

Disconnected Dots Between Strategy and Means

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Sometimes, the easiest solutions to problems are the hardest to recognize. Nonlethal weapons are a case in point. Intended to incapacitate personnel or materiel while minimizing casualties and property damage, nonlethal weapons provide valuable alternatives for accomplishing missions when the use of lethal force is not the best option.

Ensuring that the U.S. military has the kinds of tools best suited to address the complex security challenges it is likely to face in the future is the task of leadership. However, with only a few weeks before Congress considers the fiscal 2010 defense budget, there appears to be a disconnect between the trends in our national defense strategy and the recognition by policymakers of the role nonlethal weapons can play in achieving those strategic goals.

Consider the following: Defense Secretary Robert Gates has spoken and written about the need for a "better balance" of capabilities to address counterinsurgencies and irregular warfare operations. Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has noted that unintended civilian casualties in Afghanistan "set back our efforts to gain the confidence of the Afghan people."

The anticipated Quadrennial Defense Review is expected to focus on the need to combat "hybrid" threats and prepare for nontraditional military challenges. The Pentagon recently promulgated a directive declaring that irregular warfare "is as strategically important as traditional warfare."

This followed an earlier directive declaring stability operations to be "a core military mission ... [to be] given priority comparable to combat operations."

All of this suggests the United States increasingly will be involved in nontraditional military operations and will need to employ tactics and capabilities that reduce unintentional casualties and so-called "collateral damage" in order to fight smarter against an enemy that uses unorthodox methods and hides among innocent civilians.

Given these expectations, one might be excused for thinking that nonlethal weapons could play an important role in achieving mission success. Yet sometimes the obvious isn't. In this case, the reality on the ground appears to tell a different story.

In public statements and writings about the need for a portfolio of capabilities better suited to future contingencies, Gates has not mentioned the useful role nonlethal weapons can play. Mullen, lamenting the fact that "despite our best efforts, sometimes we take the very lives we are trying to

protect," has not touted nonlethal weapons as a desirable capability that could help mitigate this problem.

While multiple recent Pentagon directives have noted the need to focus our armed forces on adapting to the challenges of nontraditional warfare, an updated directive on Non-Lethal Weapons Policy remains unsigned as of this writing. Meanwhile, the Active Denial System - the Air Force's showcase directed-energy nonlethal weapon - is unlikely to be deployed in Iraq because of the improved security situation there.

The Navy is not aggressively exploiting nonlethal capabilities that could combat the explosion of piracy on the high seas. And the Army and Air Force are reluctant to budget for nonlethal weapon capabilities because of higher priorities in an austere fiscal environment.

Fortunately, some in Congress appear to recognize the importance of nonlethal weapons. Last year, the House Armed Services Committee urged the Defense Department to accelerate efforts to ensure the rapid fielding of nonlethal weapon systems. Yet the message appears to have fallen on deaf ears.

At least in their public pronouncements, no senior official has connected the dots between strategy and means. We have a strategy increasingly focused on irregular conflict and a means (nonlethal weapons) to help achieve the goals of that strategy, but no one in a leadership role seems to publicly recognize or acknowledge it. Without a clear senior-level affirmation of their utility, nonlethal capabilities will remain a low priority.

This is not to suggest that nonlethal weapons are a panacea - far from it. Other capabilities will be needed to confront successfully the challenges of future warfare. But nonlethal weapons surely can be a useful adjunct to lethal force and an important tool in complex environments - provided that someone in a leadership role connects the appropriate dots and advocates more strongly for their development and fielding.

Integrating nonlethal capabilities into the military's toolkit is not a partisan issue. As the budget hearings ramp up, it might be worthwhile to get the Pentagon leadership's perspectives on the utility of nonlethal weapons in addressing the requirements of irregular warfare, counterinsurgency operations and stability operations. Will the Quadrennial Defense Review recognize their potential?

Asking the secretary, chairman, service chiefs and service secretaries for their views of the role nonlethal weapons can play in addressing future contingencies, and what priority they assign nonlethal weapon funding vis-à-vis other programs intended to address nontraditional warfare, might be illuminating. ■

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