Defeating Violent Nonstate Actors

Robert J. Bunker

Abstract: The role of landpower "at war" is as integral to US defense needs as landpower "short of war." But what about the role of landpower between these two in environments in which violent nonstate actors dominate? In such cases, it is best to devolve opposing violent nonstate actors as quickly as possible so policing forces can implement follow-on strategies. Landpower can help provide security conditions under which these strategies can be facilitated.

And just like their allies in Al Qaeda, this new Taliban is more network than army, more of a community of interest than a corporate structure.

GEN Stanley A. McChrystal[1]

Landpower represents the application of force generated by conventional militaries—be they classical Roman legionnaires, medieval European knights, or modern US soldiers. Such power is generated by land forces, essentially the "[p]ersonnel, weapon systems, vehicles, and support elements operating on land to accomplish assigned missions and tasks."[2] Boots-on-the-ground integrated into Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) represents our state-of-the art operational approach to ground combat operations. In turn, official publications define landpower and what it influences:

[L]and power. . . . The ability—by threat, force, or occupation—to gain, sustain, and exploit control over land, resources, and people. [It is] the primary means to impose the Nation's will on an enemy, by force when necessary; establish and maintain a stable environment that sets the conditions for political and economic development; . . . .[3]

The integral nature of landpower "at war" to US defense needs—essentially in interstate war—is well recognized, as is the role of the United Sates Army as the nation's principal land force.[4] The contribution of landpower "short of war"—for influence, deterrence, and humanitarian purposes—is also well accepted. More problematic is the relationship of landpower to environments in which violent nonstate actors dominate. Far less obvious is the role of landpower in irregular warfare, intrastate war waged by belligerents who are not states—along with its attendant organized criminal, illicit economic, and governmental corruption components.[5] The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan suggest

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1 Stanley A. McChrystal, "It Takes a Network: The New Front Line of Modern Warfare," *Foreign Policy* (March-April 2011), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/22/it_takes_a_network.

2 Via JP 3-31. See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02. November 8, 2010 (As Amended Through 16 July 2013): 163, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

3 U.S. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army Capstone Concept*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-0, (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 19, 2012), 38, 39.

4 Ibid.

5 Odierno, Amos, and McRaven, *Strategic Landpower*, 3.

that, while operational successes in such campaigns may be won at a high cost in US treasure, they are not economically sustainable. Further, the strategic goals of those campaigns—the desired results which would fulfill the multinational security objectives—could only be partially met. While the Ba'athist and Taliban governments have been removed from power—and more importantly al Qaeda forces decimated—both states are fragile, suffer from tribal and sectarian violence, and are beset with dysfunctional governments. At best, the campaigns waged in Iraq and Afghanistan can be considered only partial victories, at worst, partial failures.[6]

With these perceptions in mind, this article will look at the relationship of landpower to violent nonstate actors. In order to do this, these actors first will be characterized along with their landpower-like attributes. Second, an overview of state policing and military forces will be provided. Third, landpower-related application strategies will be discussed. This article will end with some lessons concerning the need for networks when confronting violent nonstate actors and will provide a few cautionary remarks about "democratic capacity building" in the age of austerity now upon us.

Violent Nonstate Actors

The threats represented by violent nonstate actors are as old as the earliest states. Bandits, raiders, and pirates have plagued civilized peoples around the globe for millennia. A contemporary view of these actors is that they exist along a threat continuum from that of common criminals to criminal-soldiers (see Figure 1).
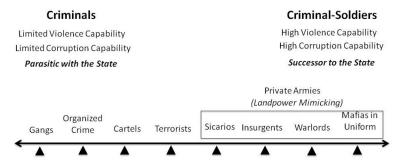

Figure 1. Violent Nonstate Actor Continuum

Criminals are at the left side of the continuum and are characterized as having limited violence and corruption capabilities. Gangs, organized crime, and less sophisticated cartels are representative of these more benign and somewhat less violent actors, as are robbers, brigands, and pirates. Criminals do not openly challenge police forces and have a parasitic relationship with a state; they seek to be left alone to engage in various nefarious activities and profit from the illicit economy.

