

# Irregular Warfare and the Marine Corps

A changed security environment creates new opportunities

by Col Robert K. Dobson, Jr., USMC(Ret)

***“The ability to adapt to the reality of war, its political framework, and its technical and industrial modes, and to the fact that the enemy also consists of adaptive human beings, has been the key component in military effectiveness in the past and will continue to be so in the future.”***

**—Joint Operating Environment 2010**

After more than a decade of continuous combat operations against an elusive foe that is at times an insurgent, extremist, criminal, nonstate actor, and/or terrorist, and often frustrated by the politics of the conflict, Marines have begun to look forward to returning to their “amphibious roots.” This has become a bumper sticker slogan that is being interpreted by many as returning to training for combat operations. This is nothing new. After the Vietnam War, the message “no more Vietnams” emanated from the defense establishment. Focus returned to conventional operations. Doctrine stagnated. Irregular warfare skills atrophied. The legacy of the Vietnam War led to the “Weinberger Doctrine”<sup>1</sup> that identified stringent criteria for the future use of military force.

The Marine Corps essentially acknowledged this preference for conventional operations in the *2010 Marine Operating Concepts*, Third Edition, which states:

The U.S. military has not relinquished its conventional view of war based on conceptual thinking that was promi-

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nent immediately following World War II and reemphasized following the Vietnam War. . . . Military personnel often focus on what they know best: combat operations.

If true, and many believe it is, then there are storm clouds forming on the horizon because the global security environment has changed. My contention is this change in the global strategic environment has created new opportunities for the Marine Corps in irregular warfare. The purpose of this article is to describe why irregular warfare is important to Marines, identify key institutional challenges to embracing irregular warfare, and make recommendations for advancing the development of irregular warfare capabilities and capacities.

## Why Irregular Warfare Is Important to the Marine Corps

*The strategic security environment has changed.* Population increases in the littorals, a growing unemployed youth bulge, globalization, competition for resources, a global recession, and failure of governments to provide essential services and employment for its people are all factors that contribute to global instability. Natural crises also create instability. Collectively these factors create unstable areas that have become prime breeding grounds for insurgents, terrorists, criminals, and other nefarious actors,<sup>2</sup> and the trend line shows little improvement. The number of failed and failing states has remained remarkably constant over the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

Consider the recent governmental overthrows in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt during the 2011 “Arab Spring” as well as the ongoing insurgency in Syria. While the overthrow of longstanding dictators is clearly an opportunity for more progressive and representative governments, it remains uncertain as to exactly how those governments will evolve, creating even greater degrees of uncertainty and instability.

*Persistent irregular conflict has replaced the Cold War as the major nonnuclear security challenge of this generation.* Opponents recognize U.S. dominance in conventional military power and have adopted irregular methods to pursue their strategic aims. Some irregular actors are pursuing advanced weaponry, including nuclear weapons. Global instability and the irregular threats that operate therein pose the most immediate and likely threat to our Nation for the foreseeable future.

Irregular warfare is defined as:

... a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Failed and Failing States are likely areas where struggles for legitimacy will occur. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.<sup>4</sup>

Irregular warfare:

... can include a variety of steady-state and surge Department of Defense (DOD) activities and operations: counterterrorism; unconventional warfare; foreign internal defense; counterinsurgency; and stability operations that, in the context of irregular warfare, involve establishing or reestablishing order in a fragile state.<sup>5</sup>

The objective of applying the method of irregular warfare is to erode an adversary's will using the relevant population as the means.

Consider this. In 2009 before the House Armed Services Committee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats, and Capabilities, Robert Martinage, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict, testified that:

Terrorist cells are active in more than 60 countries around the world. Moreover, there are radical Islamist insurgencies of varying stages underway in nearly a score of countries—most notably in Pakistan, Afghanistan, countries in the Maghreb and Horn of Africa, and Lebanon. The operating environment spans from Europe to the most underdeveloped parts of the world, and ranges from densely populated urban areas and mega-cities to remote mountains, deserts and jungles. For the United States, it encompasses permissive, semi-permissive, and non-permissive environments, as well as hostile or denied areas.

