military networks offline throughout the country.

The Estonian government declared the establishment of the Narva People's Republic illegal and demanded the return of control to elected officials. It also called an emergency meeting of the North Atlantic Council to invoke the collective defense provision (Article 5) of the North Atlantic Treaty. While deliberations over the identity of the demonstrators continued, the United States agreed to deploy the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (2CR) to Estonia. Its mission was to support Estonian security forces and regain Estonian territorial integrity and sovereignty. As 2CR prepared to depart from its garrison in Vilseck, Germany, several videos, purportedly showing sexual assault of underage German nationals by US personnel, surfaced on social media. The videos appeared to implicate key leaders within the

regiment, prompting German political authorities to call for an investigation. Local citizen protests erupted outside the gates of the garrison, delaying 2CRâ??s deployment. During its road march from Vilseck to Estonia, electronic warfare attacks on its communication network limited its ability to communicate with its formations or with local security forces. Targeting European antiwar groups, untraceable pro-Russian social media posted fake videos of Estonian security forces disrupting essential services and damaging the property of ethnic Russians in Estonia. These messages shifted some European public opinion from opposing Russian aggression to supporting citizenship for ethnic Russians in Estonia.

The day after 2CR arrived in Estonia, an unidentified, unmanned aerial vehicle was spotted overflying its cantonment. Shortly afterward, soldiersâ?? cell phones were unable to access the local cellular network and they began receiving text messages telling them to leave the area to prevent their â??destruction.â?• In summary, *before* 2CR reached its area of operations Russia controlled key infrastructure, limited 2CRâ??s ability to communicate with Estonian security forces and its own formations, established information dominance, and created local and international opposition to its presence. The lack of military education and training in irregular warfare prevented 2CR from predicting and preparing for these tactics. Its lethally focused formations forfeited the initiative to Russia before the first Stryker rolled out of the gate. This significantly limited the commanderâ??s combat power and ability to execute her mission.

This is not a hypothetical threat. [As I have noted elsewhere](#), it is a plausible scenario, and the irregular warfare tactics it highlights were demonstrated during the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014.

The Challenge

This scenario demonstrates the necessity for [unified action](#) between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war to counter irregular threats. It also shows that tactical formations will face challenges for which they have not been educated, trained, or staffed simply in order to preserve combat power. As the senior interagency trainer at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany from 2010 to 2021, I observed this challenge working with tactical- and operational-level formations. Consequently, military command structures need to be organized to effectively monitor adversariesâ?? irregular warfare tactics in the [shaping phase](#) of conflict or competition. This is the operational phase in which military activities prepare the operational environment to facilitate access should contingency operations be required. During the shaping phase, the military should identify and mitigate threats *before* it becomes necessary to deploy an unprepared formation.

Although NATO faces complex, dynamic, multi-domain challenges, it has focused on deterring, and if necessary, defeating near-peer adversaries in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). While conventional forces underpin security, it is a mistake to assume that future conflict will be conventional. The United States remains the worldâ??s preponderant military power. For revisionist, rogue, and revolutionary states such as China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran, or nonstate actors such as the Islamic State, conventional or nuclear war with the United States and its allies is too risky and prohibitively costly. More importantly, the United Statesâ?? struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq show that conventional military forces are vulnerable to adversaries who employ irregular tactics.

The US focus on conventional conflict has allowed adversaries to achieve their strategic objectives through a variety of irregular tactics. They have used state and nonstate proxies, such as violent extremist groups, private military groups, criminal networks, and state-controlled businesses to weaken US security through the use of disinformation, coercion, covert operations, cyberattacks, sabotage, and terrorism. These tactics complicate and disrupt decision making, create strategic ambiguity regarding their origins, and in some cases, offset the US conventional military advantage. The United States is not prepared to deter or defend itself or its allies against these threats. This is largely the result of the Armyâ??s lack of focus on irregular warfare, historically the most prevalent type of warfare. The ramifications can be seen in the Armyâ??s educational and training emphasis on conventional combat operations against the armed forces of peer or near-peer states. Because of the nature of irregular threats, winning contemporary and future conflicts requires a whole-of-government approach. Although the Army has a significant role to play and a recent Army white paper noted its role in the â??narrative, indirect, and directâ?• aspects in the competition and conflict phases on the competition continuum, there is only a passing reference to irregular warfare in the paper nor has it changed its education and training.

The Lack of Irregular Warfare Education

Due in part to some tactical success in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the Philippines, Syria, the trans-Sahel region, and elsewhere, the Army clings to an ingrained belief that the â??decisive use of forceâ?• and â??lethalityâ?• will bring victory. Thus it believes if it can effectively execute LSCO, it can win any conflict. However, as Colin Gray noted years ago, the requirements of irregular warfare â??pose what amounts to a full frontal challenge to the dominant traditional American way of war. . . . Since the irregular foe cannot be brought to battle en masse, he is not a problem that the Army can solve tactically or operationally.â?• The belief that irregular warfare education is not relevant for conventional forces has significant flaws. First, an increasingly complex and volatile security environment highlights the growing inadequacy of this view. Second, as can be seen in some of the conflicts noted above, using conventionally educated and trained forces in irregular conflicts often

requires changes during combat operations, jeopardizing end states. Therefore, [education and training](#) must constantly evolve to defeat new threats. Third, it is [often](#) assumed that the next conflict will be a multi-domain confrontation with revisionist powers. However, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis often noted that the enemy also â??[gets a vote](#).â?• Adversaries such as China, Iran, and Russia, aware their militaries cannot win a conventional conflict against the United States, have invested heavily in [irregular warfare](#) to exploit American vulnerabilities. Finally, focusing on defeating conventional threats does not change the fact that state and non-state actors are taking advantage of domestic and international unrest to destabilize countries and regions, undermining US national security interests. [Most contemporary armed conflicts are internationalized civil or substate conflicts](#) rather than conventional interstate wars. The lack of irregular warfare education means the Army will be unable to take a proactive posture or defeat irregular threats in multi-domain operations like Russiaâ??s annexation of Crimea.