Criminal-soldiers, nonstate soldiers, or illegal combatants, are at the right side of the continuum and are characterized as having high violence

and corruption capability. Organized into private armies—as opposed to the public armies fielded by states—the more evolved actors are increasingly landpower-like in their attributes. Sicarios (cartel assassins and enforcers), insurgents, warlords, and mafias in uniform all represent landpower forces to varying degrees. As an example, a Los Zetas commando unit operating in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, composed of a couple dozen armored sports-utility vehicles with mounted infantry in body armor and carrying small arms, definitely meets the Department of Defense definition of a land force.[7]

The major threat criminal-soldiers present is that their relationship to the state is not a parasitic one like that of common criminals. Rather, they can be viewed as challengers and successors to the state. Via one process, the synergistic employment of violence and corruption, *plato o plomo* (silver or lead in Spanish), results in areas of impunity. These, in turn, lead to *de facto* shifts in governance by criminal organizations. Via another better known process, insurgents actively create a parallel shadow government to challenge and ultimately replace state institutions while carrying out targeted violence and assassination campaigns. Ultimately, if a violent nonstate actor has the financial resources to field a private army, it has "warmaking capability" which, in turn, means it has state capturing or making potentials.[8]

It should be noted that terrorists represent a blended case along the continuum as some of them exhibit high violence potential—as in the case of the early al Qaeda spectaculars—but possess low corruptive capability. Further, most such groups are considered no better than criminals. Still, the blurred nature of transnational organizations such as al Qaeda brings us to three other facts about these increasingly significant and deadly actors. First, violent nonstate actors have been merging and blending for quite some time. Components of the al Qaeda network, and even those belonging to some of the more dominant Mexican cartels, exhibit gang, terrorist, insurgent, and organized criminal behaviors and patterns simultaneously.[9] Second, violent nonstate actors are evolving towards more networked organizational forms but can manifest hierarchical, blended, and networked features. When under pressure from competing actors and states, they tend to devolve into networks as a defensive response—when dominant in a host environment more centralization becomes evident. Third, their numbers appear to be increasing as an outcome of external stressors placed on states due to the unexpected components of globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, and biosphere degradation (e.g., climatic changes).[10]
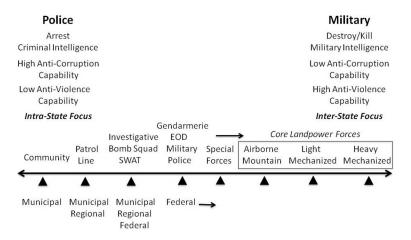
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7 See JP 1-02 (footnote 2).

8 Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In,* ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169-191.
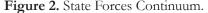
9 Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer, eds., *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2013); Jennifer L. Hesterman, *The Terrorist-Criminal Nexus: An Alliance of International Drug Cartels, Organized Crime, and Terror Groups (*Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2013).

10 The tipping point may have been reached now that at least one security scholar is suggesting an alternative to the state-centric paradigm—one in which some armed nonstate groups are now viewed as a positive force for global stability. See Robert Mandel, *Global Security Upheaval: Armed Nonstate Groups Usurping State Stability Functions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

State Policing and Military Forces

Police and military forces represent the coercive public agencies fielded by a state. Each force is meant to have a clear-cut institutional role with police utilized for intrastate crime prevention and the military utilized for interstate warfare to protect the state from opposing state militaries. A contemporary perspective on these forces can be seen in Figure 2, State Forces Continuum.

Figure 2. State Forces Continuum.

Police forces exist on the left side of this continuum and focus on crime prevention and the arrest of lawbreakers. Police utilize criminal intelligence procedures and typically work singularly or in pairs to complete their functions. While these forces are tactically adept, they have never developed or needed operational level capabilities. Community, patrol, line policing, and detective and investigative police units operate at the municipal, regional, and federal levels and are representative of these anticrime-focused activities. While police possess a low antiviolence capability—they are not meant or configured to confront armed and organized opposition forces—due to their investigative expertise, they possess a high anticorruption capability, especially within federal policing agencies.[11]

Military forces operate on the right side of the State Forces Continuum and are tasked with the mission of defeating opposing state-based military forces. The focus of these forces is that of organized destruction and killing under the condition of war between states. Since military forces oppose sentient opponents, they rely on military intelligence to understand enemy intent, capabilities, and futures. Core Army landpower forces are composed of airborne, mountain, and light and heavy mechanized units at the brigade level. While the military possesses a low anticorruption capability—it is not meant or configured to engage in investigative policing—it possesses a high antiviolence

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11 Of course, when the policing agencies of a violent nonstate actor host country are corrupted, serious conditions result. While in some countries the military is less corrupt than the police, the military does not have the ability to root out corruption so impunity still results.

capability far greater than the landpower-like capabilities of the more threatening violent nonstate actors.