Moreover, their increased ability to remotely plan and coordinate attacks extends their operational reach while rendering targeting of their sanctuaries more difficult. This threat of violent extremism is global in scope and not limited to South Central Asia.

***“... 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. . . . 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.”***

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

The United States has declared war on this global threat and shortly after 11 September 2001 designated Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to lead the effort. As a result of successes in eliminating terrorist leadership over the past 10 years, many believe this threat is now more decentralized and globally dispersed than ever. It is only a matter of time before a new generation of nefarious fanatics replaces the old leadership.

*Since the United States cannot fight every insurgency, we must build partner capacity.* The irregular warfare mission areas of foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, and stability operations all relate to building partner capacity missions across the globe. Once again citing congressional testimony of Robert Martinage:

Given finite U.S. counterterrorism capacity, the impracticability of conducting American military (or even covert) operations in several relevant places around the world, and the political/diplomatic need to avoid the perception of a unilateral American war

against Islam, it is essential to train, equip, and advise foreign security forces—including air and maritime forces, as well as ground forces—in as [many] countries as possible.

The United States and other members of the global community must assist in reestablishing order in many of these countries through a series of irregular warfare activities focused on building partner capacity. The 2012 DoD Strategic Guidance states:

Building partnership capacity elsewhere in the world also remains important for sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership . . . . *Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low cost, and small footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives* [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup>

To not act creates additional ungoverned areas, which criminals, terrorists, and other actors will use for training, recruiting, and other purposes. Addressing the major sources of global instability is a struggle that will be measured in decades and generations, not months or years.



**A persistent Marine presence will be required to combat terrorism and build partner capacity.** (Photo by Cpl Paul Zellner.)

Developing and maintaining a global capacity for combating terrorism will require the ability to conduct building partner capacity activities on a persistent basis in numerous high-priority countries as well as carrying out more episodic training activities on a rotational basis in another 20 to 40 countries.

*Special operations forces lack the capacity to meet the global requirement to build partner capacity.* Success in the war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents requires a long-term global campaign to deny sanctuary whether in undergoverned territories or state-controlled territory. The United States cannot do this alone. It will be essential to build the security capabilities and capacities of as many partners—both nations and disaffected nonstate actors—as possible. It will be necessary to put additional pressure on state sponsors of terrorism. The U.S. Government will also need to shore up weak or failing states to prevent them from becoming terrorist sanctuaries. Regrettably, special operations forces are insufficient in capacity to meet the irregular threat over this time frame. ADM Eric Olson,

commander of SOCom, summarized the unfortunate situation when he said, “We’re going to fewer countries, staying for shorter periods of time, with smaller numbers of people than historically we have done.”<sup>7</sup>

And this trend will not increase with the withdrawal of forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarked in May 2008:

The eventual drawdown in Iraq is not the end of the mission for our elite forces. Far from it. Even as our regular troops reduce their presence and are replaced by Iraqis, special operations force levels will remain fairly constant and be the connective tissue for the overall mission. They will be in Iraq and Afghanistan for an extended period of time—a force to hunt and kill terrorists, and also as a force to help train Iraqis and Afghans.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, meeting this challenge will require additional irregular warfare capacity.

*The Marine Corps, as the Nation’s expeditionary force-in-readiness, must be organized, trained, and equipped to*

*fill this build partner capacity gap.* Were LtCol Earl Ellis alive today, I believe he would be drafting a plan that would include the use of U.S. Marines to support proactively and persistently the war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents. There is an irregular warfare capacity gap in building partnership capacity, and the Marine Corps, as the Nation’s expeditionary force-in-readiness, should fill this gap. Conducting this persistent irregular warfare mission would free up special operations forces for missions that exploit their special capabilities, such as direct action and unconventional warfare.

