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Op-Ed: The New Security Reality: Not Business as Usual

August 20, 2012 | [Dr. Max G. Manwaring](#)[Print](#) [Email](#)

The past several years have marked the beginning of a different security era than that to which we are accustomed. Accordingly, it requires a new orientation. Whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not, and whether we are prepared for it or not, the United States and the West are engaged in a number of unconventional, undeclared, and undefined asymmetric wars. In addition to wars initiated by traditional nation-state aggressors, in 1996, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, then Secretary General of the United Nations, highlighted two new sources of conflict that are becoming more prevalent in the global security arena: 1) belligerent and politicized nonstate actors (e.g., proxies for hegemonic nation-states, insurgents, transnational criminal organizations, terrorists, private armies, popular militias, and gangs) that are taking on roles that were once reserved exclusively for the sovereign nation-state; and, 2) indirect, implicit, and violent challenges to stability and human well-being that are exploited almost exclusively by hegemonic and violent nonstate actors (root causes: e.g., poverty, social exclusion, environmental degradation, and political economic-social expectations). If left ignored and unchecked, these wars compel radical, unwanted, and epochal political-economic-social change.¹ Even if that compulsion is generally indirect, ambiguous, conducted over long periods of time, and not perceived to be as lethal as conventional maneuver war between traditional nation-states, it does not alter the cruel reality of compulsion.

In that context, it must be remembered that the 60,000 deaths attributed to Mexico's unconventional war with criminal organizations, private armies, and gangs have now exceeded U.S. combat casualties in the Vietnam War. At the same time, murder rates in three Central American countries are the highest in the world, and gangs control more than half the national territory in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Also, the insurgency in Colombia is moving away from direct confrontation with the armed forces to a more subtle continuation of the revolutionary struggle through political-psychological coercion. Additionally, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has not been subtle regarding his use of an undeclared asymmetric war paradigm to put an end to U.S. political and economic influence in the Western Hemisphere, and to transform the whole of Latin America into a single Bolivarian (Socialist) state. Given the pressures of international law and the requirements of U.S. trade and security accords with Mexico, Central America, and Colombia, it is appropriate for strategic leaders — and anyone else who has the responsibility

for analyzing, planning, implementing, and/or reporting on these kinds of conflicts — to: 1) take the enemy into consideration; 2) start thinking about the kind of conflict in which they are engaged; and, 3) start thinking about what must be understood to successfully conduct contemporary unconventional asymmetric warfare.

The Enemy

Any discussion regarding present and future security and/or defense must begin by addressing the question: Against what and whom are we protecting ourselves? Other issues that must be addressed are those of terrain and time, but are beyond the scope of this piece. The most important issue, in Clausewitzian terms, is that we must understand the enemy, and what the enemy is not.² The answers to these questions have been relatively easy since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The political structure of the world was characterized by a robust, but rigid, security system based on the sovereignty of the nation-state. As a result, the mission was to defend the national territory, population, and vital interests of the state against aggressive competitor nation-states.

The answers to the questions asked above are no longer so easy. Such a dramatic change in concept as that proposed by Boutros-Boutros Ghali required a global response and fundamental legitimization by international law. Thus, a series of conventions and declarations have been promulgated by the major international institutions to support, clarify, and strengthen the broader and more ambiguous notion of security.³ Even though prudent governments must prepare for high-risk, low-probability conventional interstate war, there is a high probability that the President and the Congress of the United States, and leaders of other powers around the world, will continue to require civil-military participation in unconventional conflicts. Additionally, the spillover effects of intranational and transnational nonstate actor destabilization efforts will place demands on the international community — if not to solve the underlying root causes or control the resultant violence, then at least to harbor the living victims.

As a consequence, the enemy has now become a state or nonstate political actor that plans and implements the long-term multidimensional kinds of indirect and direct, nonmilitary and military, nonlethal and lethal, and internal and external activities that threaten a given society's general well-being and exploits the root causes of internal and external instability. The actual protection and prevention of harm to peoples (enforcement of the new international law) remains, however, in the hands of the traditional nation-state. This conundrum is the basis of much of the ambiguity of contemporary conflict. The traditional distinctions between crime, terrorism, subversion, insurgency, popular militias, mercenaries, gangs, and traditional warfare are blurred. And there are virtually no rules.

