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One word that has emblazoned itself upon our minds over these past three years is "network." In cutting-edge corporations, this loose-knit organizational form encourages and empowers individual freedom of action, but networks have been embraced by terrorists as well.

Al Qaeda has led the way in networking, but it is being emulated by a wide range of other militants, many of whom have become its allies in the current conflict.

These disparate groups are the dark pioneers of an entirely new kind of network-style conflict, "netwar," a concept my Rand Corp. colleague David Ronfeldt and I introduced more than a decade ago. Now we find ourselves in the middle of the first major war that features networks on one side pitted against nations on the other.

And we're not doing very well.

Our biggest problem is that old ways of thinking about war remain dominant. The Pentagon is full of senior officers who still believe that victory is measured primarily in terms of territory and body count. So our responses to the Sept. 11 attacks have been governed by the principle of invading other countries and conducting campaigns that have featured strategic bombing and classical armored maneuvers.

But our enemies easily slipped these punches, so the military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have become bogged down in guerrilla warfare, with neither nation truly being subdued.

In the meantime, al Qaeda and its allies have taken advantage of our failure to focus on their dispersed terror teams. They have struck almost at will across the broad swath of the Muslim world, from Morocco in the west to Mindanao in Asia. Tunisia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Indonesia -- all these countries and others have come under terrorist assault.

Beyond broadening the geographic scope of their attacks, terrorists have also shifted tactics sharply. Instead of Sept. 11-style spectaculars, they have switched to launching dozens of smaller assaults, concentrating their efforts principally on campaigns in Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

The goal of destabilizing these countries reflects some wise strategic thinking on the other side. Each country currently has a pro-U.S. government - - though none has been democratically elected -- and each is vital to our war effort. The overthrow of any one of them would pose grave problems.

In Iraq, al Qaeda has been able to achieve a great deal with just a handful of operatives, as there is already indigenous resistance to American occupation coming from both Sunni and Shi'a factions.

Aside from the steady trickle of casualties inflicted upon U.S. forces, there has also been a sophisticated effort to cripple the country's

infrastructure, with flows of potable water, electric power and oil continually disrupted. A loss here, in what President Bush calls a "central front in the war on terror," would be a sharp blow to American prestige. It would also create a lawless haven from which jihadists could operate freely.

Al Qaeda is fighting all over Pakistan. For now, it is on the defensive in the tribal areas of Waziristan, a wild frontier area that has never been effectively ruled by outsiders. Osama bin Laden is probably still based there, and his followers and local hosts continue to resist Pakistani military incursions vigorously. They have also hotly engaged U.S. forces that have recently mounted some cross-border raids from Afghanistan.

Efforts in Pakistan

Outside the tribal zone, al Qaeda has taken the offensive, perhaps in concert with other Pakistani dissidents. Beyond the usual terror bombings, they have repeatedly tried to kill Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the country's military dictator. If they succeed, al Qaeda-friendly Islamists might take over, and they would inherit Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Saudi Arabia is the third major theater in which al Qaeda is striving to topple an American ally. A civil war has been unfolding there for the past two years, with al Qaeda cadres operating all over the country. Almost all of their attacks have been small-scale, and they have been well distributed among strikes on foreigners living there, Saudi regime supporters and oil infrastructure.

It is ironic that "neocons" in the United States have made this besieged country such a scapegoat for the rise of terror networks. For it is in Saudi Arabia that some of the sharpest fighting against bin Laden has been waged. Given the Saudis' crucial importance to global economic stability, we must hope that they can hang on and should support their fight rather than scorn them.

For a true network like al Qaeda, which empowers all of its small, distributed cells and nodes, there is more than enough capacity to operate well beyond a few major theaters. The network can strike wherever it wishes, for the benefits of attacking almost always outweigh the costs and risks.

It certainly has enough members to continue operating globally, as al Qaeda sent perhaps as many as a thousand fighters out of the country before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. They made their way to the northern Arabian Sea, and many shipped out on friendly merchant vessels that form part of al Qaeda's navy. Their last openly known common destination was in the Comoros Islands, and after stopping there, they shipped in many directions.

Numerical links to 9/11/01

The most dramatic examples of the network's continuing global reach since then have come in two 9/11-style spectaculars. The first was the bloody bombing in Bali, with its 10/12/02 date showing the world numerically that it was a follow-up to the attacks on America. The other major al Qaeda strike came in Spain on 3/11/04, yet another numerical link to 9/11/01. This attack brought down a Spanish government that had been supporting U.S. Iraq policy.

Now, the key strategic question is whether the war will come back to America.

Top government officials warned 10 days ago that al Qaeda may strike before the November election, and terrorists might try for another "Madrid effect" to bring down the Bush government.

If they decide not to strike in America before the election, the mere threat that they might attack will still have a substantial psychological effect. A financial one, too, as the activities associated with raising our alert level can run as high as $1 billion per week, money no longer available for global operations.

Why have al Qaeda and its allies continued to give us such a hard time? Why do they hold the strategic initiative in this war?

These are the questions that I have repeatedly urged our senior leaders to reflect upon. I have suggested to them that our fundamental problem is the failure to realize that this is not just another war. It is history's first "netwar," whose defining characteristic is a global offensive conducted by the small nodes and cells of a widely dispersed network.

Until we build our own network to fight back, attacking their network rather than other nations, we will continue to be caught short

and forced to keep simply reacting to their latest moves.

Given that the U.S. government in general and the Pentagon in particular are the largest, balkiest hierarchies in the world, one might guess that we're having a lot of trouble building our own networks. This would be a good guess. Three years into this war, we're still only thinly networked, primarily in a few sectors of the intelligence community and among our special operations forces.

The U.S. Navy got the message and has created its own Netwar Command. Even this minimal amount of networking has proven effective, as our own few nodes and cells have been hurting al Qaeda in areas of the world that cannot be listed here.

Successful networking

There has also been quite a bit of networking with our various allies, which has led to some good results. For example, cooperation with Singaporean and Malaysian military, intelligence and law enforcement elements led to the pre-emption of a planned truck-bombing campaign aimed at American interests in Singapore. About 50 terrorists were captured.

Another success came when we worked with Spanish and Moroccan authorities to roll up a node of al Qaeda's light naval forces whose intention was to mount speedboat attacks on oil tankers transiting the Strait of Gibraltar. Even the Syrians have worked with us, providing warning in time to thwart an al Qaeda attack on our naval headquarters in Bahrain.

Clearly, it takes a network to fight a network. If there is one over- arching lesson to draw from the terror war thus far, it is that we must move faster to redesign our military, intelligence and law enforcement communities along far more networked lines.

This refers not only to their internal organization, but also to the cross-connections between these departments of government. We must create an environment that measures and rewards institutional power not in terms of the amount of information that is controlled but rather in terms of how much information is shared.

This challenge to re-invent ourselves is as daunting as anything that al Qaeda has thrown at us. But if we can master it and emerge along more networked lines, there is hope of winning this "war to change all wars."