

Irregular Warfare: New Challenges for Civil-Military Relations

by Patrick M. Cronin

Key Points

Success in the highly political and ambiguous conflicts likely to dominate the global security environment in the coming decades will require a framework that balances the relationships between civilian and military leaders and makes the most effective use of their different strengths. These challenges are expected to require better integrated, whole-of-government approaches, the cooperation of host governments and allies, and strategic patience.

Irregular warfare introduces new complications to what Eliot Cohen has called an “unequal dialogue” between civilian and military leaders in which civilian leaders hold the true power but must modulate their intervention into “military” affairs as a matter of prudence rather than principle. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that irregular warfare—which is profoundly political, intensely local, and protracted—breaks from the traditional understanding of how military and civilian leaders should contribute to the overall effort.

One of the key challenges rising from irregular warfare is how to measure progress. While there is disagreement about the feasibility or utility of developing metrics, the political pressure for marking progress is unrelenting. Most data collection efforts focus on the number of different types of kinetic events, major political milestones such as elections, and resource inputs such as personnel, money, and materiel. None of these data points serves easily in discerning what is most needed—namely, outputs or results.

A second major challenge centers on choosing leaders for irregular warfare and stability and reconstruction operations. How to produce civilian leaders capable of asking the right and most difficult questions is not easily addressed. Meanwhile, there has been a general erosion of the traditional Soldier's Code whereby a military member can express dissent, based on legitimate facts, in private to one's superiors up to the point that a decision has been made. Many see the need to shore up this longstanding tradition among both the leadership and the ranks.

A third significant challenge is how to forge integrated strategies and approaches. Professional relationships, not organizational fixes, are vital to succeeding in irregular war. In this sense, the push for new doctrine for the military and civilian leadership is a step in the right direction to clarifying the conflated lanes of authority.

Lanes of Authority Conflate

Persistent irregular conflict poses difficult new challenges for command and leadership and civil-military relations in general. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq amply demonstrate these challenges. The Iraq engagement began with a short, conventional war that aimed massive military power to defeat a hostile state and depose its leader. The Commander in Chief, with the approval of civilian leaders in Congress, authorized the action, and military

commanders carried it out successfully. But after the initial goals were achieved, the engagement in Iraq rapidly devolved into a counterinsurgency. Similarly, as conflict in Afghanistan shows, in an irregular war against an asymmetric, nonstate threat, the traditional lanes of authority no longer clearly separate the activities of the political leaders responsible for managing the engagement, the military commanders responsible for executing it, and the civilian officials responsible for diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction.

As the war in Iraq progressed beyond the initial stage of regime removal, civil-military relationships began to break down as the war transmogrified into a counterinsurgency operation. Beginning in 2007 with the so-called surge, a dramatic rapprochement occurred that featured greater collaboration between U.S. civilian and military authorities and a more constructive melding of military, political, and diplomatic means to achieve stability. Although there are questions about why that same degree of cohesion did not develop earlier, the surge offers insight into the level of cooperation and communication needed in irregular warfare between military officers—whose traditional duties to apply force spill over into peacekeeping and nationbuilding activities—and civilian officials who bear the dominant role in building a framework for peace, good

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governance, and diplomatic ties that support long-term U.S. national interests.

So it is that, more than 6 years after the publication of Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*, the command and leadership challenges emerging from Afghanistan and Iraq are providing plentiful new experiences on which to consider civil-military relations and leadership in the midst of what strategist Anthony Cordesman dubbed "armed nation building" but what may be more generally classified as "irregular warfare." Clearly, soldiers are being asked to do far more than apply violence; they are expected to bring to the field a broad set of peacemaking and state-building skills in addition to their core combat experience. Modern warfare would appear to be less about direct combat and more about the larger ambit of seeking stability and peace in the midst of fighting. As Dr. Cohen wrote, the soldier's ultimate purpose is to achieve

*political ends designated by statesmen. But because political objectives are just that—political—they are often ambiguous, contradictory, and uncertain. It is one of the greatest sources of frustration for soldiers that their political masters find it difficult . . . to fully elaborate in advance the purposes for which they have invoked military action, or the conditions under which they intend to limit or terminate it.*¹

In both Afghanistan and Iraq there are questions about the quality of the planning to govern either country. Part of the problem may have stemmed from defining the objective as regime change, with humanitarian assistance and reconstruction as potential missions, without asking the basic questions about who would govern the country, how they would do so, and who had the mission to govern at both the central and local level.

Yet all might agree that, in the absence of clear objectives, it is easy to confuse military activity with progress and difficult to judge how

military operations fit into the overall civil-military effort or how well they are contributing to resolving a problem consistent with national interests. Acknowledging both the difficulty and importance of defining goals and objectives, George Marshall once quipped that, if one gets the objectives right, "a lieutenant can write the strategy." Not surprisingly, the development of goals and objectives is often the first point of tension in civil-military relations at the highest levels of government.

Despite the positive developments in Iraq, questions remain over how labor should be divided and civilian and military activities coordinated to support counterinsurgency operations in foreign theaters. Today, the need for overall political leadership and coherence appears greater

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but achieving it more difficult. At the same time, a distant, top-down style of strategic management or micromanagement of the complex tasks in remote contested zones seems quixotic.