Every two years, Army combat brigades go to a combat training center (CTC) for two weeks of intense training. Realizing that these brigades, called rotational training units (RTUs), lack counterâ??irregular warfare education, the Joint Multinational Readiness Training Center (JMRC) in Germany (one of the US Armyâ??s three CTCs), developed an irregular warfare program of instruction which could be delivered at an RTUâ??s home station. Regretfully, no RTU took advantage of this opportunity, citing the lack of training time. With the focus on LSCO, irregular warfare is not considered important by Army leadership. Consequently, it is not important to CTC or RTU commanders. This results in formations having limited or no practice identifying or defeating irregular tactics before their deployment to a CTC or to a real-world mission. Other than the course created at JMRC, the author is unaware of any US or NATO course that educates tactical or operational conventional formations to counter irregular warfare tactics.

Based on the use of mobile training teams (MTT) to educate formations in counter-insurgency during recent conflicts, a first step could be sending a MTT to educate RTUs in irregular warfare before they go to a CTC. This is especially important as adversaries view the current great power competition as a continuous, unending covert and overt struggle employing the full range of nonlethal and lethal irregular warfare tactics. The main area for this competition is the gray zone. This is the area in the middle of the traditional war and peace duality (i.e., below the level of organized, interstate violence). For the Army to deter and defend, it must be educated to shape the environments in which it operates and to identify and counter irregular warfare tactics.

The Lack of Irregular Warfare Training

The lack of education to counter irregular warfare strategy is amplified by the lack of training at a unitâ??s home station or at a CTC to recognize and mitigate irregular warfare tactics. This situation is

the result of numerous factors. First, the focus on LSCO means that scenarios are based on conventional military aggression. For example, the exercise scenario at JMRC is based on a Russian invasion of the Baltic countries and central Europe, something which would have been just as familiar to soldiers in 1949 as in 2021. Second, the Army lacks a realistic exercise operational environment. Although there have been some attempts to integrate a complex and dynamic environment at the CTCs, too often the reality of the contemporary operational environment is ignored. For example, in the real world, enemy messaging could send internally displaced persons to a main supply route, limiting resupply and maneuver. However, the exercise controllers are usually prevented from executing this action and other irregular tactics so they do not interfere with other training objectives. In other words, the â??effectsâ?• of Redâ??s tactics are ignored so that Blue can â??winâ?• with conventional tactics in a contrived environment that does not represent real-world challenges. Third, post-exercise after action reviews (AARs) are organized by warfighting functions, which donâ??t examine the impact of irregular tactics on the training unit. Identifying the significant gap between conventional warfare training and contemporary threats, JMRC created an operational environment AAR. The goal was to help RTU leaders understand the likely effects of Redâ??s irregular warfare tactics in a real-world operational environment. Unique among the nonâ??warfighting function AARs, this one included the RTUâ??s senior leaders. The Armyâ??s Training and Doctrine Command lauded this development and noted every CTC should have this type of AAR. However, new leadership didnâ??t see its relevance and canceled the irregular warfareâ??focused AAR. Consequently, RTUs are not receiving a realistic training experience. A good rule of thumb for measuring progress would be assessing whether an RTU is expending equal or greater resources countering irregular threats compared to conventional threats. While this would be a measure of performance rather than a measure of effectiveness, it would at least force commanders to try and integrate irregular challenges into planning and assessment.

Train for the Fight

The belief that conventionally trained forces can deter or counter irregular tactics has significant ramifications for readiness. Embracing a narrow conventional view of war does not prepare leaders to identify or defeat the range of contemporary threats. Also, a myopic focus on conventional threats obscures the complexity of irregular threats. To foster deterrence, strengthen defense, and if necessary, defeat our adversaries, the Army must be able to identify and counter irregular warfare tactics. But how do we defeat multi-domain irregular tactics in the gray zone? One thing is clear: long-range precision fires, tank divisions, improved air defense, and other high-end technologies will not prevent or defeat them. For the Army to be able to fight and win our nationâ??s wars, it must be educated and trained to identify and defeat irregular warfare tactics. In other words, we must train as we would fight.

James W. Derleth, PhD, is a professor of irregular warfare at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. His areas of expertise include civil-military operations, central and eastern Europe security, irregular warfare, and stability operations. Before joining the Marshall Center faculty, he was the senior interagency training advisor at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. Prior to joining DoD, he was a senior stability advisor at the United States Agency for International Development. Dr. Derleth has worked in numerous conflict areas, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and Uganda. He earned an MA from American University and a PhD from the University of Maryland.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

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