Others have also made this suggestion. COL Robert Killebrew, USA(Ret), a 40-year student of irregular warfare and a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security believes that the United States:

... needs to learn how to advise foreign armies and foreign governments with minimal presence where it counts, rather than muscling in with massive troop buildups and foreign aid that eclipses, and often alienates, the very people we are trying to help.

### Key Institutional Challenges

Many believe the Marine Corps should fill this build partner capacity gap. After all, the 82d Congress (1952) charged the Marine Corps to be “most ready when the nation is least ready.” It is hard to debate the merits of this argument.

But making this shift will not be easy for the Marine Corps. A host of organizational, programmatic, and operational challenges will need to be addressed. I have highlighted below what I believe to be the four most significant challenges in closing the persistent building partner capacity gap.

- Persistent versus episodic commitment. The future security environment will call for a combination of both persistent and selective engagements from Marine forces. Forward afloat forces will continue deploying to regions of interest to perform a wide variety of tasks across the range of military operations in response to crisis or episodic engagement priorities. Forward deployed MEUs and global fleet stations can only provide episodic partner-building capacity. But to be truly effective, the Marine Corps must expand its capacity to provide persistent engagement presence in a

number of select countries. This persistent presence must be tailored to the needs of the individual country and include expertise in culture and language, training, and tactics.

- MAGTF. The MAGTF will not be an appropriate organizational construct for most persistent engagement commitments. Most train, advise, and assist missions will require a much smaller footprint ashore. Fewer, more multiskilled personnel on the ground persistently will become the new norm. Preparing skilled teams for these persistent missions requires much more than training and education, although these elements are certainly important. New organizational constructs focused on small teams will require a comprehensive review of the current Operating Forces structure and adoption of a force model specifically designed for persistent train, advise, and assist missions.

- Age of the force. A smaller, more multiskilled force package will require greater levels of maturity and experience from individual team members. This will require the Marine Corps to age a certain portion of the force. While difficult, this may not be as hard as some believe. Some have suggested that a minimum Operating Forces experience level of 3 to 4 years be used as the qualification standard, with foreign language and cultural knowledge used as another qualifying standard. Emphasis should be placed on maturity and judgment of all team members.

- Marines are a combat force. All Marines view themselves as a combat force, and many cannot wait to be out of Afghanistan so they can get back to the real mission of warfighting. Such thinking is clearly out of step with the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and several high-level Marine Corps documents.<sup>9</sup> Collectively these documents all direct the Marine Corps to develop enhanced irregular warfare capabilities. Additionally, *Title 10* requires the Marine Corps to be prepared to conduct “other missions as may be assigned by the President.” Recently, those other missions have been defined



**A smaller, more multiskilled force will be required in the future.** (Photo by Cpl Timothy Lenzo.)

in *DoD Instruction 3000.07, Irregular Warfare*, to “Recognize that IW [irregular warfare] is as strategically important as traditional warfare” and to “Maintain capabilities and capacity so that the Department of Defense is as effective in IW as it is in traditional warfare. . . .”

### Evolving the Force

Evolving a force in a significant new direction is an immense challenge. Fiscal realities, organizational changes, programmatic modifications, and development of new training programs are often met with various forms of institutional resistance. In some cases, institutional process for combat development, manpower, and training and education will need to be amended or replaced with new processes. Consider the Marine Corps experience with changing a constabulary force to an amphibious force in the 1930s. A changed security environment precipitated that shift. I argue that a similar changed security environment today requires a similar significant evolution of the Marine Corps.

