

LEADERSHIP & STRATEGY

Insertion Forces

by Robbin Laird

Land wars of the past decade have led the United States to a significant redirection of its military forces. The key roles played in ground operations and support by the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and the US Navy (USN) to the land forces have been evident and reflected in the decisions and focus of the Department of Defence. These land-based roles entailed large-scale and expensive logistics operations via land, sea, and ground, along with significant expenditures to support civilian contractors, such as Maersk, for specialized capabilities. Although charged to military accounts and considered military ops, these are really support to land-based forces more than they are dynamic military operations.

A major centerpiece of this effort has been Counter Insurgency Operations and the training of local forces to support local governance – highlighting a significant role for nation building. Stability operations were prioritized over traditional conventional operations, and the nuclear dimension of the force structure reduced and largely de-emphasized. However, this bulging towards the traditional Land role makes little sense going forward. For example, rather than setting up long-term facilities (and providing advisors as targets), the U.S. insertion forces are able to speedily engage and withdraw – and several core allies are shaping similar forces. The ability to establish air dominance to empower multi-mis-

sion insertion forces that are able to operate rapidly, effectively, and then withdraw, is a core effort that now exists and is emerging as a more efficient way of war for 21st century conflicts.

The long-standing debate over 'boots on the ground' versus 'airpower' really does not capture the evolving capabilities each group has to offer as they capitalize on new technologies to provide for more effective and more lethal insertion forces.

Events of 2014 have challenged the previous agenda with a vengeance and laid the groundwork for shaping a new one. An evolving pattern of 21st century conflict is emerging; we now see state and non-state actors operating to reshape the global order

« Sept 2014 – Marines with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit board an MV-22B Osprey with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 163 (Reinforced), on the flight deck of the USS Comstock. The 11th MEU and Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group are deployed to the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations as a sea-based, expeditionary crisis response force capable of conducting amphibious missions across the full range of military operations.

in their favor by generating conflicts against the interests of democratic nations (which are slow to react).

The assumption by ISIS terrorists, Putin's forces, and the Chinese leadership, is that the slow decision-making cycles of democracies can be strategically exploited. In their minds, gains can be achieved on a piecemeal basis rather than going for the 'big grab' which could unwittingly provide a dramatic event that would mobilize public opinion and generate resources for democratic leaders to respond with. And so, a mix of non-kinetic, kinetic, and information warfare elements are instead blended into an assertive, adversarial, political-military policy against democratic interests. A good case in point is that of Putin's ongoing efforts to control Ukraine. Recent actions have included seizure of territory, the use of special forces, information war, the use of indigenous Russian armed and trained "separatists," and other techniques.

A characterization of the Russian approach was laid out in a thoughtful piece from Latvian researcher Janis Berzinš. Neither asymmetric nor conventional, the Russians are shaping what he calls a strategic communications policy to support strategic objectives, and is doing so with a toolset of various means, including the skillful use of military power as the underwriter of the entire effort.

According to Berzinš, "the Russians have unleashed a new generation of warfare in Ukraine. The Crimean campaign has been an impressive demonstration of strategic communication, one that shares many similarities with the Russian intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 while at the same time being essentially different, since it reflects the operational realization of Russia's new military guidelines to be implemented by 2020.

"The Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battlespace is the mind and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare. This is aimed at achieving superiority in troop and weapons

Airman Juillian Sawyer signals to an MV-22 Osprey during flight operations. USS Makin Island is on a scheduled deployment with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit to promote peace and freedom of the seas by providing deterrence, humanitarian aid and disaster relief in the fleet areas of responsibility.



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control, and psychologically depressing the morale of both the enemy's armed forces personnel and the civilian population.

"The main objective, of course, is to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power to the minimum necessary, which makes the opponent's military and civil population support appear to be the 'attacker' – to the detriment of their own government and country."

By seizing Crimea, Russia set in motion internal pressures, aided by direct support, to continue map-writing in Ukraine by reducing the size of the territory under the government in Kiev. With the Crimean intervention destabilizing, the enhanced role of Russian "separatists" within the remainder of Ukraine (aided and abetted by Moscow), is part of the Russian 21st century approach to warfare.

Similarly, the shoot down of the Malaysian airliner by Russian "separatists" and the absence of a strong Western response to secure the site and work with the Ukrainians to bring the separatist operation to a halt is another element of the learning curve.

