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2005

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## Evolution of attack / As the insurgency in Iraq shifts its strategy, the U.S. military must become more nimble

John Arquilla

Published 4:00 am, Sunday, August 21, 2005

Over the course of the past two years, a loosely organized and largely leaderless resistance movement has managed to stymie all U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq.

Osama bin Laden has exhorted jihadists to infiltrate the country. His ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has been a kind of terrorist Johnny Appleseed, sowing seeds of armed uprising. But for the most part, the struggle against American occupation has been synchronized and carried out in the absence of any great, guiding military mind.

Instead, a very loose network of Iraqis and foreign fighters has formed and repeatedly demonstrated an ability to identify, and when necessary modify, effective strategies against their highly professional American military opponents. The insurgents have done this through coordination rather than command -- sharing information, strategy and tactics widely among their dispersed cells, often by means of the Internet.

The U.S.-led coalition has found itself pitted against what futurist Howard Rheingold calls a smart mob. A tough one, too.

It began in August 2003 when, over a period of 10 fateful days, resisters first mounted a wave of attacks all around the country on oil pipelines, electric power generators and water filtration systems. These "stuns of August" were capped by the bombing of the U.N. mission in Baghdad that killed its chief, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and drove most nongovernmental organizations out of Iraq for quite a while.

These attacks showed considerable strategic sophistication and made it nearly impossible to swiftly restore the country to any kind of normality.

The inability of coalition forces to prevent such strikes soon led to a deep, growing resentment of the occupation. Opinion polls tell this story: When Baghdad fell to U.S. forces in April 2003, almost half of all Iraqis saw them as liberators. Half a year later -- just two months after the insurgency began in earnest -- only 1 in 6 viewed us this way. By the time of the so-called handover of sovereignty back to the Iraqis on June 28, 2004, the occupiers' favorable rating had fallen to just 2 percent.

While insurgents continued to focus on Iraq's basic infrastructures -- keeping oil production low, power generation spotty and potable water scarce -- their field strategy expanded in 2004 to include a second major element: concerted attacks on the occupying forces. They realized that it was not enough to make life hard for Iraqis. They also had to weaken popular support among the public in foreign countries for sustaining the occupation of Iraq.

In this undertaking, insurgents focused on hitting American forces for the most part, given their much greater numbers among the occupiers.

Deep divisions in the United States over the propriety -- even the legality -- of the war on Iraq implied the possibility that the average

American could soon be made to tire of the conflict, forcing President Bush to order a withdrawal.

This second element of insurgent strategy also proved effective. U.S. forces have suffered more than 1,800 killed and about 14,000 wounded -- some from suicide bombings, but most from homemade explosives. A majority of the American public now thinks that the invasion of Iraq was a mistake.

Al Qaeda affiliates attacked in Madrid in March 2004, driving Spain from the coalition and intimidating several other countries into announcing their intention to withdraw from Iraq.

The apparent success of this aspect of insurgent strategy has prompted our leaders to strive to "Iraqify" the counterinsurgency as quickly as possible. This is a clear, latter-day echo of the quixotic effort to "Vietnamize" the conflict in Southeast Asia three decades ago.

Our effort to create an Iraqi military able to stand on its own feet against the insurgent network has a significant chance of faltering -- much as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam did in 1975. Yet the mere possibility that Iraqification might work prompted the insurgents to introduce yet a third element into their strategy: planning attacks on any and all Iraqis who choose to work with the Americans.

Thus, 2005 has become a year in which the fight against foreign occupiers has morphed, to an increasing extent, into an Iraqi civil war. Right in the midst of our occupation.

From the beginning, the insurgent network in Iraq has articulated a clever strategy and modified it skillfully during the past two years to adapt to changing conditions. All three of its principal components -- strikes on infrastructure, strikes on U.S. forces and strikes on Iraqis -- are aimed at winning by attrition over time, rather than by a single, decisive victory in pitched battle.

But war is the most hazardous and uncertain of all human enterprises, and even a great strategy is no guarantee of victory. This is particularly true in Iraq, where U.S. efforts to counter the insurgency may still succeed -- particularly if we jettison those elements of our strategy that don't work and concentrate fully on what does.