The middle region of the continuum (Figure 2) represents the blurred zone of high intensity crime, low intensity conflict, and other crime-war descriptive constructs—it requires the fielding of both blended and specialized police and military forces. Domestic law enforcement has fielded Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams and bomb squads to contend with heavily armed criminals who use barricade techniques, are willing to confront law enforcement in limited firefights, and employ improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[12] Internationally, formed police units are employed. On the armed forces side, military police and explosive ordnance disposal units engage in law enforcement and antiterrorist (and anti-insurgent) activities. Further, infantry units armed with less lethal weapons have been utilized for crowd control and anti-riot missions. In turn, Special Forces—representing an unconventional landpower force—have been heavily tasked since 9/11 to directly engage specific violent nonstate actors around the globe. One of the ongoing problems for state forces tasked to contend with these actors is that stovepipes exist concerning our response—such as countergang groups work separately from counternarcotics groups who, in turn, work separately from counterterrorism groups.[13] This issue can become even more pronounced at the interstate level between cooperating state forces, especially between the American military and foreign police agencies.

In addition to the rise of state-based forces found in the middle of the state forces continuum, we are seeing the proliferation of private security and private military corporations contracting with states much like Swiss mercenaries and Italian condottieri did five hundred years ago. While many of these actors are our "allies"—at least while the money lasts—some of them are amoral parties which can be purchased by the highest bidder while others contract exclusively for threat forces composed of the larger violent nonstate actors.[14]

Landpower and Violent Nonstate Actors

Landpower may be applied appropriately and inappropriately against violent nonstate actors and in their host environments at the strategic

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12   This militarization of the police/bringing military concepts into policing has been both condemned and advocated. See, for example, Radley Bilko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013) and Charles 'Sid' Heal, *Field Command* (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2012) respectively. Further, debates on how to best employ foreign police forces for conflict environments exist. For instance, see David H. Bayley and Robert M. Perito, *The Police in War: Fighting Insurgency, Terrorism, and Violent Crime* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010) and John P. Sullivan, "The Missing Mission: Expeditionary Police for Peacekeeping and Transnational Stability," *Small Wars Journal*, May 9, 2007, http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/the-missing-mission-expeditionary-police-for-peacekeeping-and-transnational-stability.

13   Robert J. Bunker, "The Mexican Cartel Debate: As Viewed Through Five Divergent Fields of Security Studies," *Small Wars Journal—El Centro*, February 11, 2011, http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-cartel-debate. As violent nonstate actor forms increasingly blur and merge, we are starting to see better state forces integration.

14   Graham Hall Turbiville, Jr., "Outlaw Private Security Firms: Criminal and Terrorist Agendas Undermine Private Security Agendas." *Global Crime* 7, no. 3-4 (August-November 2006): 561-582.

level.[15] Inappropriate strategic application may result in foreign policy failure and even potentially contribute to diminished US national power via open-ended conflicts which place a substantial and ongoing burden on our defense budgets. In violent nonstate actors' focused strategies, landpower forces may have a sizeable and direct role; however, the preference is to devolve the opposing actors as safely and quickly as possible for policing forces to increasingly take the lead in implementing the more encompassing strategies. These strategies are as follows:[16]

- *Limited Punitive Strategy:* Of all of the strategies directed against violent nonstate actors, this is the most limited one. It principally seeks to deter certain actions that these groups are taking or may be planning to take by means of symbolic forms of punishment directed against them. For land forces, this can range from stand-off targeting of assets and personnel for destruction (via supporting drone strikes) through the seizure or destruction of those assets and personnel via raids. An example of this strategy would be engaging in a hypothetical raid against a coastal pirate town on the Somali coast.

- *Disruption and Neutralization Strategy:* This can be considered a "render safe" strategy—the intent is to ensure that the violent nonstate actors have been sufficiently weakened so they are unable to export violence, such as terrorism, outside the host country or to regions of the host country not under their control. Any combination of physical assets; infrastructure, materiel, finances, personnel, and organizational cohesion; and leader and factional/cell cohesion can be targeted by means of this strategy. While a foreign terrorist organization attrited in this manner has not been eliminated, its capacity to attack US interests will be severely degraded until it is able to reconstitute itself.

