

Conventional Warfare: Still Relevant

EWS Contemporary Issues Paper

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To

The Major A. K. Kelley, CG 13

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Traditionally, the Marine Corps has been trained and equipped to conduct operations in a conventional warfare environment; however, current irregular warfare operations have dominated Marine Corps training since the outbreak of Operation Enduring Freedom. In fact, the First Marine Expeditionary Force has not conducted a full-scale combined arms exercise since Fiscal Year 02. While the Marine Corps has demonstrated the ability to adapt and thrive in the current irregular environments of Iraq and Afghanistan, conventional warfare training has essentially been removed from current training exercises. Yet, the likelihood of a future conventional war is likely imminent. Based on current global circumstances, the Marine Corps should re-focus a portion of training away from current unconventional warfare tactics to conventional warfare tactics due to enemies who pose conventional threats are actively increasing their capabilities, threatening allies, and befriending known enemies of the United States.

Conventional Threats

While current Marine Corps training has focused solely on irregular threats, emerging conventional threats around the globe have continued to increase their military prowess and conventional warfare capabilities. For example, China's current army is over two million soldiers strong and they have recently

increased their annual defense spending to over sixty billion dollars. These facts indicate that China's increased defense spending is not simply focused on bolstering their homeland defense capabilities. Furthermore, distinct increases have been tracked in both naval and air power capabilities. China has recently engaged in international naval exercises and significantly increased the strike range of their bombers by enhancing radar systems and aerial refueling capabilities.² China's defense build-up has included the construction of the "Jian 10" fighter jet, which is one of the most advanced aircraft in the world. "Most technology analysts have been surprised by the speed with which China has gone from being an arms-buying country to one with real promise of being a producer of front-edge military technology."³ Although the Chinese have not established a deadline, they have made it clear that they have both the desire and capability to construct an aircraft carrier, which would undeniably permit them to increase their military influence around the globe.⁴ China's significant increases in defense spending and its ability to construct advanced military equipment make it a formidable conventional threat. A threat that the United States will likely have to face and one for which the Marine Corps must prepare.

Comparable to China, the North Koreans pose a similar conventional threat by virtue of their robust military and equipment capabilities. "With 1.2 million people under arms, the North Korean military is a very credible conventional force."⁵ In fact, the North Koreans possess the largest arsenal of both submarines and artillery in the world. In addition, they have over eleven thousand artillery pieces and approximately four thousand medium and light armor assets.⁵ Unlike China, much of the North Koreans' military equipment is both aged and outdated; however, the sheer numbers of personnel and equipment make them a conventional force that should not be overlooked.

Finally, although the prospect of Russia and the United States engaging in conventional warfare was thought to have ended with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians have once again begun to increase their military might. "It has taken more than a decade, but thanks to an oil and gas boom - and due largely to former president Vladimir Putin - the Russian military has staged a comeback."⁶ Russia is currently downsizing military personnel by over a hundred-thousand in order to become more efficient and effective, but Russian leaders have established a plan to increase defense spending by twenty-six percent, bringing their total yearly budget to over fifty-

billion dollars. This money will likely be used to develop new warships and air and space defense systems.⁸

The sheer size and capability of the Chinese, North Korean and Russian militaries make them a formidable conventional threat to the United States. In addition, the money they are investing in defense indicates that their conventional threat capabilities are increasing. In order to maintain the capability to face powerful enemies the Marine Corps should once again prepare for conventional threats.

Threatening Allies

The tense relations between China and Taiwan could ultimately strain relations between the United States and China. From 1927 to 1949, China was involved in a bloody civil war. During which simultaneous but conflicting efforts were directed at creating a communist state and at creating a more democratic like nationalist nation. The fighting ended in 1949 with the mainland falling to Communism; the nationalists left mainland China and occupied Taiwan. At this point, Taiwan wanted to separate from China and become a sovereign state with its own independence. While the fighting has ceased, tension between the two has remained present, because China believes there is only "one China" and that it includes the island of Taiwan. According to China's premier Wen Jiabao "The Taiwan issue, left

over from China's civil war is the internal affairs of China, and will eventually be resolved by the Chinese people on their own. There is one China in the world, both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China and the sovereignty and territorial integrity can never be separated." ⁸ This creates a challenging situation. The United States has been careful not to support Taiwanese independence, but rather to support the continuance of a peaceful co-existence between the two. However, recent U.S. military equipment and weaponry sales to Taiwan has displeased China and increased tension between the two powers. The 6.43 billion dollar arms sale between the United States and Taiwan is designed to bolster the islands defense. The sale includes Patriot Missiles, Apache helicopters, and antitank weaponry. ⁹ According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang, "The arms deal has contaminated the sound atmosphere of our military relations and gravely jeopardizes China's national security; the sale threatens stability and world peace." ⁹ Clearly, China does not want the United States involved in its dealing with Taiwan, yet Taiwan requires U.S. involvement to remain sovereign. Maintaining this delicate peaceful balance will continue to be a challenge for both the United States and China.