Concurrent with the Russian efforts, has been the emergence of the jihadist organization ISIS as a political force. Iraq 2014 is really about dealing with an extremist group aggregating power, trying to build an army and shape a leadership role in a volatile region where the mantra is: "join us or die".

Calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS is dedicated to the violent destruction of those who object to their leadership of a mythical Middle Ages

dream which is directly opposed to any Western values of religious freedom, secularism and tolerance. When you have a group grabbing for power that Al Qaeda finds extreme, the rest of us have a major problem.

ISIS is shaping a brand via its military successes and its ability to eliminate religious opponents. It is a kinetic force using information warfare to spread the brand and shape an evolving influence in the region. The leader does not dress in black or fly a black flag by accident; it is part of the branding effort and the information war against their enemies.

ISIS is a rapidly moving target and needs a response that is not measured in the months and years of a return of the US Army to re-start training an Iraqi Army, which the Obama Administration has already recognized as part of the problem not the solution. A *New York Times* report said: *"A classified military assessment of Iraq's security forces concludes that many units are so deeply infiltrated by either Sunni extremist informants or Shiite personnel backed by Iran that any Americans assigned to advise Baghdad's forces could face risks to their safety, according to United States officials. The report concludes that only about half of Iraq's operational units are capable enough for American commandos to advise them if the White House decides to help roll back the advances made by Sunni militants in northern and western Iraq over the past month. Adding to the administration's dilemma is the assessment's conclusion that Iraqi forces loyal to Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki are now heavily dependent on Shiite militias – many of which were trained in Iran – as well as on advisers from Iran's paramilitary Quds Force."* (July 2014)

This would suggest that simply re-inserting U.S. boots on the ground, and continuing the training of Iraqi forces attached to Baghdad will not provide an effective way ahead. It is doubtful that time and continued effort could ever overcome what are clearly deeply rooted fissures within the political texture of Iraq: namely the Sunni-Shiite division, the roles of Iran and Syria.

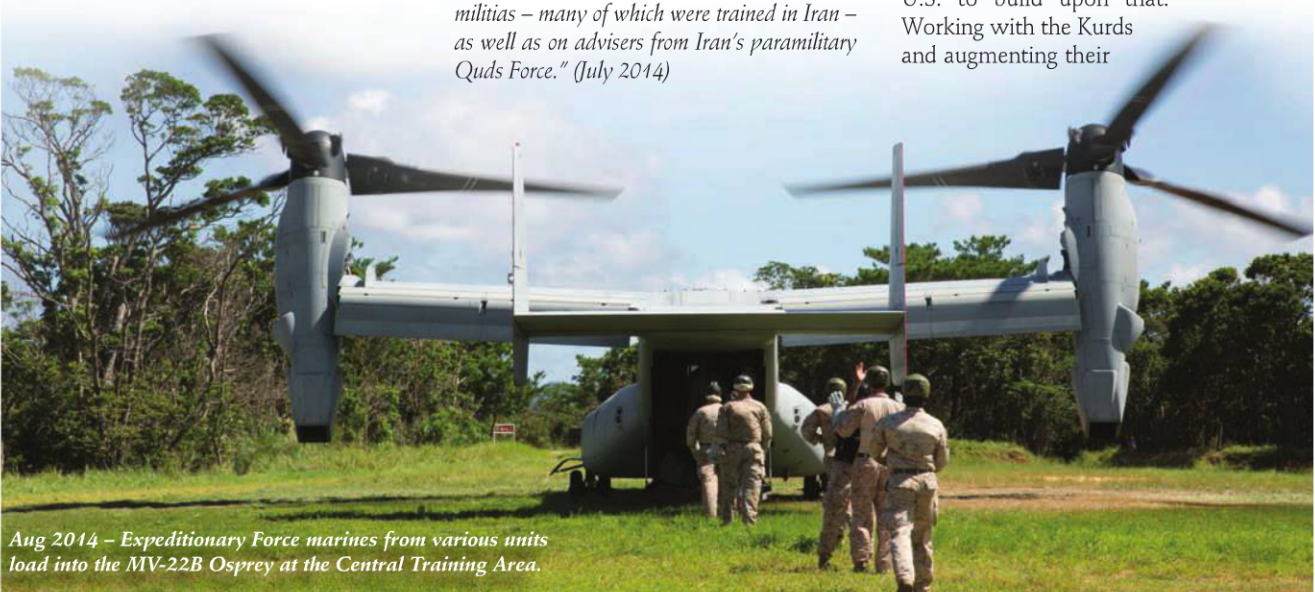
And when ISIS was able to aggregate forces, the absence of an air-enabled ground force demonstrated a fundamental fact often forgotten: it is not about air-power versus boots on the ground. It is about an air-dominance-enabled ground force versus ones that are not.