The New Sociology of Conflict

The fundamental change in the concept of the enemy is not radical or a completely altruistic principle of international law. It simply extrapolates from

post-Cold War developments in international relations and international law, in which old rules have proven counterproductive at best and murderous at worst. But, to achieve a larger protective and preventative grand-strategic objective, leaders must understand that war as we have known it no longer exists. Leaders must also understand that they must learn to deal effectively with a nonstate enemy (to include proxies or surrogates) that:

- Includes a wide range of combatants, not all of which are military. Politically effective warfare requires — among others — accountants, financiers, hackers, media and public relations experts, software engineers, and chemists;
- Tends to be firmly embedded in the population, has no permanent address, and has no identity to differentiate the enemy from the rest of a given society;
- Conducts battles among the people. When they are reported, those battles become media events that may or may not reflect social reality;
- Conducts battles at three levels: political (strategic); operational (theater); and, tactical (local). At each level, however, the political-psychological objective always has priority;
- Maintains connections with friends and allies through an extremely effective flat (horizontal) nervous system, unified by an overarching political, commercial, and/or ideological idea;
- Intends to capture the imaginations of the people and the will of their leaders, and changes the center of gravity from an aggressor military force to an ambiguous leadership and public opinion paradigm; and,
- Strives for total and absolute power to control or replace an entire government or other symbol of power.

Some Reinforcing Lessons Regarding Contemporary Unconventional Asymmetric Conflict

First, in this kind of conflict, adversaries and their purposes have changed. Now, the adversary is generally a nonstate actor that aims to undermine and break up a targeted political-economic-social system, and force radical change. Second, power has changed. It is no longer combat firepower. Power is multidimensional, and more often than not, is nonkinetic (soft). It is directed at the causes as well as perpetrators of violence. Third, battlefields have changed and expanded to accommodate the concept of ambiguous conflict between and among various types of adversaries. Four distinct but interrelated battlespaces exist in the contemporary security arena:

1. Traditional, direct interstate war;
2. Unconventional nonstate war that involves gangs, insurgents, transnational criminal organizations, and “warlords” who thrive in “ungoverned space”;
3. Unconventional intrastate war that tends to involve state and nonstate actors; and,
4. Indirect interstate war which entails aggression by a nation-state

against another through proxies.

Fourth, the kind of warfare outlined above represents a triple threat to the authority, legitimacy, and stability of targeted governments:

- It undermines the ability to perform legitimizing security and well-being (preventive and protection) functions;
- It replaces traditional nation-state authority (sovereignty) with alternative governance; and,
- It conducts low-cost actions calculated to move a state into the state failure process.

Moreover, nation-states, their proxies, and nonstate actors who perpetrate unconventional, undeclared, asymmetric conflicts throughout the global community can and do take *de facto* political control of geographical and human portions of traditional nation-states. When they do, they create quasi-states within the state. Whether or not motives are political, commercial, or ideological — or to control or to replace governments — is irrelevant. The fact is that these activities make a joke of traditional sovereignty. At the same time, law and security depend completely on the whim of terrorist, insurgent, criminal, or gang leaders. This makes a joke out of citizen (human) rights, and the notion of democracy. Inadvertent or deliberate, any and all of these actions compel radical change and define both insurgency and war.

What All This Portends for the U.S. Army

Clearly, business cannot be conducted “as usual.” It is past time to begin the process of developing an acceptable response to the “new” security reality. As a first step in that direction, the U.S. Army Staff and the U.S. Army War College must join together to help the U.S. Army understand that the final outcome of contemporary conflicts is not determined by unilateral training and equipping. At the same time, these unconventional wars are not singular military-to-military confrontations. Rather, control of the security situation is determined by qualitative leader judgment and the unity of effort that directly support overriding strategic U.S. political objectives.

Recommendation: Establish a multiorganizational (e.g., U.S. Army Staff, U.S. Army War College, Joint Staff, SOUTHCOM, and NORTHCOM, etc.) “Tiger Team” to develop a regional security plan that includes foundational ways and means to achieve appropriate mindset and organizational change within the U.S. Army.

The consequences of failing to take the realities of contemporary unconventional war seriously are clear. Unless U.S. Army thinking and actions are reoriented to deal appropriately with the asymmetric war phenomenon, the problems of global, regional, and sub-regional stability and security will resolve themselves. There will be no stability or security.

Endnotes

1. Boutros-Boutros Ghali, "Global Leadership after the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1996, pp. 86-98.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 88-89.

3. See for example, the Organization of American States Declaration on Security, available from www.oas.org/document/eng/Declaratoin_Security__102803.asp.

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