The Limits of Fourth-Generation Warfare

Putting all of our military force capabilities into the fourth-generation warfare basket is not the answer for success on future battlefields.

by BGen Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., USAF

Long a staple of Marine Corps thinking, the concept of fourth-generation warfare (4GW) is gaining a broader audience. An interesting Microsoft PowerPoint presentation discussing 4GW and the Iraqi insurgency recently surged to viewers beyond the beltway. This presentation complements the publication of Col Thomas X. Hammes’ 4GW book, The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century (Zenith Press, St. Paul, MN, 2004).

Preparing for the Future

4GW defies concise summarization. It is nonlinear, idea driven, and often involves nonstate actors who refuse to abide by the rules of conventional conflict. Hammes describes this “anything goes” style of warfare as using:

... all available networks—political, economic, social and military—to convince the enemy’s political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.

It is a favorite of insurgents, rebels, and other unconventional threats. It could even be the approach of the armies of developing countries.

4GW discussions are a timely reminder of what are actually ancient verities of war. Indeed, there is much to recommend about the theory of 4GW, especially in addressing the current insurgency in Iraq. 4GW proponents are especially “on target” in highlighting the criticality of the psychological dimension of war, that is, the vital importance of truly understanding the adversary’s mindset and what it takes to overcome it.

Unfortunately, popular interpretations of 4GW have significant intellectual—and practical—gaps. For example, in today’s incarnation 4GW is unabashedly hostile to technology. This is a deviation from its original construct and out of line with the view of its more thoughtful adherents today. Thus, some 4GW thinking has great potential to be misused and misunderstood as the United States’ over-reliance upon technology. We need to consider this carefully, especially since Americans (airmen in particular, as the late military analyst and author Carl Builder was wont to note) can become overly enamored with technology for technology’s sake. That said, one of the quotes you won’t see in this or any 4GW presentation, and one to consider along with the critiques of technology, is that of historians Ronald Haycock and Keith Neilson. They ominously warn that military technology has the nasty habit of permitting “the division of mankind into ruler and ruled.” Trivializing the role of technology in war can be catastrophic.

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Polish cavalrymen learned that when facing German Panzers and Stukas at the outset of World War II.

Absent a disciplined approach, 4GW analysis becomes an exercise in planning to “fight the last war,” which is, from a strategic perspective, the current insurgency in Iraq. As important as it is to succeed in Iraq, we ought to be very careful about allowing 4GW proponents to dramatically reorder our entire defense establishment to address today’s threat at the expense of failing to prepare to meet tomorrow’s most dangerous possible peril—a powerful peer competitor like China.

In truth, nothing Iraqi insurgents (or, frankly, even al-Qaeda terrorists) can do could threaten the continued survival of the United States as a free country. It is true that extremely grievous harm might be inflicted by them—and we must work to prevent that—but inflicting truly fatal harm is only a possibility for a peer competitor with a major, high-tech military capability (along with a significant inventory of nuclear weapons, not just one or a handful).

Examining Required Capabilities

As we look to the future, there will likely be situations where all we want or need to do to an adversary is to destroy his physical capability to project military power. 4GW advocates seem to think that we will always be in the “defeat and nation-build” mode. Actually, remaking/rebuilding societies may very often not be on our agenda in future conflicts. Frankly, the notion of occupying an opponent’s territory and remaking his political/cultural system may not be feasible or even particularly desired under many circumstances. We will never wish, for example, to occupy any portion of any of the nations that may become military peer competitors in the 21st century. Protecting ourselves from their force projection potential may completely satisfy our objectives.

To the untutored and shortsighted, exposure to 4GW aficionados could lead to an assumption that all security problems are solvable by some amalgam of the Marine Corps and special forces (a view I doubt is actually shared by those forces or, for that matter, the more thoughtful analysts of 4GW). Regardless, as important as those capabilities are, they (or some combination of them) could not alone stop an authentic peer competitor bent on our destruction as a viable political entity.

The reality is that it takes decisive quantities of dominating weaponry along with well-trained warfighters from across all of the military Services to stop the kinds of forces that
could really jeopardize the existence of the United States as anything we would recognize today. As terrific as the Marine Corps is and as talented as the special forces community is, I suspect that military planners of potentially hostile nations, like Soviet planners before them and Iraqi insurgents today, find them difficult but confrontable opponents.

Though it is an anathema to 4GW zealots, what actually inflicts despair and hopelessness upon the minds of adversaries these days is overwhelming dominating weapons. It is being attacked by systems against which the most hardened and dedicated warfighters are helpless. Yes, I am talking about things like the F/A-22 and the Joint Strike Fighter, that is, weapons that can dictate who lives and who dies on tomorrow's battlefields. Such capabilities can hold at risk every object they value in their society. And though it is faddish in the think tank circles to conclude otherwise, it is actually silly to suggest that the "ideas" and "culture" of a society—especially one with ideologically driven opponents very often have valued touchstones in material objects.

It is the array of high-tech, uniquely American weaponry that causes our potential peer competitors to know that achieving their objectives by force is simply not obtainable within their lifetimes. In truth, it is the inability to control the air, not any number of ground forces, however skilled, that wakes them up at night in a cold sweat. And it is not just airpower; it is the insurmountable gap in the quantity and quality of U.S. ballistic missile and attack submarines. And before we start tossing out so-called "legacy" systems against which they are completely helpless. Warfighters like to say that the enemy "always gets a vote" as to whether a combat operation succeeds. What American technology can do in many instances is to literally disenfranchise the adversary. The Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan were just as tough and determined as the mujahideen who successfully fought the Russians. What proved to be decisive was the ability to hold at risk Soviet military aviation with the help of U.S. Stinger missiles. That circumstance did not exist in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

The emergence of extremely accurate joint direct attack munitions and other precision technology changed things radically. They enabled the application of precise combat power from beyond the range of any defensive weapon. This development did not just physically destroy enemy forces; it crushed their will to fight. There is nothing like a feeling of total vulnerability to undermine fighting spirit.

Force majeure—Napoleon's "big battalions" so to speak—sounds antiquated, but thousands of years of military history prove otherwise. In 21st century conflicts, "mass" ought to be defined by deliverable combat power, not numbers per se. And it is ludicrous to suggest that high technology does not create deliverable combat power in distinctively effective ways.

In 21st century warfare, control of the air and sea mediums will, more than anything else, eliminate the force projection capabilities/possibilities/hopes of potential adversaries. The ability to exercise that control is essential—and irreplaceable—to safeguarding the U.S. homeland in the coming years.

*A winner! This is one of the finest small unit histories to come out of Vietnam or any other war [and] a real contribution to the history of Naval aviation."—John E. Guilmartin, Jr., author of A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang

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