The Kurdish Option

There is one area of Iraq that holds immediate promise of thwarting this aggression by, rolling back and beginning the process of destroying ISIS. The defensible area is Kurdistan, and is especially so because of its combat-tested effective fighting force, the Peshmerga.

The leaders of Kurdistan deserve great praise because of the tolerance and life saving physical sanctuary they provided to Christians and others. The Kurds can now play a key role in shaping a relatively stable island in a violent region, and provide an important focal point for the United States and its allies.

A notable difference between Iraq in 2003 and now in 2014 is the Turkish-Kurdish relationship and the ability of the U.S. to build upon that. Working with the Kurds and augmenting their



Aug 2014 – Expeditionary Force marines from various units load into the MV-22B Osprey at the Central Training Area.



Kurdish soldiers on patrol in Northern Syria.

autonomy within Iraq, including control of critical oil infrastructure, is a clear objective for the operation of U.S. forces. ISIS members have captured, tanks, major artillery, rockets, and other mobile road transportation such as Humvees, MRAPS and pick-up trucks with automatic weapons – all are visible items of war from the air. Destroying this captured hardware, which enables ISIS to operate and maneuver, is a key priority.

If the ISIS forces lose their maneuverability, their crew-served weapons, and armored vehicles (especially tanks), seizing terrain and key choke points will become more of a challenge. They will either be forced back into the cities or forced to break into small units to hide in the countryside. Many would argue that urban fights should be left to what is remaining of the Iraqi Army.

ISIS was well on the way to fielding an Army when the U.S. and the allies finally engaged – forced into it by the beheadings of Western journalists. Focusing on what is needed to pulverize ISIS' ability to move rapidly and lethally, can buy some strategic

manoeuvre space for the allies to sort out what kind of aid the Kurds might really need to protect their augmented territory within a fragmenting Iraq.

Minimizing the Footprint

To play an effective role, what is needed for such 21st century operations are what one might call insertion forces – forces that can deliver effective punch rapidly and with a minimal logistical footprint – to achieve clearly-defined tasks in a specified time frame, and withdraw. If the engagement is an area of strategic interest, this might have to be repeated as necessary.

For the United States this means, in large part, drawing on its forces from a sea base, combined with land-based airpower and embedded Special Forces.

A humanitarian opportunity was missed earlier this year. The U.S. could have responded to the Malaysian shoot down in Ukraine by working with the Ukrainian government to bring in forces to secure the crash site. NATO and the U.S. should have been proactive in protecting victim's bodies and pushing back the

(literally drunken) separatists who swarmed the scene. This could have been achieved by the President of Ukraine calling in an insertion force of Marines.

If this was the pre-Osprey era, an insertion might be more difficult but, with the tiltrotar assault force, the USMC can be put in place rapidly to cordon off the area. Had this occurred, it would have signaled a credible global response to the disinformation campaign of Russia and its state-sponsored separatists.

With airpower dominance over Ukraine, coupled with Marines on the ground, forces loyal to Kiev could have secured the crash site without becoming a permanent US military base. Future stability will require flexible military insertion forces in ways appropriate to the political mission.

Currently, the U.S. has the option of leveraging its sea base aviation strike assets – carrier and amphibious – all throughout Iraq, which can combine with the global strike reach of the USAF bomber fleet with tanker support for their tactical jets.

As new tasks come to the fore, additional forces can be calibrated to missions. A timely example would be in support of the Kurds. But what needs to be avoided, is writing a blank check for the insertion of forces of COIN-determined size packages to prop up an ally who is not.

As my colleague Ed Timperlake has argued, "the U.S. has the option of leveraging its sea base and also to generate USAF combat airpower over Iraq utilizing tankers. Those military capabilities can be in conjunction with whatever force capabilities have been and might be additionally shaped to support the Kurds such as ISR drones."



