

OPINION

In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued that the United States must be prepared to fight 'irregular' wars such as counter-insurgencies and to win the peace during post-conflict stability operations.

"The US needs a military whose ability to kick down the door is matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterward," Gates stated.

One set of tools uniquely applicable to such irregular types of operations – non-lethal weapons – has not been fully integrated into the warfighter's toolkit.

Non-lethal weapons are intended to incapacitate personnel or materiel while minimising casualties and collateral property damage. Their use could help bridge the gap between hard power and soft power in a way some have described as 'smart power'.

Efforts to expand the use of non-lethal capabilities by the armed forces have met with resistance, even among the uniformed services whose missions might be better achieved with alternatives to the use of lethal force.

Much like an Allen wrench that sits in a toolbox unused because the owner does not understand when to use it, non-lethal weapons are viewed as specialised capabilities poorly suited to volatile environments where deadly violence is commonplace.

Given the culture and training of the military, reluctance to use weapons that are designed not to kill is understandable. However, Gates correctly warns that "over the long term, the US cannot kill or capture its way to victory".

Future conflicts will require US forces to maintain security and stability. US Department of Defense (DoD) guidance now explicitly calls stability operations "a core US military mission" with "priority comparable to combat operations".

There is a growing recognition that non-lethal weapons provide useful capabilities for dealing with unconventional contingencies.

The DoD's 2005 Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support recommended greater investment in non-lethal weapons capabilities. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review noted their potential role in the 'war on terror' and counterproliferation, while the Pentagon's 2008 Guidance for the Development of the Force acknowledged their utility for irregular warfare, for combating weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and for homeland defence.

So what accounts for the reluctance to integrate non-lethal weapons more broadly into the military?

Some believe that non-lethal technologies, especially advanced directed-energy technologies like the Active Denial System, are

Non-lethal weapons: the right tools for the job



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Non-lethal weapons, described by some as 'smart power', can help bridge the gap between hard and soft power, write David J Trachtenberg (left) and William E Malone

insufficiently mature or may have dangerous long-term human effects. Others believe there are legal or treaty issues that increase the risks associated with their use.

Most importantly, the military is unaccustomed to training with and using non-lethal weapons and does not fully appreciate their potential benefits, especially in urban environments and complex coalition operations with international partners.

The military is unaccustomed to training with and using non-lethal weapons

All of these issues can be overcome by educating senior DoD leadership, military commanders and operators on the utility of non-lethal weapons, their unique applicability to future contingencies and the processes and procedures that are in place to ensure their use is safe, effective, legal and treaty-compliant.

A new Army Field Manual acknowledges that non-lethal weapons "will often be the primary weapons" in future irregular warfare contingencies and notes that effective training includes "employing both lethal and non-lethal means". Broadening this awareness across all services will help ensure these capabilities are fully integrated into the joint warfighter's toolkit.

Non-lethal capabilities also lend themselves to the unique domestic homeland security environment. For example, they could help enforce a domestic quarantine in the event of pandemic influenza and secure the country's borders more effectively. However, the military has not proactively embraced this type of capability despite Pentagon guidance acknowledging its utility for both the warfighter abroad and in support of domestic civil authorities.

Ensuring that the US military uses the right tools to fight and win the coming battles will require the active involvement of Gates.

Having argued that the US military needs "a better balance in the portfolio of capabilities it has" to meet future challenges, it would be reasonable to expect his support for the development, acquisition and use of non-lethal weapons to help achieve mission success.

The DoD should plan, programme and budget for these capabilities accordingly. In addition, the Obama administration should recognise their utility as it crafts its new defence and homeland security strategies and develops its own Quadrennial Defense Review.

There is no need to use a screwdriver when an Allen wrench is the right tool for the job.

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