

Briefing Memo

Iraq Troop Surge of 2007 and the U.S. Civil-Military Relations

KIKUCHI Shigeo

Chief, 7th Research Office, Research Department

The Shift in the Iraq Strategy and Revival of Counterinsurgency Operations

Since the shift in the Iraq strategy in January 2007 and the subsequent “Surge” in U.S. troops there, the security situation in the country improved dramatically. Iraq, once said to be “on the verge of civil war,” got back on track to reconstruction. When the Surge was announced, the very act of sending additional troops to Iraq itself grabbed the spotlight in the already war-wary United States. However, what is really important is the way the additional troops were to be used. Until then, under the U.S. policy to accelerate transfer of the responsibility for maintenance of security to the Iraqi forces, the U.S. military operations focused on the killing and capture of armed insurgents. Since the sustained protection of local population was not a priority, after completing operations in urban areas, U.S. troops quickly returned to large forward operating bases in the suburbs. With U.S. troops gone back to bases, the local population was exposed to threats from armed insurgents again, and public security, even if temporarily restored during U.S. operations, did not last. However, after General David H. Petraeus assumed command of the Multi-National Force-Iraq in February 2007, U.S. military operations began to pay greater heed to the protection of local population. U.S. troops once stationed in large military facilities, often called Super FOBs, flooded into the streets of Baghdad and manned much smaller security stations 24/7. Consequently, the number of terrorist attacks as well as civilian tolls declined dramatically, and the security situation in Iraq as a whole improved significantly.

Behind the dramatic change on the ground, there was a self-reflective process, where some in the U.S. military tried to understand and correct the mistakes committed by themselves in Iraq. In particular, the U.S. military came to recognize that counterinsurgency (COIN) operations would not be workable unless security of the local population is guaranteed. This recognition was reflected in the *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, jointly published by the Army and the Marine Corps in December 2006. After Gen. Petraeus became commander of the Combined Arms Center (CAC), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, responsible for the Army’s doctrine development, the work to prepare *FM 3-24* went ahead with his deep personal commitment. After a draft manual was worked out, Petraeus convened a workshop to critique it in February 2006. He invited not only specialists within the military but also from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the State Department, academia,

journalists and the humanitarian community. Their comments were reflected in the final manual.

FM 3-24 points out the “Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations,” some of which sound “counterintuitive to the traditional U.S. view of war.” For example, it states that COIN operations can expect greater success when U.S. troops are deployed in small units to provide constant protection to the populace rather than confining themselves to large-scale bases for the sake of force protection; and that the more force is used, the less effective it will be, increasing collateral damage among residents and undermining legitimacy. As Thomas Ricks of the *Washington Post* points out, the manual “was both a devastating criticism of the conduct of the Iraq war and an outline of the approach Petraeus might take there if ever given the chance.”

Upon release in December 2006, *FM 3-24* became a hot topic for media coverage and also captured keen public attention. Just one month after the manual went on the websites of the Army and Marine Corps, there were over 1.5 million downloads. In 2007, the University of Chicago Press (not AUSA!) published it for the general readership.

How the Vietnam “Lessons” were Interpreted

In fact, problems that confronted the United States in Iraq were what it had experienced some forty years before. In the Vietnam War, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), particularly the Army, that provided the bulk of the fighting force, conducted division-level “search and destroy” operations with the belief that they could annihilate guerrillas with their overwhelming firepower and mobility. It paid little heed to the protection of the population from guerrilla attacks. However, guerrillas learned to avoid direct contact with the superior American troops, and they just came back to fill the vacuum after Americans returned to their bases. It is true that the MACV put into place Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, geared toward population security, rural development and winning the hearts and minds of local population in the latter part of the war, but that effort was not enough to reverse its outcome. Then, the question arises: Why did the U.S. military, in particular the Army, repeat the same mistake?

In the 1970s, with the Vietnam War coming to a bitter end, the Army “re-discovered” the Soviet threat, focusing attention to building capabilities to defeat Soviet aggression on the Fulda Gap. At the newly created Training and Doctrine Command, under its first commanding general, Gen. William E. DePuy, the Army proceeded with the development of a doctrine focusing on such capabilities. These efforts came to fruition in the form of the AirLand Battle (ALB) doctrine published in 1982. Inspired by this process, the U.S. Army activated internal studies on theater-level operational arts, again assuming Europe as main battlefields, and also carried out training reforms for implementing the ALB doctrine and introduced new equipment such as M-1 *Abrams* main battle tanks and AH-64

Apache attack helicopters. All these efforts contributed to the U.S. victory in the Gulf War of 1991. During this period, meanwhile, the Army literally discarded resources on its experiences in Vietnam, particularly COIN operations. Papers were shredded, and relevant lecture programs disappeared from the curriculum of Army service schools. As retired Gen. Jack Keane, former vice chief of staff of the Army, who after retirement got deeply involved in the shift of the Iraq strategy, pointed out, “After the Vietnam War, we (the U.S. Army) purged ourselves of everything that dealt with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war” (*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, April 18, 2006).

