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Sandals and Robes to Business Suits and Gulf Streams: Warfare in the 21st Century

by MG Michael T. Flynn

Warfare used to be a bi-polar structure, state on state. Our defense establishment was more concerned with templating our enemies in a force-on-force engagement that was grounded in understood “rules of war.” The battlefield was linear and structured, with clearly defined battle lines. We could isolate, contain, outflank, and attack our enemies well into the depths of the rear of their formations. Our enemies had tangible and recognizable infrastructures that, when attacked, could shut down their telecommunications networks and transportation systems. We were able to counter their numbers. There were parallel technologies, and in most cases numerical capabilities that we could quantitatively overcome. There were observable indications and warnings that enabled our high-tech intelligence system the advantage to provide the necessary early warning to detect movement of our enemy’s formations. Those were the days.

We are already in the second decade of the 21st Century and find ourselves still struggling to understand what kind of warfare we are in and what kind of warfare we will likely face in the coming years. Although there have been numerous documents written about the environments we are likely to face, seeing and believing in the reality for what it is still causes all sorts of machinations throughout the entire Defense Department. For instance, each of our services is trying to redefine itself as it considers shifting from a bi-polar structure to one requiring incredible agility and adaptability given a highly complex, low contrast cast of adversaries; adversaries who are as comfortable in sandals and robes as they are wearing business suits and flying around the world in gulfstream aircraft. As confident in their ability to defeat our high tech weapons platforms and as cocky to think they can get away with it. This group of future adversaries must be taken seriously.

How should we shape future force structure, how should our intelligence systems be designed to meet future threats, what are the roles and responsibilities of the services, and how does each fit during an era of increasingly growing complexity and where operating within coalition environments is the norm?

While each of these questions should be addressed, this article will narrow their scope and attempt to address what this author believes are the attributes of 21st Century Warfare we are likely to face. For purposes of any debate, this won’t be about which specific capabilities are required or what missions are more appropriate for conventional or unconventional forces. It will address several factors worth considering as we think our way down a very murky path.

The evolution to 21st Century Warfare has not come easily, nor is it well understood. Achieving dominance in a battle space requires a number of activities to be brought together at the right moment and place to achieve some desired effect. These activities range from mud to space, and include the cyber domain that surrounds it. They include activities not related to

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kinetic military only solutions; and they encompass Interagency and Non-Governmental solutions with people who have very little understanding of military operations. They require rapid and effective team building by strong leaders simultaneously engaged with enemy forces. We must be capable of nation building, negotiating and fighting all at the same time.

Before exploring the attributes of 21st Century Warfare, it is worth understanding the categories of threats of this vast geographic, physical, and virtual domain. These threats are what we are facing now and are likely to face for the remainder of this century. There are five categories and each requires a brief explanation.

1. **Environmental challenges:** These are threats related to access to food, water, and energy sources, many inside of current conflict zones or other ungoverned and under-governed spaces. For example, there exist numerous failed states and other physical locales with growing refugee problems living in chaotic times, many trying to come to grips with the extremist religious aspects of Islam and most lacking the basic necessities of food and water. Additionally, the constant problem of narcotics, especially heroin, cocaine, and the burgeoning hashish trade are all playing into the hands of the nexus between insurgent and criminal networks and state sponsors of terrorism.
2. **Irregular threats:** The primary threat is Al Qaeda and its associated movements and the extremist environments in which these movements operate. However, much like a franchise business enterprise, AQ is expanding its operational reach. This organization wishes to make as painful as possible the causes of freedom we seek to establish for other less fortunate people of the world.
3. **Conventional threats:** There is the ever-present China and Russia argument. Should we see these nations as competitors contributing to the health and wealth of blossoming global societies, or our enemies? That's for the politicians to decide, but they do remain conventionally powerful. And there remain other players on the world stage such as Iran and North Korea. These two, while still dangerous, are vastly less conventionally effective today than they were in previous times. While we must understand this latter grouping of actors, we also need to understand and consider those conventional military capabilities in other difficult parts of the world. For instance, the Pakistan-Indian border conflict has seen numerous wars in the past half century. These are large, capable conventional militaries and we can only hope they have no intention of attacking each other. In places like East Africa, there is the threat of the Ethiopian and Eritrean line of demarcation. There are large numbers of military forces poised on either side of that line, and although there is no projected conflict on the near horizon, the dominant position astride a key sea line of communications is something we must continue to monitor. And lastly, there is the presence of the Israeli-Syrian militaries still staring each other down across the Golan Heights. All of these remain formidable, but still none at the level nor sophistication of the U.S. Military. But how long can that last?
4. **Catastrophic threats:** This has to do with the ever-present weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN); with at least two (chemical and biological), the most difficult to detect, but easiest for a terror group to get its hands on. These threats also include another 9/11 type event in the