What has not worked for us is the classical military strategy that calls for concentrating huge resources against an enemy's "center of gravity." This way of war may have been right for the duke of Wellington at Waterloo, as well as for Gen. George Patton in Normandy. But it can't succeed against a network that has no "center" to speak of.

So, when Marine Gen. John Sattler said, after the flattening of the city of Fallujah in November, that U.S. forces had "broken the back of the insurgency," he betrayed our conceptual confusion. For in Iraq, there is no back to break.

A proper appreciation of this point should lead us to stop seeking to mass our forces. Instead, we should withdraw most of them from Iraq and redistribute the rest in small packets around the country -- just as the insurgents are dispersed in their own cells and nodes.

In short, we must shift to an attritional strategy that mirrors and at the same time undermines the insurgents' own strategy of attrition.

Reducing our garrison in Iraq -- as Pentagon officials have indicated they would like to do by spring -- will limit the number of targets for improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers, while improving logistics, field mobility and fire support for those who remain. This will allow us to take and keep the initiative against both the indigenous resistance and the foreign fighters who, until now, have been able to control the tempo of the conflict.

It means, as I suggested in Insight in March -- and as seems to be confirmed in recent leaks of classified documents -- that a "third way" has been found between abject withdrawal and sticking stubbornly to an increasingly counterproductive course.

Thus we may stay on in Iraq for some years, but at much lower troop levels. In the political sphere, the withdrawal of very significant numbers of our forces will reassure both the Muslim world and the rest of the international community that we did not come to conquer Iraq. And the return of tens of thousands of our soldiers will shore up morale at home, tamping down some of the bitterness that has arisen in the wake of this unnecessary war.

Going beyond shifting our military strategy to something nimbler and far more networked, much greater reliance should also be placed on negotiations with the insurgents. This has already been tried successfully with the Shiite community in Iraq -- and has been undertaken very tentatively with the Sunnis -- but should be pursued far more vigorously.

Even if we make all the right military and political adjustments, however, we should expect the insurgents to add some new wrinkles to their own game plan. After all, they have shown themselves to be very flexible.

Because our new moves would deal effectively with their strategy of relying on myriad small attacks, my guess is that they would try to shift to planning "spectaculars." Think of the Tet Offensive in 1968, which demonstrated that the communist guerrillas operating in South Vietnam were still a vital force, full of fight. They were defeated tactically, but the very fact that they were able to conduct such an offensive at all undermined support for the war among many Americans.

The insurgents in Iraq may reason that mounting a Tet-like series of attacks now will have a similar effect. While such an offensive would pose daunting challenges to our forces, it would at the same time afford us, at last, the opportunity to come to grips with large numbers of insurgents. Much as U.S. troops effectively destroyed the Viet Cong (but not the North Vietnamese army) as a fighting force in the aftermath of Tet, the Iraqi insurgents could be devastated if they came into the open to do battle.

Another kind of major action might take the form of mass hostage-taking, with the insurgents emulating the example of Chechen fighters who, during the past decade, have attacked the Russians by seizing a hospital in Budennovsk, an opera house in Moscow, and a school in Beslan.

This is just the sort of thing that might appeal to those more inclined toward engaging in acts of pure terrorism, who see in perpetrating such evil the chance to spark a chaotic, climactic war of "all against all" in Iraq. But if we prepare our special mission units ahead of time to respond speedily and skillfully to hostage-taking crises, even this challenge can be mastered. There is also a good chance the vast majority of Iraqis would be so horrified by attempts to engage in such atrocities that support for the insurgency would fracture and slip away.

Right now, though, even without the specter of either a major new offensive or a wave of hostage-takings of Shiites and Kurds, the outcome of the war hangs in the balance.

The insurgents' attritional strategy is working, as it steadily wears down support for the occupation among average Americans, putting pressure on our political leaders to withdraw.

For our part, we have kept far too focused these past two years on conventional, brute-force military solutions. We have played right into insurgents' hands.

So now we must adjust to fight more nimbly, and strive to erode support for the insurgency by negotiating local truces wherever we can and be ready for a swift change in the insurgents' tactics. If we can cultivate this sort of military suppleness, there is still hope of bringing an equitable peace to Iraq.

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