The desire to avert a second Vietnam was shared by the American public, and the shift to Europe reflected the trend in overall U.S. defense policy. It also mirrored the U.S. military’s particular set of internal circumstances that in order to rebuild the Army, which was badly bruised in the Vietnam War, it was considered necessary to assign the Army to a duty that everyone could understand (that is, beating back possible Soviet invasion in Europe) and provide its members with a sense of purpose. On the other hand, however, the U.S. Army was able to forget its experiences in the Vietnam War and shift its focus to Europe because of, in the first place, the military’s perception that the blame for the failure in the Vietnam War should be placed entirely on the civilian leadership.

Harry G. Summers, Jr., an Army colonel then serving at the U.S. Army War College, completed a study in which he pointed out that the Vietnam War was not COIN operations but a conventional war against the North Vietnam, and criticized President Lyndon B. Johnson and other civilian leaders for restraining direct attacks on North Vietnam and forced the military to conduct COIN operations. Summers further argued that the rapid loss of popular support for the Vietnam War within the United States after the 1968 Tet Offensive came because President Johnson failed to make sufficient effort to gain it in the first place. Being urged by Gen. Edward “Shy” Myer, then Army chief of staff, Summers published his study in a book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* in 1982. Summers’ work had shaped the views many of the service members had toward the Vietnam War. Particularly, his arguments, which capture the Vietnam War entirely as a conventional war, helped to make it psychologically easier for the post-Vietnam military to accept the fact that they had concentrated on the immediate Soviet threat, while neglecting to draw proper lessons from the successes and failures they had made in the war.

Moreover, the perception that defeat in the Vietnam War was not only attributable to the arrogance and mistakes of Johnson and McNamara and their civilian lieutenants, but also to the military’s failure to stand up against them, was widely accepted among service members as the most important lesson of Vietnam. The bible for those who subscribe to these views is *Dereliction of Duty*, a book by then-Major (now Brigadier General) H.R. McMaster, published in 1997. In the bestselling book,

McMaster, the hero of the Battle of 73 Easting, argued that the Joint Chiefs, while knowing that the war policies Johnson and McNamara were pursuing were wrong, failed to challenge them. And this “dereliction of duty” led to the ill-fated war in Vietnam.

These widely shared perceptions allowed the military officers not to critically examine COIN operations in Vietnam to come up with ideas for better enabling themselves to deal with future Vietnam-like conflicts, with a few notable exceptions. And based on their interpretation of the history that the U.S. military had to fight the Vietnam War with a hand tied back, military officers came to believe that the next time they ever had to go to war, it had to satisfy certain conditions they prescribed (called the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine), and that it was up to them to insist on the civilian leaders to accept them.

Implications for the U.S. Civil-Military Relations

The blame game over Iraq was a repetition of the one we saw after the Vietnam War. More specifically, the blame for the difficulties in Iraq was exclusively placed on civilian leaders, most notably former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, and among a handful of military men bearing the brunt of criticisms was Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. Central Command, who commanded the war against Iraq, but in the context that Gen. Franks and some other military leaders adulated Secretary Rumsfeld. Like in the Vietnam War, the main blame for the failure in Iraq was put on civilian leaders. On the other hand, little attention was paid to the military’s “failure,” as *Newsweek* pointed out, “It is amazing to see that the military has received little criticism for its actions in Iraq despite all of the recriminations over the situation there” (*Newsweek*, January 22, 2007).

However, Gen. Petraeus and his team, who had hands-on experience in Iraq critically reviewed the U.S. military operations in Iraq, results of which were reflected in *FM 3-24*. This fact is of great significance for the U.S. civil-military relations in the sense that it represents a powerful counterargument against the widely-accepted view that the failure in Iraq should be blamed entirely on Secretary Rumsfeld and his associates.

But this does not put an end once for all to the controversy over failure or success in Iraq. In particular, it should be noted that some including active duty officers stepped forward with the views that the improvement in the security situation in Iraq has been brought about by factors other than the Surge and the new Iraq strategy, and that the U.S. military already adapted itself to the situation in Iraq before the Surge. These assertions are counterarguments against the view that the military is at least partly responsible for the failure in achieving stability in Iraq, advanced by the proponents of the Surge. They can be put into a larger context of ongoing controversy over the future of the U.S

military, particularly on whether the U.S. forces should be optimized for “irregular warfare” or should remain ready to fight major conventional wars. The arguments described above, are also related to the concern that the U.S. military is overly biased toward irregular warfare, with its capabilities to fight conventional wars being seriously eroded. In other words, these assertions are implying that since the U.S. forces are fit to engage in COIN operations in the first place, thus they do not need to veer toward COIN operations anymore. Needless to say, they have already drawn fire from the camp that gives particular weight to COIN operations.

Against the backdrop of the changes being introduced into the U.S. military force structure by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, the fight over the “next war” is also heating up; the story of failure or success in Iraq has not yet become history. (Written on June 1, 2009)

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Planning and Coordination Office, The National Institute for Defense Studies
Telephone: 03-3713-5912
Fax: 03-3713-6149
E-mail: nidsnews@nids.go.jp
Website: <http://www.nids.go.jp>