Continental United States or Europe. This is not out of the question nor should anyone believe for a second that our enemies aren't plotting another attack; they are.

5. **Vulnerable interests / disruptive threats:** These threats have to do with oil access, critical infrastructure, the vital sea lanes that exist and must be protected, and those key allies we have across the globe who see the world in much the same way we do—as stable and secure, where commerce can flow freely, people are able to thrive on a good living, and raise their families in a decent way. Further addressed and discussed is the relatively new threat of cyber and the vulnerable domain it represents. Bottom line, we are and will remain highly vulnerable, and the ability to shift from a disruptive threat to a catastrophic threat is real. To avoid this, a much more serious debate about what we are trying to achieve as a nation in the world of cyber defense and protection needs to occur; time is not on our side regarding this debate.

With nearly a decade of war already behind us, what is 21st Century warfare starting to look like? Clearly, one of the principal battles we find ourselves within is the fight for knowledge; knowledge of the entire environment vastly more than any one adversary or competitor's military capability. And to win, we must win the virtual and physical spaces we operate within, but we must also be prepared to win as a member of a coalition. We've heard a great deal about network warfare and the speed of decision making required to operate in today's battle space. People in organizations are vastly more effective when the organization has a high degree of trust in team, is mature, and are able to rapidly share information up, down, and laterally, across the entire network (coalition or otherwise). Additionally, if people feel empowered and responsible, we see their levels of effectiveness exponentially increasing over time as their experience increases.

Operating within this complex, highly charged, and increasingly uncertain environment where global financial resources are dwindling, access to food, water, and energy are being challenged, and growing populations of young people with little to do other than join insurgent movements, criminal cartels, or simply shooting an American for the price of a loaf of bread to feed their families, we need to better understand what we're facing. From past military experiences in conventional and unconventional assignments, countless combat deployments, numerous campaign planning sessions, and extended travels in a part of the world that currently remains unrecognizable to most, we must consider the following attributes of 21st Century Warfare.

1. **Intelligence and information (I2) are the fire and maneuver of the 21st Century.** The components of I2 are precision, perception and understanding, whereas those of fire and maneuver are speed, distance and lethality. Clearly fire and maneuver remain necessary tools of any military's tradecraft (even insurgents), but they are no longer the decisive tools of warfare – more precise intelligence collection and smarter use of the open source information environment are critical. Greater focus based on more precise questions driven by modern commanders is more important than numerically outmatching an opponent with weapons. Perceptions about us, the people we serve to protect, and the adversaries we need to defeat are critical to our success, and finally, fighting for the knowledge leading to a deeper understanding of the environment we operate within are now the vital components that we struggle with today, though all together are necessary to win the peace.