So we ask ourselves, how does irregular warfare alter our thinking about civil-military relations? Is the putative decline in civil-military relations permanent, serious, and crippling? Or conversely, is it sui generis to a conflict such as Iraq or Afghanistan—and overblown in terms of the problems it presents—depending mainly on individual actors and therefore manageable, given

the right set of personalities? To what degree does command and control structure contribute to, or detract from, the ability to integrate civil-military efforts? And at what levels and in what venues should civil-military efforts be integrated in an irregular war?

The war that "we are in and must win" (to paraphrase Secretary of Defense Robert Gates) pits us against nonstate groups that seek to advance extremist agendas through violence. Accordingly, irregular warfare will be the dominant form of conflict among adversaries in the early years of the 21st century. To succeed in these messy and profoundly political wars, the United States needs a framework that appropriately and effectively balances the relationships between civilian and military leaders and makes the best use of their unique and complementary portfolios.

An Unequal Dialogue

In *Supreme Command*, Dr. Cohen advanced our thinking about civil-military relations. Concerned especially with a wartime environment associated with major combat operations, he contrasted the so-called normal theory of well-delineated command and civil-military relationships, in which soldiers are sequestered from political affairs, with a far more integrated politico-military model consistent with Carl von Clausewitz's observation that war cannot be separated from politics or policy.

Normal theory took hold under the intellectual influence of Samuel Huntington, whose earlier classic, *The Soldier and the State* (1957), described how civilians maintained "objective control" over military professionals who were granted wide latitude to execute their primary responsibility, namely, the "management of violence." Cohen juxtaposed against this traditional model a "Clausewitzian formula for civil-military relations . . . [in which] the statesman may legitimately interject himself in any aspect of war-making, although it is often imprudent for him to do so."² Despite a "deep undercurrent of mutual mistrust" between statesmen and soldiers, Cohen argued, "[c]ivil-military relations must . . . be a dialogue of unequals

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and the degree of civilian intervention in military matters a question of prudence, not principle, because principle properly opens the entire field of military activity to civilian scrutiny and direction.”⁷³

Great wartime statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion all probed into military affairs about which they presumably knew less than professional soldiers. In *Gettysburg: The Final Fury*, Bruce Catton wrote, “[t]he one strategist who realized [the Federal opportunity created by Lee’s invasion of the north] most clearly was that untaught, awkward, non-military man who could learn fast, and by the summer of 1863, he could understand a military equation as well as any man in America.”⁷⁴ Lincoln often argued military strategy with his generals, he stayed in touch with the battlefield by telegraph, and he was well aware of the primacy of his authority in wartime.

In such examples of great wartime statesmen, “[w]hat occurred between president or prime minister and general,” Cohen wrote, “was an unequal dialogue—a dialogue, in that both sides expressed their views bluntly, indeed, sometimes offensively, and not once but repeatedly—and unequal, in that the final authority of the civilian leader was unambiguous and unquestioned—indeed, in all cases stronger at the end of a war than it had been at the beginning.”⁷⁵

Does an “unequal dialogue” in which civilian leaders hold the true power adequately describe contemporary civil-military relations? The nature of irregular warfare raises the question of whether our civilian (and military) leaders are sufficiently competent, given the asymmetric nature of the threat, to direct war efforts in a way that goes beyond reliance on simplistic rules of thumb. To succeed in such a complex undertaking, do our leaders not need to possess the attributes of the great war statesmen, including keen intuition, an eye for detail, an understanding of the unique context and larger political objective from which to judge military action, expert judgment and knowledge, and courage? If so, how can these

qualities be developed in the next generation of civilian leaders?

The traditional notion of an unequal dialogue also raises issues regarding the power of civilian leaders to appoint military leaders. When is it appropriate for civilians to dismiss military leaders? Conversely, when is it appropriate for military officers to register dissent or, in extreme cases, to resign? Has the inherently political nature of irregular warfare unduly politicized our military leadership and forces, undercutting the separation of military officers and soldiers from political affairs?

And finally, are modern forms of communication and the democratization of the media at odds with military discipline and the traditional notions of the chain of command on which the safety and effectiveness of the warfighter—and his insulation from political advocacy—rest?

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Nature of Irregular Warfare

Defining the types of engagements the United States is likely to face in the 21st century helps frame the discussion. An *insurgency* is generally defined as a drawn-out political-military campaign by an organized nonstate movement that seeks to displace a government and control the population and resources of a country or region. Effective counterinsurgency, therefore, requires in-depth local, political, and cultural knowledge and influence that

enable the affected government to mobilize the support of its people and resist the insurgency.

The Army’s revised *Counterinsurgency* field manual, whose preparation was overseen by General David Petraeus, then U.S. commander of Multi-National Force–Iraq, and the Marine Corps’ counterpart publication embody these notions and challenge the military to think differently about the conduct of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. These operations require the “synchronized application of military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions.”⁷⁶ Prevailing in these types of engagements, according to the manual, requires integrating forces into the civilian population and using both controlled force to protect local nationals and soft tools such as street money, jobs, humanitarian assistance, and construction projects to gain trust and cooperation.