- *Co-option and Reintegration Strategy:* The intent of this strategy is to rely on persuasion and soft power to either "buy off" (e.g., via bribes and payments) or actually reintegrate personnel into the societal mainstream by means of political enfranchisement, ideological rehabilitation, amnesty, and job training and employment programs. Rehabilitation programs have been successfully carried out in Saudi Arabia and within some other states.[17] The role of land power forces within this strategy is limited with their serving more in an auxiliary security and protection role.

- *Termination Strategy:* This strategy seeks to eliminate a specific organization by dismantling it principally by coercive military and policing

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15   A separate analysis can also be made of landpower forces applied against violent nonstate actors at the operational level. Inappropriate operational application may result in military failure and loss of indigenous population support. Applying landpower at the operational level should follow the logic of proportionality, economy of force, and network response integration with policing forces. See Steven Metz, *The Future of Insurgency* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, December 10, 1993) concerning the "commercial insurgency" construct and John P. Sullivan, "Transnational Gangs: The Impact of Third Generation Gangs in Central America," *Air & Space Power Journal* (Second Trimester 2008), http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2008/2tri08/sullivaneng.htm, concerning DIME-P.

16   Army thinking is constantly evolving. Unified land operations have replaced the concept of wide spectrum operations. Proposed strategies extend the CONOPS by unifying military operations with policing operations. U.S. Department of the Army, *Unified Land Operations,* Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3.0 (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Army, May 16, 2012).

17   See the report prepared by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPTVR) and the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation (ICTR), February 24-26, 2009, Singapore, http://www.pvtr.org/pdf/Report/RSIS_ICTR_Report_2009.pdf.

activities. This requires an ongoing boots-on-the-ground presence and may require years to achieve success. This is also dependent on the size and sophistication of the targeted actor, its penetration into local society, termination strategy resources allocated, and local environmental conditions present (e.g., cross border sanctuaries). A good example was the intent of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan to eliminate al Qaeda and Taliban organizations within that host country.

Potential inhibitors of these strategies include the fact that a specific targeted actor can move to another location, or is already transnational in nature and exists simultaneously in many locations. Thus, the potential transnational existence of these threats requires the possible fielding of landpower and policing forces in multiple national locales. Additionally, some violent groups are heavily networked and exhibit a biological reconstitution capacity—like starfish growing back a lost limb—which makes them resilient to targeting.[18] Unintended second and third order effects of these targeting strategies may also result in unwanted outcomes.[19]

Another major spoiler of these strategies is the fact that if a targeted actor is weakened or eliminated, a vacuum may develop in the host environment. This condition is readily evident in host environments in lower socio-economic regions in which the illicit economy, lack of governmental authority, and dysfunctional patterns of human organization dominate. Neutralizing or eliminating a specific gang, cartel, or warlord group simply allows for a competitor, successor, or new organization to fill the void. In host environment alteration focused strategies, the role of landpower forces is that of a facilitator—they may help to provide the domestic security conditions under which these strategies can be facilitated—but are not the primary implementers of state building or strengthening regimes.[20] These strategies, integral to responding to "wars among the people" and the recognition of the human domain of warfare, are as follows:[21]

- *Stability and Support Strategy:* The intent of this strategy is to stabilize the host environment—typically a fragile or failed city, region, or state—so it does not deteriorate further. Putting an end to sectarian and violent nonstate actor violence by providing peace enforcement activities and humanitarian aid to the local populace to satisfy basic living needs (food, water, clothing, shelter, etc.) are the typical objectives. It should be noted implementation of this strategy will not fundamentally alter the host environment which will remain favorable to violent nonstate actor sustainment.

- *Limited State Building Strategy:* This strategy promotes the creation of

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18 For more about starfish (networked) organizations, see Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider* (New York: Portfolio, 2006).

19 The deportations of Los Angeles street gang members in the 1990s who were illegal immigrants to Central America gave rise to the Maras (MS-13 and M-18) in El Salvador and neighboring countries.

20 In ungoverned spaces, the reality is that the military has had to fill the governance void or risk mission failure. This mission is better left to U.S. Department of State (USDOS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and related agencies.

