The Fourth Block

Krulak in the Information Age

by 1stLt Mitchell Gunter

If Gen Charles C. Krulak were to write his quintessential "Three Block War" today, the focus of his demands would undoubtedly be different. Any thoughts on developing strategic noncommissioned officers would be ballasted in light of the sheer technological disadvantage that the Marine Corps—as an expeditionary warfighting institution—has quietly accepted and done little to change.

The Fourth Block

In January 1999, the concept of a Three Block War was introduced by the Gen Charles C. Krulak. Spanning three notional blocks and covering a range of activities from humanitarian aid to peace-keeping operations to traditional warfighting, his vision called for the development of "strategic corporals." Influenced by lessons learned in the tensions of the Cold War, bloodshed in unconventional engagements in Africa, and a growing sense of an impending global competition, Gen Krulak called for the development and maintenance of a strategically minded noncommissioned officer corps to guide the Marine Corps into the next conflict.

However, if Gen Krulak were to walk the three blocks of his warfighting parable today, he would find it strikingly different than when he left it in early 1999. Today, draped in 5G cellular internet and canvassed in 24/7 hi-definition video surveillance, there is now a fourth block. While three physical blocks remain, a fourth dimension has been layered onto each of the original problems in Gen Krulak's metaphor. His call for the development of strategic corporals has been replaced with an unanswered requirement for data conscious leaders at all levels.

In the time that has passed since Gen Krulak penned his article for *Marines*

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Magazine in 1999, an almost unimaginable shift has occurred in the world. The introduction of modern computing and a globally available internet connection has fundamentally redesigned the way that we not only conduct war, but exist as human beings in an interconnected, live-streamed, and constantly surveilled world. To the original point, Krulak's Three Block War has since been renovated. This fourth block, comprised of omnipresent technologically-based surveillance, data-enabled

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predictive analysis, and computational capacity a trillion times more capable than in the early 2000s, has added unforeseen complexity to the original problem sets of this foundational article. This additional data-centric dimension and our institutionalized inability to establish informational dominance within it violates the very purpose of the Corps.

The original objectives of each block within Gen Krulak's metaphor remain unchanged. The Marine Corps—embodied by a young Cpl Hernandez—

must retain its ability to render humanitarian aid, conduct peacekeeping operations, and, most importantly, conduct traditional warfighting. However, in the age of omnipresent digital surveillance and internet-based information access, the implied tasks required to meet these objectives have changed significantly.

Cpl Hernandez's responsibility to traverse Krulak's three blocks is no longer as simple as manning an observation post and managing the flow of pedestrian traffic. Today, in a data-enabled environment, Cpl Hernandez must now contend with angry crowds of unarmed citizens convinced of his colonizing intent by malicious Russian disinformation campaigns. Cpl Hernandez must patrol the city and conduct peacekeeping operations all while under the silent surveillance of Chinese funded smart-city infrastructure. Identified by AI enabled facial recognition, measured by hundreds of internet-connected devices, and psychologically profiled using data sold by data-brokerage companies operating in the United States, Cpl Hernandez will not be the victim of a complex ambush in the streets of this African city. His family, however, will receive targeted "deepfake" videos of his fabricated execution, their shared bank accounts drained by cyber-personas equipped with knowledge from personal communications, and his personal information broadcasted to the World Wide Web at large. Further, Cpl Hernandez will not even make it to Krulak's third block.

After six months of rendering humanitarian aid to an uncooperative, disinformation polarized population, Cpl Hernandez will likely be sleeping three decks deep in the amphibious readiness group's LHD when hypersonic Chinese carrier-killer missiles

What is the Corps doing to prepare today's "strategic corporals" to succeed in the information environment? (Photo by LCpl Samuel Brusseau.)

cripple ARG shipping in response to deteriorating diplomatic conditions in Taiwan, kinetic maritime disputes in the South China Sea, or any number of other unpredictable escalations around the world. Under a silent, unseen, and unpredictable barrage of precision munitions moving upwards of five times the speed of sound, Cpl Hernandez will likely not have time to comprehend his failure to conduct a four-block war.

No Sanctuary

There is no sanctuary for an antiquated Marine Corps on this fourth block of modern warfare. All efforts to redesign the force and reestablish a sense of naval integration will be wasted unless the Marine Corps and the DOD first prioritize the strategic objective of dominating the information environment. There will be no littoral operations in a contested environment if we cannot defend ourselves or our C2 assets in cyberspace. There will be no "force in readiness" if the entire force has been subjected to technical surveillance and psychological warfare at the individual level. There cannot be expeditionary advanced base operations without leveraging big-data enabled operational security measures. Any divestiture leveraged to create investments in a "force redesign" will be wasted unless the re-

design includes significant allocations of personnel and resources to information operations.

The weapons of the next war do not resemble the platforms of the past. Incongruous with our design-use-upgrade acquisition process, the requirements of the next major conflict include significant investment and innovation in currently nonexistent capabilities such as data analytics and the weaponization of information related capabilities. By choosing to allocate resources, personnel, and innovation to the renovation of antiquated platforms, we— the Marine Corps—have chosen the low ground and embraced technological disadvantage in the impending four-block war. Gen Krulak would be ashamed to find that our innovation of military operations in this newfound "Information Age" has primarily consisted modernization kits to previous weapons and transport platforms, updated doctrinal publications, and marginal shifts to secondary MOSs within the new Information Related Capabilities.

If the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2016 Russian disinformation campaign against the U.S. presidential election, or the rampant and uncontrolled spread of weaponized misinformation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic are any indicator, the United States—and

specifically the Marine Corps—has not been, nor is it now, prepared to "fight tonight" in the data-enabled world. If we as a warfighting institution cannot even guarantee the operational security of our elements operating within our borders, we stand little to no chance of success while operating abroad. Threats of psychological warfare amplified by psychoinformatics, artificial intelligence enabled simulation, and computational psychologists alone pose significant risks to our power projection abroad. In the information space, the Marine Corps is exclusively reactionary. We lack resources, innovation, and desire to compete with our peer competitors who have long since accepted and invested in the conduct of shaping operations in the information environment. Where our enemies have accelerated their kinetic capabilities using information operations enabled targeting cycles, we have chosen to maintain aging systems and processes based on a seemingly institutionalized inertial force.

Conclusion

Perhaps unironically, the solution to this four-block war rests in the hands of Cpl Hernandez. The youngest and least seasoned of our ranks may yet be our saving grace. Raised entirely in an internet connected world, the "netgeneration" of our ranks are technologically the most fluent. These junior Marines are the most adaptable to the change that must come in order for the Marine Corps to fight the next war, the war of the future. However, in order to do this, the Marine Corps as an institution must provide itself with the ability to adapt. At a minimum, there must be increases in funding to data-analytics, the modern employment of the information-related capabilities like psychological operations and military deception, and a ruthless shift towards operational security in a data-enabled world.

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