Irregular, or asymmetric, warfare is an even wider phenomenon and may involve the notion of armed nationbuilding. It too requires a set of tools that combines military force with political and cultural influence to stabilize a government or replace it with leaders and institutions that coexist more peacefully and successfully in the world community.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that irregular warfare breaks from traditional understanding of how military and civilian leaders should each contribute to the overall effort:

■ Irregular warfare is profoundly political and not winnable in the traditional sense. There is no distinct point at which surrender is accepted or victory is declared. Instead, success is recognized when military operations transition, often subtly, to law enforcement and reconciliation. This characteristic makes it difficult to measure progress.

■ Irregular warfare is intensely local. When attempting to direct forces and resources, it is not possible to form a theater-wide perspective, as commanders were able

to do in previous conventional wars. Afghanistan has been described by one military leader as a valley-by-valley war. Iraq, or Bosnia in the previous decade, could be similarly described as a region-by-region, or even a town-by-town, war. Tactics are driven by local conditions, cultural and ethnic sensibilities, and the local religious leaders and other characters who wield their own peculiar brand of influence in a particular place. This characteristic makes it difficult to choose the right leaders and coordinate military and civilian tasks.

■ Irregular warfare is of long duration. In fact, many military strategists view the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as merely tactical fights in a larger, global insurgency that is likely to take decades to defeat. With such an open-ended time horizon, it is difficult for senior political leadership to keep a sustained and steady focus on the demands of the engagement.

This was not the case when the United States entered the World Wars of the 20th century. For a relatively brief but intense period of time, the country mobilized to defeat the enemy, and a “wartime economy” supported the national effort. During an irregular war, many aspects of public life at home continue as in peacetime. Senior political leadership is likely to be distracted by domestic issues unrelated to the war, such as economic dislocations, national crises, or campaigns for elective office. The long nature of irregular warfare makes it difficult to sustain leadership continuity and focus and raises a range of military and civilian manpower and training issues.

These aspects of irregular warfare create a thorny set of challenges for both military and civilian leaders as they take up their respective, complementary responsibilities.⁷ The answers to these challenges are not found in studying past wars or even the Cold War. As shown in the following paragraphs, however, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan do reveal a number of challenges in civil-military relations whose solutions require fresh thinking.

Measuring Progress

In irregular warfare or a counterinsurgency action, there are no front lines, making it more difficult to assess progress toward military and strategic goals and objectives. While all agree regarding the relative difficulty of measuring progress, there is disagreement about its feasibility—and even its utility—in an enterprise that is “shot through” with cultural and political components that do not readily lend themselves to objective measurement.

Nevertheless, political leaders crave data to make sense of a war they have authorized and to maintain public support. In the May 2007 legislation funding the war in Iraq, Congress included language setting up benchmarks that defined “success” and requiring periodic reports to Congress by the top U.S. military commander

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and Ambassador in Iraq. Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle indicated that their continued support would depend on credible evidence of tangible military progress and signs that the Iraqis were taking steps to reconcile their ethno-sectarian differences, share power and resources, and establish a functioning government and adequate security forces. The war-funding legislation also demanded additional assessments measuring progress in other areas, such as reconstruction.

Military commanders are adept at measuring kinetic progress. General Petraeus’ reports to Congress on the situation in Iraq featured numerous charts detailing such things as the number of attacks, the num-

ber of civilian deaths, trends in U.S. military casualties, and the number of Iraqi security forces trained and ready. General Petraeus also presented financial data, such as how much money the Army paid to Iraqi citizens under the Commander’s Emergency Response Program to lure them away from sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker’s companion reports to Congress on political, economic, and diplomatic developments presented some measurable data but emphasized more his “most honest assessment of the situation in Iraq and the implications for the United States.”⁸ Crocker cited numerous examples of where “the seeds of reconciliation are being planted” and reiterated that he is “constantly assessing our efforts and seeking to ensure that they are coordinated with, and complementary to, the efforts of our military.”⁹

These assessment and data collection efforts have indeed been useful in the public discussion about the war. But the fact remains that the attempt to measure political and cultural progress, fundamental facets of irregular warfare, is largely anecdotal, comprising specific projects or individual reports. Nevertheless, Ambassador Crocker acknowledged that “questions are sensible when a nation invests in and sacrifices for another country and people,” but that “we must not lose sight of the vital interests the United States has in a successful outcome in Iraq.”¹⁰

Some experts point to successful efforts to collect quantifiable information about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and argue that metrics are a useful management tool necessary for informed decisionmaking. But there is not a consensus on that point. Others believe that leaders may fall back on quantitative measures and that the quest for metrics keeps them from comprehending the political and strategic issues that drive counterinsurgency actions and irregular warfare. Most data collection efforts necessarily focus on kinetic events such as the number of suicide bombings; dramatic public events such as elections or street demonstrations; and inputs such as the amount of money spent

on the war. None of these data points serves well in determining what we really need to know, which is *outputs*—or what we are getting from the military, political, cultural, and diplomatic efforts we are making and the money we are spending.

Some strategists who are suspicious of metrics further believe that leaders may hide behind charts and numbers because the tangibility of things they can count helps reassure them in the midst of uncertainty and unpredictability. Metrics in Iraq and Afghanistan have given variable pictures of reality—sometimes informative, sometimes distorting. In this view, metrics are best seen as illustrative and suggestive, not accurate portraits of reality and not predictive. Tracking violence falling or rising, for instance, can be particularly misleading, as the surge suggested.

