

# WHAT BATTLEFIELD LESSONS HAVE WE LEARNED FROM 12 YEARS OF WAR?

*Maren Leed*

Every conflict is a laboratory for the evolution of military operations. Peacetime militaries develop concepts and capabilities to accomplish tasks around a given vision. As soon as peace gives way to conflict, the gaps between concepts and reality become rapidly apparent. Successful organizations, leaders, and technologies adapt, facilitating the emergence of new ways of warfighting.

The last 12 years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq are no different. From the onset of the initial invasion of Afghanistan with special operations teams riding on horseback with the Northern Alliance to complex coalition operations in Basra, U.S. forces have developed new equipment, procedures, doctrine and organizations while continuously engaged with disparate adversaries ranging from former state militaries and narco-traffickers to criminal networks and local insurgents. This has driven numerous areas of major change within the U.S. military, many of which have already had tremendous effects and may be still further enhanced going forward.

Among the most fundamental of these changes is the unprecedented fusion of operational and intelligence information. Rapid advances in computing

and telecommunications technologies enabled U.S. forces to gather intelligence data not just through new or expanded use of sensors on the battlefield (such as blimps and signals intelligence tools), but also through the conduct of routine operations (such as census operations collecting biometric information). Fed in near-real time into networks with unprecedented capacity to process and identify relationships, analysts were able to rapidly generate intelligence relevant not only to the highest levels of strategic command but also to local commanders who, in turn, pushed it down to the appropriate tactical actors. This intelligence was then used to inform new operations, which generated additional intelligence. This adaptation resulted in an operational-intelligence cycle so rapid and effective that, for the first time in U.S. military history, operations were limited by available forces rather than intelligence to usefully guide them.

These processes were pioneered within the Special Operations community, and their full exploitation led to a second major area of change: an enhanced interdependence between Special Operations Forces (SOF) and their conventional counterparts. Whereas previously SOF and conventional forces had little interaction, eventually commanders recognized that their three areas of

**THE QUESTION IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH THESE FEATURES CONSTITUTE A “NEW AMERICAN WAY OF WAR” AND WHETHER THEY TRULY TAKE HOLD AS THE MISSIONS THAT PRECIPITATED THEM FADE.**



focus—high-end terrorist networks for SOF, local insurgents within large civilian populations for conventional forces, and building the capacity of indigenous forces for both SOF and conventional forces—were so intertwined that greater collaboration was an imperative. In some areas, SOF commanders were given responsibility for supporting conventional force units. Even more surprisingly, some conventional commanders assumed command over SOF detachments. This collaboration allowed for the more efficient use of scarce assets like helicopters and medical support, but also increased the sharing of intelligence and lessons learned in linked operational planning, and built relationships and understanding that was previously inconceivable.

A third major advance was in the use of unmanned systems. The most prominent example

is the vast expansion in reliance on aerial drones not only for surveillance but for lethal strikes. In addition, ground forces employed robots to search for improvised explosive devices, and pioneered the use of unmanned helicopters to deliver supplies to remote locations.

In these areas and others, the different military services combined expertise like never before. Naval electronic warfare specialists served on the ground supporting soldiers and Marines, while the Air Force took tools developed for ground operations to the skies. Headquarters became a *mélange* not only of the different branches but of multiple nations and defense and civilian institutions.

The scope and scale of these changes would not have been possible absent the crucible of

necessity. It is important to note, however, that many of these adaptations occurred within the context of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations. While counter-terror missions will persist using a much smaller subset of the force going forward, counter-insurgency is now an explicit area of decreased focus for U.S. defense policymakers. The question, therefore, is the degree to which these features constitute a “new American way of war” and whether they truly take hold as the missions that precipitated them fade.

For example, how could operational/intelligence fusion manifest itself in humanitarian assistance or partner capacity building missions? Are the tools, processes and organizations the same, and if not, will the lessons be forgotten or will new innovations be necessary? As SOF and conventional forces return to a more traditional division of labor, do they continue to exercise with each other and synchronize their activities to ensure relationships and procedures are maintained or expanded? Are unmanned systems integrated even more fully into future operations, or will they be employed in the same manner as they have been in the past?

Irrespective of how the above questions might be answered, progress raises another critical area of potential friction. If these revolutions are fully embraced, they may distance American warfare from that of our allies and friends to such an extent that our vision of a more distributed and collective set of like-minded actors is largely unachievable. Many of the areas of major change were underpinned by technologies, at least some of which the United States may be reluctant to share broadly. If the gap between U.S. capabilities and partner capabilities becomes too great, other countries may become increasingly dependent on the United States, a future directly at odds with our current fiscal path. ►