2. **Better intelligence and information enable our industrial age weapons to maximize their potential and provide modern commanders a fuller awareness of their battlespace.** The U.S. military designed and built weapons systems over the past fifty years that remain in our inventory. What we are discovering in our current wars is that many have proved less relevant, therefore a much more agile and rapid acquisition, technology development, procurement, and fielding system were required to outsmart the enemy. A completely new framework within DoD requiring extraordinary leadership from our most senior leaders to include the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was vital. Succeeding in war demands this type of adaptation and leadership. We owe it to the men and women serving our nation during a time of war. “I don’t want to join a military because they have nice planes, ships and tanks; I want to join because they are seen as a winning team.” We need to understand, that in order to enable our weapons systems, when our commanders and those they lead hit the battlespace, they will be in a fight for knowledge above all else, vastly more than a fight for physical turf.
3. **The causes of war will be more complicated.** What is more likely to lead us into a global conflict is an economic crisis in Europe than a land grab in Central Africa. What if another terrorist attack in America? All bets are off as to what our reactions are likely to be. Thousands of cyber attacks occur every day, yet we have decided to fight this one “dot” at a time. Why not protect the entire spectrum of “dots” (i.e., .org, .com, .gov, .edu, .etc...)? I can see Congress now holding another post cyber attack, 9-11 type commission, wondering why our current CYBERCOM was only responsible for a small component of the cyber spectrum versus the whole enchilada. Causes of war have always been complicated, but in this century, we’ve added a completely different domain, yet, we still function with a fire and maneuver mentality.
4. **Goals will be more limited.** Consider our most recent quest into North Africa. If we get more involved for humanitarian purposes, where is it likely to end? We have to clearly outline our goals, but as warfare becomes more untenable in the age of social media, as the unacceptable killing of civilians on any battlefield could lose the coalition of the willing, we have to clearly limit the goals of our wars. Otherwise, we’ll find ourselves truly in an era of persistent conflict.
5. **Contents of warfare will be richer.** Our current reality in places like Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan are placing enormous stress on our entire system, yet we deal with each as single events. Not one of these is a prime mover for our nation, but taken together, they represent a tectonic shift in an emerging way of war for which we have yet to organize ourselves. Talk about being adaptive; we don’t have a choice. Where will the next major conflict occur? Are we overly focused staring at the gerbil on the wheel while massive global trends are shifting underfoot? Global trends are testing our very fiber. These include but are not limited to the growing energy imbalance, unclear climate issues, vast food and water shortages, shifting demographics that are changing the face of entire regions, transnational crime and criminal networks that appear legitimate but are anything but. We have to do a much better job of

understanding the environments we are likely to operate within before we dive in head first. Our current reality is very reactive, yet understanding the contents of potential operational environments is something we certainly have the capability to do. At the end of the day, we should be capable of understanding the well being of an environment better than those who live in it. Why not?

6. **Duration of war will be shorter.** This primarily refers to the duration of kinetic operations. Therefore, we have to think through, in a much deeper way, post kinetic phase outcomes. Looking back at previous wars, we should not be surprised at our kinetic capability to destroy airfields, air defenses, conventional ground forces, or other military and civilian infrastructure. That is what we designed our military to be able to do. However, in this coming century, the cost of rebuilding what has been physically destroyed, is prohibitive. And, the longer term political, emotional and psychological effects of kinetic phase operations may end up causing us to lose in the end anyway. The growing trend of anti-American sentiment in large swaths of the Islamic world is testament to this notion. If we aren't able to reverse this sentiment, longer wars most certainly will not solve the problems we'll likely experience.
7. **Physical damages will decrease; however, psychological damages are likely to increase.** As stated above, we have to precisely understand what our objectives are. We must be very specific. We must see the end game before we start the clock. We must understand the perceptions of those with whom we are about to enter into the fray, and we must have an understanding of the type of threats we are likely to face (initially and over the long haul). Otherwise, the damages we do cause may be insurmountable to changing attitudes. Winning the hearts and minds before the first shot is ever fired may be the right path to take in this coming century.
8. **Intangible factors will play a much greater role.** Developing relationships (now and in the future) will be critical. How do we develop these relationships? Are they based on honesty and trust or are they based on business or political interests? We have to know. The intangible factors of a strong or weak relationship cannot be understated. These have always been a critical enabler for solving crises, but in the future, they may be the seminal reason. Individual and organizational relationships matter more now than they ever have and will be critically important to overcoming incomplete or poor methods of communications. Additionally, understanding and sharing our American values and being honest and candid about those globally shared and accepted human values must be constantly addressed. From a military perspective, it is no wonder that military forces trained by the American Military tend to operate at a much higher acceptable standard. This is because the American Soldier brings not only a demonstration of enormous physical courage, but provides an example of trust, teamwork, compassion, and moral courage that we must reinforce in our men and women that we recruit into the ranks in the future.
9. **Integration of operations will be higher.** The most effective organizations on today's battlefields are those that have integrated capabilities. Teams and networks of people leveraging their parent organizations have demonstrated a