Bernard Fall proposed a novel measurement of progress that counted taxes collected from the Vietnamese citizenry by the French during the First Indochina War. But we clearly do not have fine enough metric tools to allow us to objectively measure all the facets of an irregular war, weigh the relative importance of each data element, and identify with some level of certainty when we have succeeded. Nevertheless, no business would thrive without knowing how it is doing, and so finding a way to honestly gauge the output of the military and civilian work done in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other counterinsurgencies remains a sought-after objective.

Choosing Who Should Lead

The quality of leadership has always been a pivotal factor in the conduct of war. But in irregular warfare, the desired abilities and traits of military leaders may differ from past understandings of the nature of wartime leadership. Some observe that, in conventional warfare, military leaders have needed something akin to engineering “smarts” as they employ troops and the tools of war to systematically plan tactics, win battles, and build a victory. Irregular warfare, in contrast, puts a much higher premium on civil and political “smarts” in

addition to the traditional skills of a military tactician.

In the United States, top military officials and commanders on the ground serve at the pleasure of the President. The choice of those leaders is influenced by who is available in the chain of command as well as political, strategic, and personal considerations. As the demands of leadership in the Iraq War intensified, the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefly attempted to devise specific job descriptions for general officers and others in the highest echelons of the uniformed Services, again mirroring a common practice in business. Although that effort was ultimately set aside in favor of more pressing concerns, the exercise yielded a deeper understanding about the personality characteristics and skill sets needed to successfully prosecute an irregular war, both from Washington and in theater.

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According to one top military leader, effective leadership comes down to one thing: trust. As noted in the Army’s COIN field manual, those leading a war effort need the ability to work together—both among themselves in the “unity of command”¹¹ and with political and civilian officials in a “unity of effort.”¹² A collaborative personality, flexibility, adaptiveness, innovative thinking, willingness to listen, and mutual respect are among the traits that come to the fore in the execution of an enterprise that is, in the end, more a political enterprise than a military one.

Regardless of their respective talents, today’s military leaders up and down the ranks face a number of new pressures with which they must contend and that chal-

lenge the command and control structure on which an effective military force stands. These include the following:

Politicization of War. How far political leaders should go to intervene in military matters is a question that becomes even more problematic in the uncertain environment of irregular warfare. Going back to Eliot Cohen’s notion of “prudence versus principle,” the question is raised whether prudence points in the direction of more or less civilian intervention in military decisionmaking.

The most important function of civilian leadership is to ask the difficult questions. It is, however, rare for people to ask first-order questions that challenge underlying assumptions. Instead, there is a tendency to get distracted by details. The President and senior defense officials should vigorously examine the conclusions and advice of military leaders, and Congress should ask hard questions as well. Unfortunately, during the multiple congressional hearings on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the level of discussion needed for serious analysis is often reduced to partisan wrangling. Visits to the theater by groups of elected leaders have been helpful in developing perspective and providing an opportunity for more informed political debate.

Although not a phenomenon unique to irregular war, elected leaders and civilian defense officials may believe that they have to use lofty rhetoric and articulate noble goals to “sell” the mission to a skeptical public. It then falls to military leaders to assume the role of pragmatists, putting events into perspective and tamping down unrealistic expectations. During testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Petraeus engaged in this sort of management of expectations when he answered a Senator’s question about U.S. goals. Petraeus stated, “Ambassador Crocker and I, for what it’s worth, have typically seen ourselves as minimalists. We’re not after the Holy Grail in Iraq; we’re not after Jeffersonian democracy. We’re after conditions that would allow our soldiers to disengage.”¹³

In discussing an irregular war with political leaders and the public, the danger appears of a mismatch between the rationale stated by the President and civilian defense and

national security officials and the pragmatic caution of military commanders. The result is confusion about whether the war is being “won” and an erosion of political resolve. The war in Iraq revealed a need for better articulation in the public forum that the military will help set the conditions for victory but will not win in the conventional sense—that a successful outcome depends on leveraging all the instruments of national power in a sustained effort that produces an enduring strategic partnership with the host country.

Soldier’s Code. The Soldier’s Code embodies the common ethos that a military member expresses dissent, based on legitimate facts, in private to one’s superiors and away from the public eye. Once a tactical or other decision is made, the soldier must desist and implement the decision to the best of his ability, regardless of whether it reflects his dissent. Thus, the code provides an avenue for constructive dissent, but it is not open-ended.

Many experienced military officers believe that the Soldier’s Code may need to be revitalized among both the leadership and the ranks. Seasoned military professionals believe the code is essential to maintaining discipline and is just as relevant in irregular warfare as in a conventional war or peacetime. If dissent is expressed openly, especially in the media, or is pursued beyond recognized boundaries, force morale and discipline may quickly break down.

Dissent. An irregular war is more prone than a major conventional war to be perceived by the public as an elective undertaking by the U.S. Government. To the extent it is seen in that light, there will be extensive public discussion of its motives and merits. Because the Soldier’s Code prohibits military leaders from expressing dissent in public, they can be accused of kowtowing to political leaders as opposed to providing their best professional advice. Even the effect of a national election may be seen as preemptively steering policy, apart from the exigencies of the war.

Clearly, military officers have always had their own political opinions. In an address to the New York legislature on June 26, 1775, George Washington argued, “When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the

Citizen.” However, military officers are obligated to provide their best professional judgment, but in the end, to follow the orders of the President. They can register dissent within the bounds of the Soldier’s Code, but it is less clear how far the military can go to question the nature of the conflict itself.