Peshmerga soldiers fighting ISIS are anxious for Canada to join the effort.

International Cooperation

Allies are significant in this effort as well, and several are already engaged. New capabilities have emerged which could support this effort. For example, the Gulf Cooperation Council has new Airbus tankers, which can be used to fuel American and allied strike fleets.

Insertion forces are not occupation forces and are not defined by the rotorcraft-dependent Army and the significant ground grid, which needs to be laid down to support and fuel a land-focused force. Changing capabilities and concepts of operations are overcoming the classic distinction. While the USAF and USN have shaped highly integrated air grids, and advances in both the lethality and effectiveness of manned and unmanned aviation have grown, the USMC has become the only tiltrotar-enabled force in the world.

The USN-USMC team has been practicing in recent years in the Bold Alligator series for the kind of events happening in Iraq right now. There is another Bold Alligator exercise scheduled, but it makes a great deal of sense to shape a real world experience right now.

Creating strategic maneuver space for the immediate period ahead, and pulverizing ISIS military capabilities – trucks, cars, artillery pieces, etc. – are the crucial objectives, and is an airpower strike mission.

By sorting out the evolving relationship with the Kurds, and thereby influencing the evolution of the rest of Iraq, is good enough for now and will lay down the parameters of change for a military approach.

Sept 2014 – Marines with Alpha Company, 2nd Assault Amphibian Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, conduct exercises after disembarking the USS Whidbey Island off the coast of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Leaders and Strategists

Strong progress is being made towards reshaping capabilities to insert force to support a limited engagement and achieve clearly defined objectives. The evolution of insertion force capabilities – under the influence of new technologies such as the V-22 Osprey – require however significant change in the civilian side of command and control. Civilian strategists and political leaders in the West have to re-think their role in setting objectives and framing operational engagements. To insert force, one has to determine when to withdraw force. In this process, France has demonstrated – in its Mali engagements and re-set of operations in Africa – a sensitivity to the changes needed. The Obama Administration, and others, could learn from this.

In an interview I did with Rear Admiral Phillips (the 2nd ESG Commander), and Brigadier General Love (the 2nd MEB Commander) on the evolution of their insertion forces in the Bold Alligator 2013 exercises, this challenge was evident. Working through the challenges of anti-access and area denial capability to put forces ashore was the key focus of the exercise. The forces ashore were then supported by an expeditionary logistics approach which was designed to provide support targeted for the at-shore forces, rather than building a mobile WALMART which would then have to be protected.

This is what Rear Admiral Ann Phillips had to say: *"Today's surface force has a greater capacity, and we'll have even more capacity in the future with capabilities like Navy's Integrated Fire Control – Counter Air to support forces ashore. We can influence the battle space to support the maneuver of Marine forces on the ground with a number of capabilities*

"For example, when talking about a significant air and missile defense threat, you've got to remove that threat. Maritime forces, including

Carrier Aviation and long-range TOMAHAWK Strike missiles strategically roll the threat back to gain entry and to gain space for operations.

"The Amphibious Task Force with augmented with Cruiser and Destroyers for defense and power projection then provides the support and capability to the ground force to enter the battlespace and then continues that support once forcible entry is achieved.

"What we did here over the past several weeks in the Bold Alligator 2013 exercise was to work on combining the capabilities inherent in the Amphibious Task Force with the ground forces to shape a more effective force able to be inserted and withdrawn as needed.

"The fleet provides the ground force with support from a close in sea base that's taking care of Intel, logistics, fire support, Command and Control, and close air support. All of this is managed from the sea base and projected forward in support of maneuver ashore."

Enter 2014, and Iraq becomes the real world Bold Alligator Exercise. Yet I commented to both Love and Phillips that I believed the military was better at grasping the strategic impact of being able to insert and withdraw force to support objectives than the political and civilian strategizers. Setting the objectives and withdrawing force seemed to be missing from the civilian side of the equation.

For democracies to prevail in 21st century conflicts, this fast and flexible capability needs to be shaped, augmented and delivered. Notably in fighting the information war aspects of modern conflict, it is not up to the military to set the agenda, it is the task of the missing civilian leadership. And this clearly requires engagement in public debate – of the sort that leaders seem more intent on avoiding than engaging in. **F**

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