

# The Strategic Skills

A long-term effect of the Global War on Terror

by Capt Samuel Rinaldo

**L**aunched by President George W. Bush during a time of extreme emotion in the United States, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) brought into question many facets of conventional military strategy. Used as the umbrella for the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as many less well-known operations in places like Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines, the actual term fell out of vogue under President Obama and has not been resurgent under the current administration. There are, however, a host of vestiges from earlier years of the GWOT that are detrimental to forming new and adaptive strategies.

In the *2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, Secretary Mattis laid out a clear framework for the future of the DOD. In it, he focused heavily on the threats posed by nation-state actors: revisionist China, resurgent Russia, ascendant Iran, and unpredictable North Korea.<sup>1</sup>

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Alongside these threats stood asymmetric violent extremist of all forms and banners. While previous strategies have acknowledged each of these threats, the change in 2018 came with the prioritization of new strategies, technologies, and tactics for countering the very real threat of state actors. In essence, it flips the previous strategy on its head. The significance for the Marine Corps is that the new way forward is increasingly focused on strategic capabilities, which the Marine Corps lacks organically and struggles to integrate. Many Marines should expect that the Corps will do what it has always done and craft a novel and adaptive strategy to

meet a changing environment. Marines have done this time and time again—most recently with counterinsurgency in Iraq and information operations in Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency and information operations, though, had the Marine Corps' almost undivided attention. At every level, innovators wanted a piece of the fight. Lance corporals and generals were equally enthralled by the challenges that Iraq and Afghanistan offered. Can it honestly be said that the same zeal is being applied to the strategic threats of Russia and China? Are Marines fighting tooth and nail to get on the next unit deployment program to the Pacific theater and counter Chinese threats to Taiwan? If you pose the question to an average lance corporal or second lieutenant who has never deployed before, how likely do you think it would be for them to choose a training exercise in Norway over combat in Helmand Province?

Some of these problems are out of the Marine Corps' control. For example, it may not be possible to make training exercises or presence operations more appealing than advising and assisting in a combat zone. There are also some things that are above the level of the Service and must be handled by the DOD, but for which the Marine Corps can advocate. Some of these high-level actions are symbolic, like getting rid of the GWOT and GWOT Expeditionary Medals. Others are more substantive, like diverting to better uses the funds squandered on Combat Zone Tax Exclusions for parts of the world that are safer than the United States (Qatar comes to mind).<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of this problem must be solved internally by Marine Corps leaders at all levels. The Service needs to take a deliberate look at how its culture fails to address the root issues.



*Even while deployed, Marines' training may not be focused on operational requirements. (Photo by Cpl Michael Lockett.)*

**Transparency**

While a lack of transparency in the military has been building since the end of the Vietnam War, the slow burning and secretive conflicts that characterize America’s actual hot battlefields have been a perfect incubator. The combination of an ever-increasing reliance on special operations forces and sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance has put a virtually impenetrable wall around U.S. military operations. The American public often first hears about its military’s involvement in a country when something goes wrong (Yemen and Niger stand out).<sup>3</sup> Not only is the American public blocked from accessing information on how the military is spending tax money and human lives, even critical decision makers in the U.S. government are unclear what the military is doing. Such was the case last fall when members of a Congressional Panel focused on ship-building announced to an entire conference that he had not heard a thing regarding Marine Corps’ plan for the South Pacific and how it intended to employ amphibious operations in a strategic conflict.<sup>4</sup> This lack of transparency has two important impacts for Marine Corps culture. First, it fails to keep junior Marines and



*Major exercises are where Marine rehearse and demonstrate capabilities for major theater war. (Photo by Lt Adam Cole.)*

leads to unmet expectations and cognitive dissonance in their first term.

Transparency within the Marine Corps has everything to do with an operations mindset. Readiness has become for many commands either an end unto itself or so abstract in its meaning that the average Marine has little understanding of their role beyond turning wrenches on seven-tons or making sure they finish Tobacco Cessation

They expected to fight insurgencies, and they believed the priority for the DOD was USCENTCOM. More often than not, they found this to be true. With certain exceptions, the Marine Corps poured the lion’s share of its resources into Iraq and then doubled down on Afghanistan after 2010. This reflected the Department’s priority, as demonstrated by the appointment of the military’s best and brightest to leadership roles at USCENTCOM, USSOCOM, or commanding combined U.S. and Coalition commands in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marines became disillusioned during this period as the result of an unsustainable operational tempo, the uncertain motives behind these operations (particularly Iraq), and many factors common across all periods of the Marine Corps’ existence. Marines mostly got what they signed up for, however, and this is a key distinction. A Marine who gets burned out deploying for two or more years out of a four-year contract still has valuable skills to pass on to the next generation, even if they leave the Service. A Marine who spent their whole contract chasing exciting assignments but peaked with a simulated beach landing during Trident Juncture is significantly less likely to value their experience and pass it on. These exercises, though, are supposed to be the foundation on which our military strategy is built; they are the venue in, which we both demonstrate