These issues were explored by H.R. McMaster in a book on the political and military decisions that led to the Vietnam War. In *Dereliction of Duty*, Colonel McMaster discusses whether U.S. military leaders should have more aggressively challenged the President and Secretary of Defense on what many of them came to believe was a flawed military strategy.

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The advisory role of top military leaders was clarified in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Under that law, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are the primary military advisors to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council. The statute charged the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs with providing the full range of military advice and opinion on a given matter. The statute also fostered greater unity of command among the Armed Forces and created a mechanism by which dissenting opinions by any of the Joint Chiefs other than the Chairman would be presented along with the Chairman’s advice. However, some senior military officers believe that the law, despite its intention, concentrated too much authority in the Chairman and resulted in a level of advocacy unhelpful to the development of sound strategy and operational planning by military commanders on the ground.

In the context of these issues, would it be a dereliction of duty for Active-duty military officers to give voice to their doubts about the wisdom of an operation? Dereliction of duty is a violation of military law involving the failure to perform expected duties. If military officers have grave reservations about the wisdom of a strategy or tactic, some hold the view that these officers have a moral obligation that goes beyond their constitutional obligation to obey civilian authority and their duty under military law to obey an order.

Similarly, would it be an act of moral courage for military officers to resign when they believe that a course of action is a dangerous folly or, worse, based on false claims? Here again, the intensely political nature of irregular warfare makes it more likely that military leaders will face crises of conscience that could lead to resignation.

To the extent that public opinion about a counterinsurgency operation or irregular war tends to become polarized, military officers are exposed to pressures that can compromise their effectiveness and cause a breakdown in force efficiency and discipline. The nature of their obligations under the Constitution and military law, especially in an irregular war, may need clarification through additional education and training.

Information Technology. The level playing field for information and opinion created by the Internet and encouraged by contemporary American culture has further politicized war. Anyone with a thought or a video camera can distribute words and images across the globe for access by anyone. This democratization of the media has created endless temptations for soldiers, especially younger ones, to express their views from the battlespace via social networking sites, emails, and blogs, activities that can be at odds with military discipline and, in some cases, force security. Unfettered access to the Internet may also conflict with traditional notions of decorum, confidentiality, and security in the civilian Foreign Service.

The Army has adopted military blogging rules to counter the security risks associated with “war diaries” and other personal writings posted online. Generally, all blog postings must

be vetted by a superior officer, and the Army reserves the right to shut down a blog if it is deemed to compromise discipline or security.

Despite these measures, it is clear that putting the media in the hands of soldiers, both at home and in a war zone, entices some military members to express their opinions more freely than military norms have allowed in the past. As such, the information revolution presents new challenges for force protection and discipline that have not been encountered in previous wars.

Chain of Command. On a daily operational level, senior military officers have noticed a greater expectation among junior officers to participate in senior-level discussions about strategies and tactics and to have their views heard and considered. Educational and cultural factors, as well as the environment of irregular warfare, may be working to alter accepted chain of command practices.

For example, one of the paradoxes of a counterinsurgency operation is that “many important decisions are not made by generals.”¹⁴ According to the *Counterinsurgency* manual:

*Successful COIN operations require competence and judgment by Soldiers and Marines at all levels. Indeed, young leaders—so-called “strategic corporals”—often make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences. . . . Preparation for tactical-level leaders requires more than just mastering Service doctrine; they must also be trained and educated to adapt to their local situations, understand the legal and ethical implications of their actions, and exercise initiative and sound judgment in accordance with their senior commanders’ intent.*¹⁵

Small fissures in the chain of command may also be appearing because junior officers, like younger soldiers in general, tend to be facile with the Internet and more outspoken about their views than their predecessors. Some of them are also politically organized, and a growing number have entered the public dialogue by voicing their views through the print, broadcast, and electronic media.

Experienced military leaders believe that these trends could portend erosion in the norms of professional ethics and that steps should be taken to reemphasize respect for the chain of command. At the same time, there is support for creating mechanisms that encourage and provide channels for healthy debate among professional soldiers at all levels.

Personnel Development. Irregular warfare requires the military to adapt its education and training programs to the situations that soldiers are likely to face as they conduct counterinsurgency operations and postconflict stabilization activities. Officers emerge from

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these programs better prepared to blend military tactics with awareness of the social and political dimensions of their activities. Military officer education and training programs, at both the undergraduate and professional levels, now address civil-military relationships and frameworks for building cooperation, communication, and mutual trust with civilian partners.

These military education programs have room for non-Defense Department officers. One promising approach is for civilians from the State Department, intelligence services, Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies involved in foreign affairs to attend military courses that prepare officers for the blended responsibilities of an irregular war. Coming together in common educational settings can promote acculturation between mili-

tary and civilian personnel who will interact in the field.

A related issue for the civilian diplomatic and development corps is an urgent need for more personnel. With some success, the Army has been rebuilding during wartime, shoring up its recruiting programs and offering incentives to reenlist. The executive branch, in contrast, has not asked for an increase in State Department staff, despite the fact that 20 percent of existing positions are unfilled and that there is a shortfall of staff to handle in-country assignments.