21 Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2008) and Charles T. Cleveland and Stuart L. Farris, "Toward Strategic Landpower," *Army*, July 2013, 20-23.

a functioning and somewhat legitimate state. This result extends beyond just the protection of the indigenous people and providing for their basic survival needs. Other components of modern society will be developed to one degree or another including a functioning civil service, education and schooling, employment opportunities in the formal economy, social welfare, and entertainment and sports programs. No provision for free and democratic elections, the enfranchisement of women, or limitations on state corruption or police excesses exists. Still, the host environment created will be less favorable to violent nonstate actor sustainment than that found in fragile and failed regions.

- *Democratic Capacity Building Strategy:* The conceptual model behind this strategy is almost seventy years old and is derived from the American experience with post-war Germany and Japan. In both instances, authoritarian governments were unconditionally defeated and the conquered indigenous populations were "societally reengineered" over the course of decades into modern democracies. Conceptual extensions of this strategy include the reconstitution of former East Germany and other Eastern European countries into democratic states with the end of the Cold War and its attempted implementation in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last dozen years with very mixed results.[22] Democratic states are viewed as producing fewer and more benign forms of violent nonstate actors than other host environments.

Conclusion

As this article has explained, landpower—in terms of conventional, general purpose formations (brigade combat teams)—is not the primary solution for contending with violent nonstate actors. In fact, given our recent experiences:

> The application of military force in its current form has limited utility when fighting modern wars among the people…Strategic victory requires a wider understanding of "forces" that includes the military and nonmilitary.[23]

While landpower forces may indeed have a sizeable and direct role in some strategies, the better choice is to utilize policing forces—both specialized and general ones—as safely and as quickly as feasible.[24] In some instances, however, specialized US Army constabulary forces may be required as an initial stabilizing force. Further, concerning host environment targeted strategies, landpower may help provide the domestic security conditions under which they can be facilitated, but it should not be the primary implementers of those conditions.

In the Iraqi and Afghani campaign theaters, lessons learned include the view that, "It takes a network to defeat a network," and "The network [our network] needed to include everyone relevant who was

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22 Concerning the need to shift from the current strategy of regime change followed by stability operations see Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "Strategy in a Time of Austerity," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2012): 58-69.

23 Cleveland and Farris, "Toward Strategic Landpower," 23.

24 Police forces are not only more appropriate against many violent nonstate actors, they are vastly cheaper to field and sustain than landpower forces.

operating within the battlespace."[25] Such networks have been coordinated principally by the US military and portray the entrepreneurship and adaptability of our landpower forces in the face of new and evolving nonstate threats. Still, as has been discussed, larger strategic issues are now in play. Our recent campaigns have taken us into conflicts that were fertile, such as Afghanistan, or became fertile, such as Iraq, host environments for violent nonstate actor emergence and sustenance. We are also observing these host environments emerge in former autocratic states such as Mexico, Libya, and Egypt, and in potentially transitioning ones such as a Syria gripped by civil war. In a sense, two paths from autocracy now exist—the preferable and hoped-for democratic one and the one dominated by violent nonstate actors who fill the vacuum of governance vacated by former institutions of an autocratic state.

The attempted transition of autocratic states is indicative of the major issues at hand. Intervening states deploying land and policing forces are increasingly finding themselves in a dilemma when confronting violent nonstate actors. Focused strategies are actor-specific and even when that actor is eliminated or reintegrated into the political process, a successor or new actor typically emerges. Host environment alteration strategies, on the other hand, are meant to alleviate the conditions under which these actors breed and grow. These strategies exist at a level beyond the use of land and policing forces and seek to engage in societal reengineering in failed, fragile, and transitioning states. US governmental programs to facilitate any form of limited state—let alone democratic capacity—building have not been up to the monumental tasks required, even when flush with monies. As a result, US attempts at both eliminating violent nonstate actors and denying them host environments have been mostly studies in failure.

This fact brings us back to the contemporary problem we now face. Our recent attempts at "democratic capacity building" in host environments have been far from successful and—given the age of austerity faced by the United States Army, its sister services, and the United States government writ large—we no longer have the resources nor the political will to engage in such long-term and expensive endeavors. This reality suggests that strategic victory in some of these environments is presently unattainable. To conserve finite elements of national power, more cost-effective forms of counter strategies—based on some form of global violent nonstate actor containment and mitigation protocol—should be considered.

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25 McChrystal, "It Takes a Network." For theory and more information on this topic, see the netwar writings of John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt.