The US Army and Iraq: the Unexpected Transformation, and its Lessons for India

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Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez (Ret.) who occupied posts such as Commander, Combined Joint Task Force-Iraq recently made headlines by condemning the American political leadership's decision-making at almost every level above him for their handling of the Iraq war. Many serving and retired American personnel with experience in Iraq regard General Sanchez as having been just as much of the problem, the product of an institutional short-sightedness that has dominated the United States Army for decades. Yet Iraq is bringing about a rapid transformation in that force, a transformation that is unprecedented in its recent history.

The US Army between 1775 and 1945 was generally a small army that fought small wars with limited resources, swelling up to enormous proportions only for limited periods during titanic struggles such as the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and the two World Wars. Massive downsizing swiftly followed decisive victory in all but one case. These lean, hungry periods for the US Army were not exactly 'peaceful' as noted by military historians like Max Boot, Robert Kaplan and Robert Kagan. There were often any number of conflicts, generally in the Americas, Caribbean, or even as far afield as the Philippines(which included facing martyrdom-seeking Muslim insurgents) and China. These involved threats which could not be defeated purely through force of arms, which in any case the Americans were not in a position to apply. Then as now, mainstream press and liberal opinion at home were extremely sensitive to American casualties, reports of military excesses on the local population, and allergic to any perception of being an occupying and/or exploitative power. Adaptivity, innovation, and a far greater of degree cultural learning were crucial to the US Army's successes in what is currently called "Low Intensity Conflict" (LIC) and “Operations Other Than War” (OOTW).

In that sense the post-WWII era marked a turning point not only for the US Army, but for the United States as a nation - the decision to follow the Soviet example and maintain a large standing army in Europe and East Asia through the Cold War had many profound ramifications. Unlike post-colonial French or British armed forces, the focus of the US Army shifted from a broad spectrum of missions to deterring (by preparing to fight) what would have been World War III.

The military culture of the US Army was transformed from one of great tactical and strategic flexibility to one of exceedingly narrow vision. An army capable of dealing with the entire range of actors and conflicts became a military force fixated on seeking decisive conventional battles to be won with concentrations of overwhelming firepower.

The US Army paid the price for such narrowness a generation later in Vietnam, ignoring the political nature of insurgency in its focus on victory through attrition of the enemy. Sweeps, raids and positional defences such as Khe Sanh brought victory no closer. Instead they played into the Communists' hands producing demoralising images that alternated between the inconclusive (the Lam Son 719 campaign in Cambodia, 1971) and the horrific (the My Lai massacre in May 1968). This kind of enemy-centric approach treated them as a conventional organization, and paid no attention to the insurgents' ability to recoup their losses from a variety of sources. For that matter the Soviet military paid exactly the same price for its own WWII oriented obsessions as seen in its failures in Afghanistan (1979-89), and the first Chechen War (1994-1996). Just as the US Army must share the blame for failure in Vietnam with the Lyndon Johnson Administration, the Red Army had to share the responsibility for its failures with the Brezhnev/Andropov and Yeltsin leaderships.

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It should be noted that the far smaller US Marine Corps (USMC) on the other hand never lost its intellectual capacity to deal with the confusion and messiness of ‘small wars’, which more often than not requires population-centric thinking. In Vietnam wherever they had the lead they placed their focus on programmes like the Combined Action Platoon (CAP). This stationed Marine platoons in Vietnamese hamlets, creating mutual bonds between the troops and the Vietnamese peasants they were supposed to defend. The result was that the Communists were denied the opportunity to take control of the villages, and Americans developed an appreciation for the hardships and needs of the Vietnamese peasant. The average US Army soldier on the other hand remained largely isolated from the Vietnamese he was supposed to be fighting for, dependant not on the local population, but on tactical airpower and artillery. The CAP programme was an outstanding success, with not one village lost to the communists – but the conventional US Army leadership rejected the expansion of USMC and similar US Army Special Forces programmes.

The end of the Vietnam War did not lead to lessons learned for the conventional US Army– instead conventional officers, particularly those from armour and artillery who dominated the service leadership did their best to forget Vietnam. Their reaction was the ‘Powell Doctrine’, which rather than seeking to equip the US Army for similar conflicts in the future instead sought to keep the Army out of them entirely, thereby crippling US readiness for the messiness of reality.

The Gulf War of 1991 with its spectacular successes by conventional US armed forces against Iraqi armed forces (then the fourth-largest in the world) only reinforced such prejudices. The US-Army as a whole adopted the ostrich in the sand like attitude of we-don’t-do-nation-building-or-counter-insurgency, as if American foreign policy gave them the choice. Despite interventions in failed or internally warring states such as Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti, the US Army’s focus remained on fighting the state armies of Iraq and North Korea, simultaneously if need be. The USMC on the other hand stressed concepts such as the ‘Three Block War’ where units might have to simultaneously engage in humanitarian aid giving, peace enforcement and all-out combat anywhere in the world.

There were of course those within the US Army who fought such attitudes tooth and nail, particularly those with a Special Forces background, with the support of the USMC. However the conventional point of view remained dominant in the autumn of 2003 when the US Army faced the emerging Sunni Arab insurgency, centered in Al-Anbar province. Under Major-General (later Lieutenant-General) Sanchez, US forces launched an aggressive response largely comprised of raids, combat patrols and interment of suspects without trial which culminated in the shameful and unproductive dead-end of Abu Ghraib. Such an enemy-centric approach repeated the mistakes of Vietnam, only in the far more volatile and dangerous environment of the Middle East.

Donald Rumsfeld (Secretary of Defence under George W. Bush from January of 2001 to December 2006) although a fan of special operations, and committed to ‘transformation’ in the face of entrenched conventional thinking, was in his own way just as much part of the problem. His emphasis on enemy-centric direct action rather than population-centric ‘hearts and minds’ had more in common with conventional thinking than the Special Operations Forces he championed. Nevertheless for all of Rumsfeld’s destructive dogmatism, he did open the door for change by supporting figures such as David Petraeus and David Kilcullen.

But that is as far as the Vietnam comparison goes tactically and strategically. The US Army, perhaps spurred by a more sensitive American public took one year instead of four, 700 instead of 17,000 lives to
recognize that change was necessary. In the Spring of 2004 the emphasis shifted from pursuing an elusive enemy through aggressive operations (at the cost of alienating Sunni Arabs) to training Iraqi forces, handing over control to Iraqi forces, and limiting US combat operations to a strictly supporting role.

Even this approach suffered from serious problems – poorly vetted and hurriedly trained Iraqi security forces when locally sourced were thoroughly penetrated by insurgents, and the stationing of non-local Iraqi forces faced even more friction than American troops did. Insurgents would take control of population centres from the Iraqi government forces, be cleared out by US troops, who would then hand back to Iraqi forces and the cycle would repeat itself.

By the Winter of 2006-07 with another 2,000 American troops dead, strategy shifted yet again to a truly population-centric approach. This was based on small detachments of US troops that are embedded in communities, attuning them to local security needs and sensitivities, denying militias and insurgents the roles they crave. The US Army, after decades of avoiding the issue has finally adopted an official counter-insurgency doctrine. Company commanders' laptops are now crammed with local sociological information to go alongside the more conventional topographical maps and photos of insurgents on the watch list. Having chats over tea regularly with village and neighborhood community leaders is as important as conducting combat patrols. This approach has paid off in Al-Anbar province which went from being one of the most dangerous provinces in the country to being one of the safest, without the repeat of Fallujah.

In short, the post-1945 ‘conventional’ US Army mindset is in retreat as the institution returns to its roots. It is learning and adapting to the needs of counter-insurgency and nation-building in a manner not seen for over half a century. While the Iraq war itself is unlikely to end happily for the United States of America thanks to the fatal incompatibility of Iraqi and American domestic politics, the de-fossilisation of US Army thinking as seen in the eclipse of figures like Lt. Gen. Sanchez and the rise of figures like Gen. Petraeus is a major development. Defeat in Vietnam (despite a 5-year slump in the mid-late 1970s) directly contributed to the reinforcement of American dominance in conventional warfare. Defeat or at least stalemate in Iraq seems likely to produce a larger, smarter and far more versatile US Army.

There are of course lessons for the Indian Army here in terms of balancing the competing priorities of counter-insurgency and conventional preparedness for inter-state warfare. This is despite the fact that India's post-1947 history has meant that it has never had the luxury of choosing between fighting insurgencies and inter-state wars. However the Indian Army like the US Army faces very serious challenges in recruiting and retention given the dichotomy between the growing, well-compensated private sector job market and the rigours and dangers of active duty amongst persistent insurgencies. The difference is that the Indian Army faces far more serious budgetary shortfalls in its quest for conventional dominance over its enemies. As a result it has been forced to look at ways to reduce its personnel costs in order to free up funds for capital expenditure.

Any cuts in regular Indian forces will have serious consequences. The US Army and USMC today find themselves in a position of intense regret over the halving of their forces as part of the post-Cold War ‘peace dividend’, and are now attempting to incrementally restore that combat manpower at enormous cost (even Sen. Barack Obama, the Democratic ‘peace’ candidate has proposed a troop expansion by 100,000). The inexperienced part-time soldiers of the US Army National Guard have on the whole proved to be inadequate in terms of morale and training when it comes to the uncertainty of the 360-degree insurgent battlefield, just as the Powell Doctrine had intended. The US Army Reserve and USMC Reserve on the
other hand, composed of ex-regulars on the other hand have been very valuable, but as individuals have struggled to manage the costs of going back and forth between civilian and military lives.

Although the major struggles within Indian military culture today have more to do with integration (both civil-military and inter-service) than accepting the reality of non-conventional conflict, the unpalatable truth is that there are no cheap solutions for those who seek to eat their cake and have it too. If the Government of India and the Indian nation want the Indian Army to be capable of both managing internal insurgencies and establishing a capacity for decisive results in regional conflicts, they must maintain military spending at commensurate levels (i.e. above 3% of Gross Domestic Product). Although technology can improve the efficiency of combat service support, sustaining forces in insurgencies while maintaining the upper hand on the border will require both numbers and technology. Without such spending, something will have to be sacrificed at the end of the day.