Not unlike their military counterparts, civilian agencies also contend with internal cultural issues that may lessen their effectiveness as partners in a counterinsurgency operation. Most civilian personnel are trained and equipped to handle program management and crisis response activities, with little emphasis on strategic analysis and adaptive thinking on the ground. COIN operations require more multifunctional, cross-sector diplomatic and development staff (as opposed to specialists) who are lateral thinkers and “integrated designer-strategists” capable of applying novel approaches to resourcing and collaborating with a variety of actors in uncertain situations. These issues are beginning to be addressed under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s concept of “transformational diplomacy.”

On both the military and civilian sides, better foreign language capabilities to manage the human dimensions of irregular warfare are sorely needed.

Integrating Civil-Military Relationships

Recent developments in the war in Iraq suggest that professional relationships, not organizational fixes, are essential to succeeding in an irregular war. This supposition has been borne out by the productive collaboration between General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker. Their offices were on the same hallway, and their physical proximity reflected a close partnership between the two leaders that produced a breakthrough in U.S. efforts to

stabilize the country, quell extremist activity, and restore a functioning government and society in the fifth year of the war. The importance of skillful integration of effort between the senior American official in country and the top military commander in theater has likewise been demonstrated in Afghanistan.

Why the importance of civil-military relationships is elevated in an irregular war goes back to the mosaic nature of counterinsurgency operations. According to the Army's *Counterinsurgency* field manual, "Political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency."¹⁶ Participants in a COIN operation include not only military personnel but also diplomats, politicians, medical and humanitarian aid workers, reconstruction workers, security personnel, narcotics officers, contractors, translators, and local leaders. All these diverse players must share common overall aims and effectively communicate as they perform complementary and sometimes conflicting tasks.

The interaction and coordination that must take place in irregular warfare require mutual respect and leadership from the top down, both in the field and in Washington. Achieving this level of cooperation between two fundamentally different cultures is one of the challenges of an irregular war. Following are some of the issues that are in various stages of discussion and resolution.

Who Does What. Out on the streets of a counterinsurgency operation, the degree of civil-military integration is dictated by conditions on the ground and available resources. According to the *Counterinsurgency* manual, "Political, social, and economic programs are most commonly and appropriately associated with civilian organizations and expertise; however, effective implementation of these programs is more important than who performs the tasks."¹⁷ In the frequently dangerous environment of an irregular war, soldiers may be the only personnel in the area. As a result, they may be called upon

to render aid to local nationals and perform other services and tasks that are at the heart of a counterinsurgency operation.

"Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors," instructs *Counterinsurgency*.¹⁸ One of the turning points in the war in Iraq was the engagement by military commanders in a dialogue with insurgent groups and tribal leaders. According to General Petraeus, "we employed non-kinetic means to exploit the opportunities provided by the conduct of our kinetic operations—aided in this effort by the arrival of additional Provincial Reconstruction Teams [PRTs]."¹⁹

PRTs are under military command and include civilian personnel and contractors engaged in construction and development missions. Among other things, the military provides a security envelope in which the PRT

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can safely operate. One of the primary roles of the teams is to work with local officials to institute good governance practices and economic development capacity.

General Petraeus' statement about cooperative civil-military missions suggests a kind of handoff of certain tasks from military personnel to civilian workers when they become available, but also a recognition that, until that time, Soldiers and Marines will use all the tools at their disposal to achieve the political, social, and economic goals of a counterinsurgency operation. This accommodation, however, cannot be permanent or institutionalized. As Secretary Gates said in a recent speech, "The Foreign Service is not the Foreign Legion, and the U.S. military should never be mistaken for a Peace Corps with guns."²⁰

Civilian Operational Doctrine.

Another concern that surfaced is the "hole" in doctrinal authority governing civilian activities in conjunction with military counterinsurgency operations in an irregular war. With no clear lanes of separation, civilian and military activities can be difficult to coordinate and may sometimes collide. U.S. civilian agencies involved in foreign affairs need to develop a doctrine to guide their own field operations—one that is tailored to the requirements of an irregular war, along the lines of, but distinct from, the Army's *Counterinsurgency* field manual. Such an effort would build upon, and complement, recent efforts to develop clearer guidelines between U.S. military and nongovernmental humanitarian relief providers, who need to balance their own security requirements against a traditional approach that in some cases required them to retain the aura of impartiality among partisans in the fighting.

Planning and Resources. Some veteran Foreign Service officials believe that, on the civilian side, we have failed so far to bring the same kind of analysis of goals and resources to bear in an irregular war that is standard practice on the military side. This lack of effective planning leads to a mismatch of civilian tools in the field and a shortage of Foreign Service staff empowered to make decisions and manage the complex tasks associated with in-country stabilization and assistance activities.

Part of the problem may be cultural differences between how military and civilian planners approach problems and the nature of the problems they tackle. On one side, the military culture operates under the concept that, when we see a problem, we fix it. On the civilian side, the emphasis is more on managing issues that we know cannot be completely resolved. To engage effectively in coordinated planning, each side should recognize the value of the other's approach and find common ground.

Although military planning is a well-honed discipline, the runup to the war in Iraq revealed a flaw that may be endemic to irregular war. Under well-established planning precepts, when a war is contem-

plated, the initial discussions between civilian defense and military leaders should pin down the nature of the conflict, and from that discussion, realistic goals and objectives based on U.S. national interests may be derived. The initial failure to understand the political, cultural, and human dimensions of the conflict put U.S. forces at a severe disadvantage. In the Iraq War, defense planners initially erred when they took a maximalist approach to setting goals and objectives while taking a minimalist approach to allocating resources.

