



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

## TESTIMONIES

# Language and Cultural Awareness Transformation

July 8, 2009 | **Andrew F. Krepinevich**

Resources: Strategy & Policy

## Introduction

*"...asymmetric warfare will remain a mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time... arguably the most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern their own countries. The standing up and mentoring of indigenous armies and police—once the province of Special Forces—is now a key mission for the military as a whole... The same is true for mastering a foreign language...and building expertise in foreign areas. Army soldiers can expect to be tasked with reviving public services, rebuilding infrastructure, and promoting good governance. All these so-called “nontraditional” capabilities have moved into the mainstream of military thinking, planning, and strategy—where they must stay.*

- Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates Remarks to the Association of the United States Army, October 10, 2007

In order to assess the value of any particular piece of equipment or form of training, it is necessary to have a sense of what tasks the armed forces will be asked to perform, and where they will be operating in the years to come. During the 45 year-long Cold War the U.S. military focused primarily on structuring, training and equipping itself for conventional combat against the Soviet Union and its allies on the European continent and at sea. Following the Cold War, our armed forces have found themselves conducting operations, often irregular and protracted in character, in places such as Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq that to some would have seemed highly implausible only months before they were undertaken. If the experience of the last seventeen years tells us anything, it is that we are likely to continue to find our armed forces deployed, often for protracted periods of time, and typically in operations among the indigenous populations, rather than around them. As I will discuss presently, it is not only past experience, but strong current trends that argue for this conclusion.

Consequently, as we look ahead, the U.S. military should be prepared to confront a more diverse array of opponents, including third-tier rogue powers, transnational terrorist organizations, indigenous insurgent groups, as well as potential great power rivals. Rather than focusing on one particular geographic area, U.S. forces will likely be required to prepare for contingencies in widely dispersed locales. Moreover, U.S. soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen will increasingly be asked to perform a range of tasks quite different from those associated with conventional combat operations.

## **The Future Security Environment: A Disordered World?**

What will the future security environment look like? Although it is impossible to say for certain, a number of trends suggest that the United States may be on the verge of confronting a “disordered world” in which the principal threats to U.S. security are more likely to emanate from irregular forces and ungoverned spaces than they are from the great power rivals that posed the gravest threats during the last century. These trends include the continuing use of irregular tactics and strategies by state and non-state adversaries alike; the empowerment of non-state opponents due to a revolution in communications and the proliferation of increasingly advanced weapons; and the growing prospects of internal instability, state failure, and even state collapse in a number of fragile nations due, in part, to worrisome demographic trends.

### **The Rise of Irregular Warfare**

The current trend toward irregular warfare did not begin with the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns that the United States has undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, the entire post-Cold War era has been dominated by irregular warfare contingencies. To be sure, the First Gulf War in 1991 and the conventional combat operations phase of the Second Gulf War in 2003 involved major, combined-arms air and ground operations. However, both of these conflicts vividly demonstrated the enormous overmatch that exists between the United States military and those that might choose to challenge it by waging conventional warfare, as Saddam Hussein’s military did not once, but twice.

<sup>1</sup> Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Armed Services, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1181> on July 2, 2008.

The U.S. military's performance in irregular warfare campaigns has not met with the same success as it has enjoyed in conventional combat. The difficulties encountered should not have been a surprise. Following the Vietnam War ground our armed forces were optimized for conventional warfare. The catchphrase "No More Vietnams" reflected the military's desire to avoid protracted, ill-defined conflicts. General William DePuy, one of the Army's leading thinkers, viewed the 1973 Middle East War as a godsend of sorts, as it enabled the Army to reorient itself back toward a more familiar, almost comfortable threat to U.S. security: the Soviet Army in Central Europe. The "No More Vietnams" attitude was heartily seconded by the American people and civilian leadership. It spawned the Weinberger and Powell doctrines of the 1980s and the "Exit Strategies" discussions that preoccupied political and military leaders during the deployment of U.S. ground forces in the 1990s. The U.S. military became increasingly structured, trained and equipped to fight short, conventional wars. When this proved unworkable, the intent became to set clear limits on the duration of U.S. force deployments to avoid "another Vietnam."

Unfortunately, as our generals are fond of reminding us, "The enemy gets a vote," and many of our enemies—especially those espousing a violent radical Islamist creed—have "voted" against taking on the United States with conventional forces, opting instead for irregular warfare.

There are three primary reasons for this:

- First, as noted above, the U.S. military has overwhelming dominance in conventional warfare;
- Second, and consequently, even if they wanted to confront the United States conventionally, most of our enemies simply lack the human and material resources to build conventional forces on anything like the scale and level of sophistication required to pose a serious challenge to our military; and
- Third, and perhaps most important, the U.S. military, and other first- rate militaries like Israel's, have proven far less effective in combating enemies waging irregular warfare than those engaged in conventional war.

To buttress their line of thinking, our enemies can cite from an impressive run of successes by non-conventional forces, including the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, and the withdrawals from Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in the 1990s; Soviet losses in Afghanistan; and Israel's inability to prevail over the Iranian-backed irregular forces of Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War. Given these factors, it seems likely that the U.S. military is destined to face adversaries waging irregular conflicts unless these adversaries gain an advantage in conventional warfare (an unlikely occurrence in the foreseeable future), acquire nuclear weapons, or the U.S. military demonstrates an ability to deal effectively with the irregular warfare challenge.

## **The Diffusion of Information and Military Technology**

Not only should we expect that many existing and prospective opponents will resort to irregular warfare well into the foreseeable future, but we should also assume that they will be able to do so more effectively than in the past. This is due in large part to a revolution in communications that has diffused to the lowest levels of society, as well as the growing availability of advanced weapons and military technologies.

Terrorist groups and insurgent forces have already demonstrated their ability to use mass media and information technology skillfully to communicate, recruit and organize new members, create and disseminate propaganda, and share "lessons learned" from their efforts. Moreover, the diffusion of advanced military technology (such as rockets and missiles, precision-guided munitions, advanced explosive charges, etc.) is significantly enhancing the capabilities of irregular forces, a trend that is likely to continue for some time. Perhaps most worrisome are the efforts of groups such as al Qaeda and the The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to acquire weapons of mass destruction.