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young officers informed at even a basic level of what the rest of the Corps is doing. If Marines are not even aware of what the Special Purpose MAGTFs or MEUs are doing when they deploy, how can they understand what it means to be a Marine in today’s military? Second, it hands the narrative to overblown recruiting advertisements as well as action movies and television shows. Pop culture feeds recruits and candidates a consistent stream of misrepresentations about the nature of the Marine Corps and today’s security environment, which

training in time to secure for Christmas liberty. Despite the series of outstanding initiatives currently underway—more face-to-face annual training, the Battle Skills Test, and quarterly innovation challenges to name a few—there is still a persistent focus to only become aware of operational priorities in the weeks leading up to a unit deployment.

These problems are real and detract from focus needed to sufficiently address rising strategic threats. In the mid-2000s, newly joined Marines expected to deploy to Iraq, Afghanistan, or both.

and rehearse the skills needed to fight and win a major war.

Today, newly joined Marines still expect to fight ISIS or the Taliban. The archetypal enemy of the United States in the mind of the average teenager is still the “terrorist.” That title lacks even the nuanced distinction from domestic insurgencies, which is almost certainly lost to the average 17–22-year-old. They are highly unlikely to place Russian influence campaigns in the Baltic States as a higher national security priority than fighting al-Shabaab. Moreover, you would be hard pressed to find one more motivated to participate in theater security cooperation with Estonians than support SOF in Somalia. If their recruiter hooked them with personal experiences, they were probably more likely to be stories of patrolling in Afghanistan than the account of a port call in Spain.

### Experience

If there is an expiration date on the bait-and-switch, it will probably be followed quickly by the expiration date of combat veterans in the Service. The Marines who were there to break ground in Iraq and Afghanistan are rapidly approaching retirement, and the bulk of combat veterans in the Service cut their teeth at the small unit level, fighting in operations where the battalion or company were operationally critical. More and more, expertise stays at the small unit level while there is not a single person who has practical experience employing a MEF against another nuclear power.

The experiences and nature of the recent conflicts has fundamentally shifted how commanders dedicate their time. If one looks at any daily brief, for example, the highest scrutiny is seen applied to platoon and squad level operations. The removal of individual fighters from the battlefield reaches the attention of four-star commanding generals—isolated small arms events have the potential to shift national level resources. If the Marine Corps were forced to fight a near-peer adversary, it would require a massive departure from current operations. It would be much more than “scaling-up” the MAGTF. Significant changes in both top-down direction



**Marines focused on fighting “terrorists” may not be suited to theater security cooperation in the Baltic.** (Courtesy photo U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. Sixth Fleet.)

and bottom-up refinement would need to occur that have not existed in the current generation of Marines.

The GWOT has groomed leaders to be accustomed to knowing everything there is to know about how their forces are operating in the field. For over a decade, there has been a laser focus on the small unit level and an internalization of “micro-strategy” as senior officers make more and more tactical decisions. Without the experience of making actual strategic decisions, there would be a steep learning curve in the early stages of an interstate conflict.

The intrusion of senior leaders into the tactical space has bred small unit leaders who are increasingly reliant on external capabilities. There are the standard examples, such as SATCOM, which can be denied in a near-peer fight, but there are also institutionalized processes that would be even more difficult to overcome. For example, Marine Corps intelligence has an almost exclusively tactical focus. Redundant organizations from the MEF-level to Marine Corps Intelligence Activity tout their ability to provide tactical reachback support, but any mention of higher-level analysis is conspicuously absent from the conversation. This is not just a Marine Corps problem, either. Organizations across the DOD have been quick to “support the warfighter,”

whether or not that support replicates what they could do for themselves with a little training. This support comes at a cost, and more often than not strategic intelligence is the first to be cut. Ultimately, the GWOT has made tactical units reliant on strategic resources, while conditioning strategic resources to fulfill tactical requirements.

Before the Marine Corps can address strategic security issues, it must first divest itself of the GWOT and the post-2001 conflicts. In order to gain the necessary skills and experience across the institution, there must be an admission that the service is behind the power curve.

### Notes

1. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
2. Information for Global Peace Index is available at <http://visionofhumanity.org>.
3. Staff, “The Military Doesn’t Advertise It, But US Troops Are All Over Africa,” *NPR*, (April 2018), available at <https://choice.npr.org>.
4. Information regarding Expeditionary Warfare Conference, Congressional Panel, 16 October 2018 is available at <http://www.ndia.org>.