Mistakes and Self-criticism. Some civilian officials believe that the agencies involved in diplomacy and development tend to avoid self-criticism and are generally loath to rethink a program midstream or learn from their mistakes. This is an ingrained cultural trait that makes them less responsive and adaptive to unexpected developments, a real handicap in the uncertain environment of irregular war.

The Army has worked hard to offset this all-too-human tendency. An internal history published in June 2008 entitled *On Point II* “testifies to the Army’s strength as a learning organization.”²¹ The U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute study covered the 18-month period immediately following the overthrow of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq, from May 2003 to January 2005, during which the Army had to essentially reinvent itself by transforming into an organization capable of conducting diverse and complex “full-spectrum operations.”²²

According to David Ignatius, rather than blame civilian leaders or pursue failing tactics, the “Army developed a new doctrine for fighting a counterinsurgency; it learned how to work with Iraqi tribal leaders; it pursued al-Qaeda into every village of Iraq; it experimented with soft power by working closely with Provincial Reconstruction Teams.”²³ Ignatius called the Army “that rare institution in American life” that puts into practice “philosopher George Santayana’s maxim that ‘those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’”²⁴

U.S. diplomatic and development officers see a need to ingrain in agency planning and analysis procedures the notion that it is not

a weakness, but a strength, to engage in self-analysis and internal criticism.

Headquarters versus Field. Both diplomatic and foreign assistance officials worry about the politicization of foreign aid and reconstruction programs overseas. Among the symptoms are the undue centralization of authority in Washington, excessive micromanagement from headquarters, and a shortfall of manpower and fiscal tools to support the Country Team.

Overall, there is a tendency in a centralized structure to pursue high-level strategy changes to solve a problem in the field. This tendency is reinforced by bureaucratic sensitivities to congressional oversight and Government Accountability Office standards that can be unforgiving when it comes to potential waste, fraud, and abuse, even in irregular conflicts.

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This only increases the illusion that headquarters is exercising control. In the end, policy issues are “resolved” and implementation issues remain unfixed. In particular, field staff has been constrained by its inability, first, to hire the right personnel who will have enough time in country to foster local relationships and an understanding of political, social, and economic needs; and, second, to sign contracts in the field to effectively “move money” to where it is needed. These procedural mechanisms need to be fixed in order to provide greater flexibility and responsiveness.

In a critique of the development and current practice of U.S. security cooperation programs, Christopher Griffin and Thomas Donnelly wrote that many of the authorities and instruments for engagement already exist. However, “they may be more effectively harnessed if leadership is devolved from Washing-

ton to the ‘frontline country team,’ in which the ambassador is responsible for coordinating and directing American policy.”²⁵

In an irregular war, in which field staff must effectively interact with military forces, other civilian agencies, and host country and alliance organizations, attention should also be given to empowering midlevel staff closest to the issues and opportunities presented by the engagement. There is a pressing need for more expeditionary officers empowered to make decisions in the field.

Funding Allocation. The military’s responsibilities in irregular warfare have led to a shift in budgetary resources for foreign assistance programs. A July 2008 report by Washington, DC–based Refugees International, entitled *U.S. Civil-Military Imbalance for Global Engagement*, warned that U.S. aid to Africa is becoming increasingly “militarized,” favoring kinetic operations to restore order and protect populations over long-term development projects aimed at the root causes of terrorism, genocide, and displacement.²⁶ According to the report, the percentage of development assistance controlled by the Pentagon went from 3.5 percent to nearly 22 percent during the past decade, while the U.S. Agency for International Development’s share of development assistance declined from 65 percent to 40 percent.²⁷

Some believe that change in budget allocation has made the United States a “profoundly unbalanced power.” The Defense Department’s assistance budget now dwarfs that of State, even though Federal spending on international affairs has almost doubled since 2001. Much of this increase, however, has been designated for security assistance costs and is offset by the declining dollar, leaving far too little for core diplomatic operations.

Secretary Gates frequently voices his concerns about the risk of “creeping militarization” of some aspects of U.S. foreign policy. This was one of his points in a recent speech when he stated, “It has become clear that America’s civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded far too long—relative to what we traditionally spend on the military, and more importantly, relative to the responsibilities and challenges

our nation has around the world.”²⁸ A year earlier, a Reuters article quoted Gates as saying, “The non-military instruments of America’s national power need to be rebuilt, modernized, and committed to the fight.”²⁹ Gates has likewise frequently been on record in interviews and testimony as advocating a new approach to making use of the full range of national power to “deal with the challenges to our freedom, prosperity, and security around the globe.”³⁰

Virtual Communications. Advancements in telecommunications have brought fundamental changes in how civilian and military leaders manage a war—and the potential for tipping the fragile balance between civilian and military authority. Although virtual meetings can help promote better communications, teleconferencing in wartime may create a misleading sense of immediacy and provide the illusion of headquarters control that may not reflect reality. There is also the danger of civilian leaders crossing the line and interfering in tactical areas that should be the province of professional soldiers. The ability to “beam” into a conference room but “tune out” what is being said is all too real. The fact that most teleconferences are run on Eastern Standard Time also may result in the disruption of staff cycles for the key players who have to prepare for and participate in the conferences.

