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A better way to fight the war on terror / Mobile 'hunter networks' are the right strategy to combat guerrilla fighters

John Arquilla

Published 4:00 am, Sunday, March 28, 2004

The movement of U.S. troops rotating into and out of Iraq is an eye-catching logistical ballet, but the repositioning of U.S. special forces teams around the world merits more attention. In their potential impact on the course of the war on terror, these elite "hunter networks" can better carry the fight directly to al Qaeda and its affiliates, ripping them apart cell by cell.

At this moment, Army Rangers and Green Berets, along with Navy SEALs and Air Force special tactics soldiers, are resuming the offensive begun so well in Afghanistan late in 2001 but abruptly halted by their diversion to Iraq. Freed up again, a year after the fall of Saddam Hussein, some U.S. commandos have already gone back to Afghanistan, where they have had an immediate impact on resurgent Taliban and al Qaeda cadres.

Special forces teams have also been sent to Southeast Asia, several locations in Africa, and a number of other places around the world where reliable intelligence has led them. Everywhere they go, these soldiers are taking the initiative against the terrorists -- capturing, killing, or putting them on the run.

By way of contrast, the 100,000-plus U.S. troops remaining in Iraq are largely on the defensive and have to deal with a hothouse environment for terror. So our garrison suffers under a continuing siege from Shiite and Sunni factions, and from foreign jihadists, including, of course, some al Qaeda fighters.

Al Qaeda must see Iraq as a very useful sideshow that allows it -- with a minimal commitment -- to pin our forces down while resuming the offensive in other corners of the world. Al Qaeda has taken great advantage of our having tied ourselves up in Iraq to mount multiple assaults in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Morocco over the past year. Most recently, in the deadly railway bombings in Spain, al Qaeda showed a sophisticated grasp of the electoral politics of terror, bringing down the government.

Al Qaeda is probably also intent on striking again in the United States before our own general election in November.

But we may still have a chance to preempt al Qaeda's next attacks and force its fighters onto the defensive. We can do this by shifting our focus away from the quagmire in Iraq and keying instead on the other war that we're just starting to fight in earnest: a truly global, special-forces-led campaign.

The soldiers who are blazing the way in this new mode of conflict serve in an organization, the Special Operations Command, that was formed in 1987. They represents less than 5 percent of total service members, and their share of the military budget is an even smaller proportion. Yet just a few hundred of them toppled the Taliban from power after Sept. 11, and a few thousand of them saved Iraq's oil fields and secured the approaches to Baghdad -- among their many other accomplishments in that theater.

Now our special operators face a challenge as daunting as defeating al Qaeda: persuading senior U.S. military leaders to support their unconventional approach to the war on terror. The issue is less one of material support than moral support, as special forces operators are flush with resources for now. What they really need is to know that their concept of operations will be followed in a

sustained way.

The record is not encouraging. In Afghanistan, nimble, networked special operations by a few hundred soldiers gave way, after the Taliban's fall in late 2001, to a balky, hierarchical approach in which thousands of conventional forces engaged in fruitless sweeps for the enemy. The result: in 2002 and 2003, the Taliban and al Qaeda got back on their feet and reasserted control in many parts of the country. A new, close-held U.N. report confirms this, noting that 14 of the country's 22 districts are no longer under government control.

Looking back a bit in our history, one can find similar patterns. During the American Revolution, small teams of guerrilla fighters -- such as those led by Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox" -- gave British regulars absolute fits. Yet Continental Army leaders kept engaging the Redcoats in head-on conventional battles, mostly unsuccessfully. But Lord Cornwallis finally was forced back to Yorktown, where his army was trapped by the French navy, because his force had been exhausted by continual attacks from our irregulars.

In the Civil War, the Confederacy fielded several incomparable, small raiding forces, like those of Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Singleton Mosby. Yet the West Point-educated heads of the Rebel armies brought about their own ruin by insisting on launching massive, straight-ahead offensives that culminated in disasters such as Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, and Hood's suicidal frontal attacks against Sherman's forces that squandered a whole Confederate field army and lost Atlanta.

The Vietnam War started with an emphasis on special operations, but the irregular war conducted by the Green Berets was soon overshadowed by the preference of most of the leadership for waging a "big unit" war. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and a host of generals in the Pentagon insisted this was the proper way to fight in Southeast Asia, but all were soon shown to be tragically wrong.

As in many of our other conflicts, we have largely conventionalized the war on terror. The shift this time is easy to understand, as we are accustomed to having to fight territory-based nations rather than dispersed networks. And we want those who oppose us to mass their forces so that we may destroy them with our overwhelming firepower.

But our strength in conventional operations guarantees that our enemies will fight unconventionally, now and in the future. This is what happened in both Afghanistan and Iraq, where our adversaries fought conventional battles only briefly before shifting to guerrilla warfare. They learned to adjust quickly, as we must.

The question for us now is whether we will continue to fight two different wars on terror. One is costly, conventional and counterproductive. The other taps into and builds upon our deep traditions in irregular warfare. Yet our early history and more recent record of conflict suggest that we will have to work hard to avoid slipping into and staying in a conventional mindset, even though the type of opposition we currently confront should impel us to emphasize an unconventional approach.

Will we find a way out of this trap of our own making? Stay tuned. But don't watch the glitzy movement of hundreds of thousands of troops into and out of Iraq. Instead, keep an eye on the small number of special operators on whom the outcome of this war increasingly depends.

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