Three force development guidelines will help steer the evolution of the force. Taken together, they will help evolve the force into one more poised to meet the demands of the changed security environment

First, *acknowledge that a degree of specialization in the Marine Corps is necessary.* *DoD Instruction 3000.07* added numerous irregular warfare training tasks to the Marine Corps, especially in the areas of foreign internal defense, stability operations, and counterinsurgency—all build partner capacity in orientation. These tasks were simply added to the existing list of tasks across the range of military operations that must be performed to an acceptable standard. It is time to acknowledge that a general-purpose force must have some degree of specialization in order for the force as a whole to have the full range of capabilities required. The range of missions is so broad and the skill sets sufficiently different that attempting to field a force that can move quickly from irregular warfare to conventional warfare seems destined to produce a Marine Corps that is less than adequate in a range

of skills and at some point will simply not be able to accomplish the mission. This is unacceptable for the Nation’s expeditionary force-in-readiness.

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Second, *develop a bona fide irregular warfare capability capable of providing persistent build partner capacity capability in 10 to 20 countries simultaneously.* To do so will require aging the force and a new operational force structural model. In order to be persistently present in 10 to 20 countries for the next 10 to 20 years, the Marine Corps will need to develop an irregular warfare capacity

of approximately 30,000 personnel. It is recommended that the highly successful operational detachment “alpha” team model of 12 multiskilled personnel be used as the start point for the basic operating unit in the necessary organizational realignment. The current ground organization of fire team, squad, platoon, company, battalion, regiment, and division is not an appropriate organizational construct for the persistent build partner capacity missions.

Irregular warfare enabling organizations formed over the past decade, such as the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, Advisor Training Group, Law Enforcement Battalion, and Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, must become part of this newly formed operational force irregular warfare capability. It must become a standing organization within the MEF much as the Special Operations and Training Group (SOTG) is operationally aligned with each MEF.

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In fact, expanding the SOTG to include irregular warfare training is an idea whose time has come.

Third, *maintain a 70,000-man conventional warfare capacity for a major regional contingency.* Doing so will provide combatant commanders with the corps-level Marine force required by the existing war plans.

Taken together, these three recommendations for evolving the force will help propel the Marine Corps in an important new direction and fill a prominent joint force capability gap. Each of these recommendations has significant second and third order effects that require institutional intellect to solve and energy to effect change.

### Conclusion

The Marine Corps must continue to evolve to meet the expanded range of threats and opportunities in the future security environment. While a major combat operation against a nation state remains a difficult military challenge, irregular warfare is the most likely, especially for the next several decades. Global instability and the war on terror present a unique opportunity for the Marine Corps to once again demonstrate its utility across the spectrum of conflict by reorienting a portion of the force to the irregular warfare task of building partner capacity persistently.



**The Corps must evolve in order to meet an expanded range of threats.** (Photo by Cpl Chad J. Pulliam.)

***“We operate throughout the spectrum of threats—irregular, hybrid, conventional—or the shady areas where they overlap. Marines are ready to respond whenever the Nation calls . . . wherever the President may direct.”***

**—35th Commandant’s Planning Guidance 2010**

The uncertain future demands an expeditionary force that can fight and win as part of the Nation’s joint force yet operate in other environments that do not require a large footprint or massive combat power. The Marine Corps must ensure that it continues to field forces that are organized, trained, and equipped, as well as properly balanced to meet the full range of future challenges. How it addresses maintaining competencies in an ever-increasing number of tactical tasks, especially at the persistent engagement end of the range of military operations while maintaining traditional combat capability, will in large measure determine if it remains the Nation’s expeditionary force-in-readiness.

### Notes

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3. The Failed and Failing State Index is published annually since 2005 by the Fund for Peace and the magazine *Foreign Policy*.
4. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for Armed Forces of the United States*, Washington, DC, May 2007.
5. Secretary of Defense, *DoD Instruction 3000.07, Irregular Warfare*, Washington, DC, December 2008.
6. DoD, *DoD Strategic Guidance, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, DC, January 2012, p. 3.
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8. Gates, Robert M., Secretary of Defense, speech delivered at Special Operations Forces International Conference, Tampa, FL, 21 May 2008.
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