How telecommunications technology potentially changes the nature of civil-military relationships is a matter that bears further scrutiny. Both military and civilian leaders agree, however, that there is no substitute for developing face-to-face relationships based on trust and for observing first-hand developments on the ground.

Maintaining Strategic Patience

The world is on a 24-hour news cycle, but an irregular war is a lengthy undertaking that requires strategic patience and steadiness of purpose. Political leaders naturally want to avoid explaining this fact to the citizenry, who generally prefer quick results with as few sacrifices as necessary. Because of this tension between public expectations and operational

reality, the President and civilian defense leaders may push military commanders beyond their comfort zone in terms of strategy, manpower, and equipment, creating internal friction between the civilian and military leaders responsible for the war.

Even within the military, strategic patience is a virtue not completely mastered. Military leaders, with their ingrained willingness to shoulder difficult tasks, may de-emphasize how long it will take for counterinsurgency operations to bear fruit. They will

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also, quite naturally, be concerned about the opportunity costs that long-term employments impose on their ability to reset and adapt to meet other operational requirements. In their efforts to motivate troops to accomplish difficult and dangerous tasks, they may not effectively communicate the length of the commitment and the uneven progress military forces are likely to encounter.

The realization that an irregular war is a long march creates gaps between expectation and reality on the civilian side as well. Agency appointments in country are generally for a year or less, while efforts to restore stability within a traumatized and displaced population can go on indefinitely. Diplomatic and development personnel on overseas assignments may become frustrated unless they understand the long-term horizon under which they must necessarily labor. For example, a military justice law for Afghanistan, devised under the guidance of the U.S. Ambassador working with Afghan officials, took 4 years to legislate.

Because of the complex nature of irregular war, it takes time to build a sense of progress, and we leave ourselves open to a sense of failure if we neglect to see the long-term horizon. It will take both strategic success and political skill to explain the long-term nature of irregular war and develop a consensus that the United States and its allies have little choice but to make that commitment.

Managing Relations

The mandate to cooperate in an irregular war becomes more problematic and complex in an alliance structure, such as the multinational coalition in Iraq and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance in Afghanistan. Never in the history of alliances has the ideal of completely seamless interaction been attained. The first Gulf War demonstrated a high degree of cooperation with coalition members, but that war had limited objectives and did not slide into the sloppier and more political phase of irregular war.

As a result, we are learning as we go how to coordinate U.S. military and civilian activities with multinational partners and host governments. U.S. efforts to manage coalition and alliance relations are based on several premises:

- Working with allies is always problematic but preferable on burdensharing grounds to independent action.

- Working with the host government is both a constraint and a necessity.

- The ultimate objective is transition of authority to a stable host government, supported by competent security forces, capable of meeting the needs of the populace and providing the basic infrastructure to support economic development growth. Successfully managing transitional relationships with both host government officials and security forces is, therefore, a priority. Military transition training of host country security forces and coaching, training, and mentoring of

local officials are critical contributions to postconflict stabilization.

In the search for the right balance between military and civilian contributions—between command and leadership—in an irregular war, much has been learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Secretary Gates acknowledges that “the lines separating war, peace, diplomacy, and development have become more blurred, and no longer fit the neat organizational charts of the 20th century,” but that “[a]ll the various elements and stakeholders working in the international arena—military and civilian, government and private—have learned to stretch outside their comfort zone to work together and achieve results.”³¹

Although there has been undeniable progress in rebalancing the capability portfolios of each of the players, all the problems have yet to be resolved. What is clear is that the world will continue to look to the United States for leadership. How to best bring together America’s civilian and military assets to protect our national interests and support our alliances and local partners is an essential conversation that should be continued.

Notes

¹ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 241–242.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Bruce Catton, *Gettysburg: The Final Fury* (New York: Berkley Books, 1976), 7.

⁵ Cohen, 209.

⁶ U.S. Army, Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Army, December 2006), 5–1, available at <www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>.

⁷ For an extended discussion on irregular and modern warfare, see Patrick M. Cronin, ed., *The Impenetrable Fog of War: Reflections on Modern Warfare and Strategic Surprise* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008).

⁸ Ryan C. Crocker, “Report to the U.S. House of Representatives on the Situation in Iraq,” presented before a joint hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and House Armed Services Committee, September 10, 2007.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ U.S. Army, 2–2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2–3.

¹³ Anna Mulrine, “General David Petraeus Gives Congress a Sobering Report on Iraq,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 11, 2008.

¹⁴ U.S. Army, 1–28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ U.S. Army, 2–1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, foreword.

¹⁹ David H. Petraeus, “Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq,” September 10, 2007.

²⁰ Robert M. Gates, speech before U.S. Global Leadership Campaign, Washington, DC, July 15, 2008.

²¹ See David Ignatius, “An Army That Learns,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2008.

²² Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Rees, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign—The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Combat Studies Institute, June 2008), available at <<http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/CSI/OP2.asp>>.

²³ Ignatius.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Christopher Griffin and Thomas Donnelly, *The Frontline Country Team: A Model for Engagement* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, June 2008), foreword.

²⁶ Refugees International, press release, July 17, 2008.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Gates, speech.

²⁹ “Gates Calls for Rebuilding of U.S. Development Agencies,” Reuters, July 18, 2007.

³⁰ Gates, speech.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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