high degree of success. The advent of fusion cells, threat finance centers, interagency task forces have all proven their value. There is little question that when you put people from multiple agencies and coalition partner nations with the right skills together, they will be more effective. We are doing this more and more in the Continental United States with the stand up of various Joint Task Forces in many of our cities. These are proving of great value for their supported leadership. Can we do this on a larger scale? Can we integrate whole intelligence agencies; can we create more of these integrated centers without diluting their value and creating additional layers of duplication? We have to go back to the threats we are likely to face and consider organizing more functionally against known or suspected target sets as much as we organize geographically. To deter conflict and prevent surprise we must force integration in some cases as part of our peacetime mission. In our large bureaucracies, it will be easy to fall back into our protected silos and only after conflict occurs and people are ordered to act, do they task organize into cells, workgroups or task forces. Bottom line, we are going to have to “incentivize” in order to cause people and organizations to integrate. We also have to create national structures that are able to “operationalize” decisions to rapidly understand the environment and to act against emerging threats in a timely manner (and in a much more politically sensitive climate). If we don’t seek or cause a higher degree of integration, we risk losing fleeting tactical opportunities where the potential for enormous strategic advantage is lost.

10. **Warfare will require more decentralized decision-making but an increasing need to centralize situational awareness.** This may be the hardest issue with which we are likely to deal. At the end of the day, accepting increasing levels of risk may be a leader’s greatest responsibility. We must consider pushing authorities and responsibilities down to much lower levels of command. We are going to operate in an increasingly dispersed battle space. Leaders at every level must know their higher headquarters backs them on the decisions they are likely to make. As we consider this critical attribute, we need to understand that authority does not always equal permission. “If I have the authority to act, but my higher headquarters wants me to inform them before I do, this slows down action, in some cases, to a dead stop.” If we want to be agile, we will need to speed up our decision-making process. And, we will want to act rapidly during an era of increasing numbers of fleeting targets, and thus leadership, at the appropriate levels, must know they can act. To achieve speed in decision-making we must centralize situational awareness. How do we achieve this? We have to become more comfortable operating in a networked, virtual world. One that inspires inclusivity among various cultures and agencies and one that enables greater transparency of the information sharing environment. We must. We are in the 21st Century; the information age. We need to start acting like it.

Where does this take us? In summary, the global outlook and existing networks that are emerging provide hope and opportunity. With influencers such as Brazil, Russia, India, and

China, we must seek new ways for conducting trade, developing new energy supplies and markets, increasing wealth, and bringing together nations who today remain internally focused.

That is why we must apply intelligence and information in this century much as we applied fire and maneuver in the past, and in fundamentally different ways. We are operating in an era where turning the many complex challenges we face into opportunities is the true mark of success. We may be running out of time to recognize this, still however, time remains on our side – but only if we are willing to act.

The attributes discussed above are not all-encompassing and must be further thought out. However, each must also be understood, debated and smartly applied in our intelligence and information collection efforts, analytic judgments, counterintelligence, and overall planning efforts, as well as in the way we operate in any future battlespace. The physical and virtual domains of war have fundamentally changed and we need to do the same. Instead of fighting future wars against large armor formations and vast armadas of aircraft or ships at sea, we are more likely to face adversaries in sandals and robes who are as comfortable in business suits and flying around in gulf streams. Not seriously considering these attributes is to do so at our own peril.

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