On the other hand, Russia has not only threatened, but also has taken aggressive military action against an ally. After the

1991 collapse of Communism, Georgia, a former Soviet republic, declared its independence. Georgia, which has befriended the United States, is currently seeking membership in NATO.¹⁷ Russia is displeased with both the friendship between Georgia and the United States and the potential of having a NATO nation on its border. Recently Russia is demonstrating a desire to re-assert themselves as a conventional power, and they have aggressively impose themselves on former republics.¹¹ In August, the Russian military crossed the border into Georgia and attacked with both air and ground assets, killing hundreds of Georgian civilians and military personnel.¹² This attack was strategically timed; Russia was aware of the United States' current preoccupation with the war on terror, making military action unlikely.¹³ The United States supports Georgia's territorial integrity and has called for an end to the bloodshed. Because Georgia is not currently a member of NATO, it is difficult for the United States to justify military intervention.¹¹ Russia's aggressive attack on Georgia clearly indicates there desire to once again assert themselves as a world power. Being that China and Russia are currently threatening or taking aggressive actions towards known U.S. allies, it is pertinent that the Marine Corps be prepared to defend the interests of the United States against aggressive conventional forces, if called upon.

The fact that China and Russia are openly threatening and attacking allies serves as another example of potential conventional threats facing the United States. It is paramount for the Marine Corps to maintain the ability to conduct warfare with conventional powers in order remain capable of preserving the best interests of the United States well into the future.

Befriending Known U.S. Enemies

In addition to taking threatening actions towards allied nations, Russia has established friendly relations with nations that have objectives that contradict those objectives of the United States. These relationships were established due to Russia's displeasure with the United States' planned missile defense shield in Eastern Europe and the potential expansion of NATO. In what appears to be an act of defiance, Russia has re-established a relationship with Iran, despite the latter's aggressive intentions and likely, yet denied, desire to create a nuclear weapon. In fact, Russian officials have expressed no concern over Iran's nuclear intentions. Instead, they have chosen to believe that the intentions are for peaceful energy purposes, a dangerous stance given Iran's past.¹⁴ According to a report in the Daily Telegraph London, "Mr. Putin may come to regret the games he is at present glad to play with a serious source of instability on his southern flank."¹⁵

In another notable example, Russia has recently befriended Venezuela; a nation that has feuded with the United States since Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998.¹⁶ Russia has taken advantage of this strained relationship and has used it as a means to gain access to a nation within close proximity of the United States. Not only has Russia befriended Venezuela, but it has also made plans to conduct joint military exercises in the waters of the Caribbean. Actions like these are reminiscent of the Cold War. "The last time a Russian Navy ship plied the azure waters of the Caribbean for major joint maneuvers with an anti-US country was during the Cold War."¹⁸

Like Russia, China has established friendly relations with Iran. Due to China's abundant use of petroleum, it is actively seeking a friendship with Iran in order to secure its future supply. "China now produces [oil] only for domestic use. Its proven oil reserves could be depleted in 14 years, oil analysts say, so the country is aggressively trying to secure future suppliers. Iran is now China's second-largest source of imported oil."¹⁹ The reason this relationship concerns the United States is twofold: First, China has intentions of competing with the United States for supremacy in the region. China views Iran as its best opportunity to gain access to the Middle East, an area that contains significant geostrategic importance. Essentially,

this relationship will provide China with a better opportunity to increase its influence on the global scene.²⁰ Secondly, China's support emboldens Iran, providing an avenue to avoid United Nation sanctions over emerging nuclear programs. "Holding a veto at the U.N. Security Council, China has become the key obstacle to putting international pressure on Iran. During a visit to Tehran this month, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing signaled that China did not want the Bush Administration to press the council to debate Iran's nuclear program."²⁰

Russia's and China's relations with Iran should not be deemed insignificant. These two historically conventional powers are undermining the United States and attempting to gain supremacy in the Middle East. These acts will likely increase tensions, and they serve as yet another example for why the Marine Corps should once again focus on conventional warfare training.

Opposing Viewpoint

Some believe that the current irregular fight taking place in the Middle East is the only fight of the twenty-first Century. For example, President George W. Bush stated "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by

failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few."²¹ Defense Secretary Robert Gates believes conventional challenges exist; however, he also believes the United States will be capable of sustaining conventional superiority for the medium term. This viewpoint will ensure that the majority of focus and spending will continue to be on irregular threats.²² If opinions like these remain at the forefront of U.S. planning and preparation, emerging conventional threats may prove dangerously effective against America's soon-to-be diminished conventional capability.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps has dedicated little time or effort towards conventional warfare training over the past six or seven years. Current training has almost exclusively focused on irregular warfare tactics. While this is due to the current operational demand, a generation of Marines is quickly losing the ability to utilize conventional tactics effectively. This loss may be cause for concern because potential emerging threats are currently increasing their conventional warfare capabilities, threatening allies, and befriending known enemies of the United States. The point is not to diminish or discredit the importance of irregular warfare training, rather to dedicate

a portion of training to traditional conventional tactics that may eventually prove vital to the future interests of the United States.

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