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FUTURE WAR PAPER

Institutionalizing Small Wars Capabilities: The Future of Marine Corps Security Force Assistance

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

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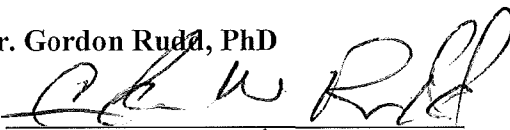
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The Challenges of Preparing for Future War

As the United States prepares for future war, it faces the challenging task of applying finite resources to seemingly infinite problems. In its quest for both dominance and relevance, the United States must develop balanced defense capabilities, ensuring that it can prevail in both conventional and small wars.¹ Despite the recognition that balanced capabilities are critical to national security, the United States habitually focuses its military preparation on the most dangerous threat, war with a peer nation, often to the exclusion of preparing for the most likely threat, a small war against a weaker state or a non-state actor. Predictably, America's adversaries refuse to play to its conventional military strengths. In articulating the dilemma, General Charles Krulak stated that while the United States may want to fight the "beloved Son of Desert Storm," it is more probable that it will encounter the "Stepchild of Chechnya."² Although such forms of irregular conflict do not play to American strengths, the United States does not have the luxury of opting out because such scenarios do not correspond to preferred notions of war.³

As the United States continues to modernize and develop increasingly sophisticated 21st century military capabilities, it must also institutionalize small wars capabilities such as security force assistance, which is defined as "activities that support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions."⁴ Security force assistance, whether applied proactively to deter conflict, or reactively as part of a stabilization and reconstruction effort, will remain a relevant capability in future war. Acknowledging that advising and assisting partners will remain an important component of United States national security, the Marine Corps should take steps to institutionalize its approach to security force assistance by dedicating operational force structure to advisor units, improving advisor training and education, and revising personnel policies that limit advising opportunities.

Security Force Assistance Déjà Vu

The ebb and flow of Marine Corps advising missions over the past century demonstrates a pattern. First, U.S. security interests necessitate military assistance to fledgling partners. In response, the Marine Corps forms ad hoc teams, conducts much discovery learning along the way, and eventually reaches a relatively effective solution.⁵ As soon as circumstances permit, the Marine Corps disbands these advising capabilities in favor of pursuing more traditional military missions, until the need for advisors arises again and the cycle repeats. This sine wave of interest in security force assistance, evident from the Banana Wars to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, demonstrates both the continued requirement for advisors and the Marine Corps' treatment of such undertakings as passing aberrations that can be addressed with improvised solutions.

As the Marine Corps determines what advising capability and capacity to preserve, it should look to the recent past for instruction. The lessons learned, and those omitted, in the wake of Vietnam should give pause to contemporary military leaders setting the course for the future force. In the aftermath of the long and divisive war in Vietnam, each of the military services retained an institutional bias for manning, training, and equipping a force to fight a conventional war against a peer threat.⁶ This focus on major combat operations prevented the military from institutionalizing many of the advising lessons it should have garnered following Vietnam. While the post-Vietnam U.S. military proved to be a lethal force when fighting like opponents, it struggled to adapt to irregular threats that refused to conform to American strengths.

The American military experience in Iraq demonstrates both the lessons learned and those neglected from Vietnam. In a three-week invasion of Iraq, U.S. forces quickly defeated the Iraqi Army. However, in the wake of conventional military victory the U.S. military struggled to provide security and empower indigenous forces. As in the early stages of Vietnam, the United

States inundated the country with infantry battalions well trained to locate, close with, and destroy an enemy, but poorly prepared to train foreign security forces. As a result of the deliberate institutional amnesia of post-Vietnam senior officers, a generation of military leaders were forced to relearn many of the lessons of small wars under fire.

As the United States enters its sixteenth year of war, it is once again at a strategic inflection point. Many strategists herald the return of great power rivalry, but the threats of violent extremism still occupy much of the United States military's attention. In this dynamic environment, U.S. political and military leaders face tough choices on how to allocate finite resources to prepare the force for future conflict. When deciding on future capabilities, leaders must resist the temptation to turn away from small wars simply because they do not play to America's military strengths. While modernizing a conventionally dominant military force, the United States must also institutionalize small wars capabilities, such as security force assistance, so that future generations of Americans will be prepared to address these recurrent challenges.

Institutionalizing Marine Corps Security Force Assistance

To empower Marines conducting advisor missions, the Marine Corps should institutionalize its approach to security force assistance by dedicating operational force structure to advisor units, improving advisor training and education, and changing manpower models to encourage some of the institution's most capable leaders to take on advisor roles.

While advising will remain a daunting task even under the best of circumstances, many of the advising challenges that the Marine Corps encounters are self-inflicted. One of these self-imposed challenges is the manner in which teams are formed to conduct advising missions. Despite a consistent demand signal, the Marine Corps continues to assemble ad hoc teams of

individual augments to fill advising requirements. The typical life cycle of an advisor unit involves the formation of a team from individual augments, a brief training period, deployment, followed by redeployment and disaggregation. Continually standing up new organizations from a manning document presents a number of administrative and operational challenges that consume leaders' time and attention. This model is an inefficient process that degrades the readiness of the units providing individual augments, limits the preparation of advisor teams, and impedes the ability of advisor teams to learn directly from those who went before them.

A way to remedy this deficiency is to create a Marine advisor regiment that includes both an advisor training cadre and deployable advisor battalions comprised of advisor teams. This advisor regiment could be formed around the nucleus of the Marine Corps' existing advisor training unit, the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group (MCSCG). From its current structure, MCSCG would retain a training cadre as well as its existing Coordination, Liaison, Assessment, and Training Sections (CLATS), which would continue to serve as a linkage to Marine Component Commanders. To form an advisor regiment, current MCSCG structure would be reinforced with two active duty advisor battalions and one reserve advisor battalion, each comprised of four deployable advisor teams. Each advisor team's composition would be tailored to its mission, but a standard advisor team would consist of approximately twenty total Marines, officers and staff non-commissioned officers, representing administration, intelligence, operations, fires, information operations, logistics, engineering, communications, and medical services. Depending on its mission, each team could be modified to include additional advisors for areas such as law enforcement, explosive ordnance disposal, or other required capabilities. Battalions and teams would be regionally aligned based on national security priorities, which would evolve over time.

This advisor regiment would remain a service retained force under Marine Forces Command allowing for centralized training and communication with the supported Geographic Combatant Command via the CLAT. Marine Forces Reserve would play a significant role in an advisor regiment. One third of the advisor regiment's deployable strength, a battalion, would be a reserve unit. Reserve forces would provide a degree of continuity as reserve Marines would be able to remain in their advising unit for a decade or more, while active duty Marines would spend several years in the regiment before returning to their primary military occupational specialty (MOS). Reserve Marines would also provide personnel with unique skill sets to augment deploying active duty teams as missions required.

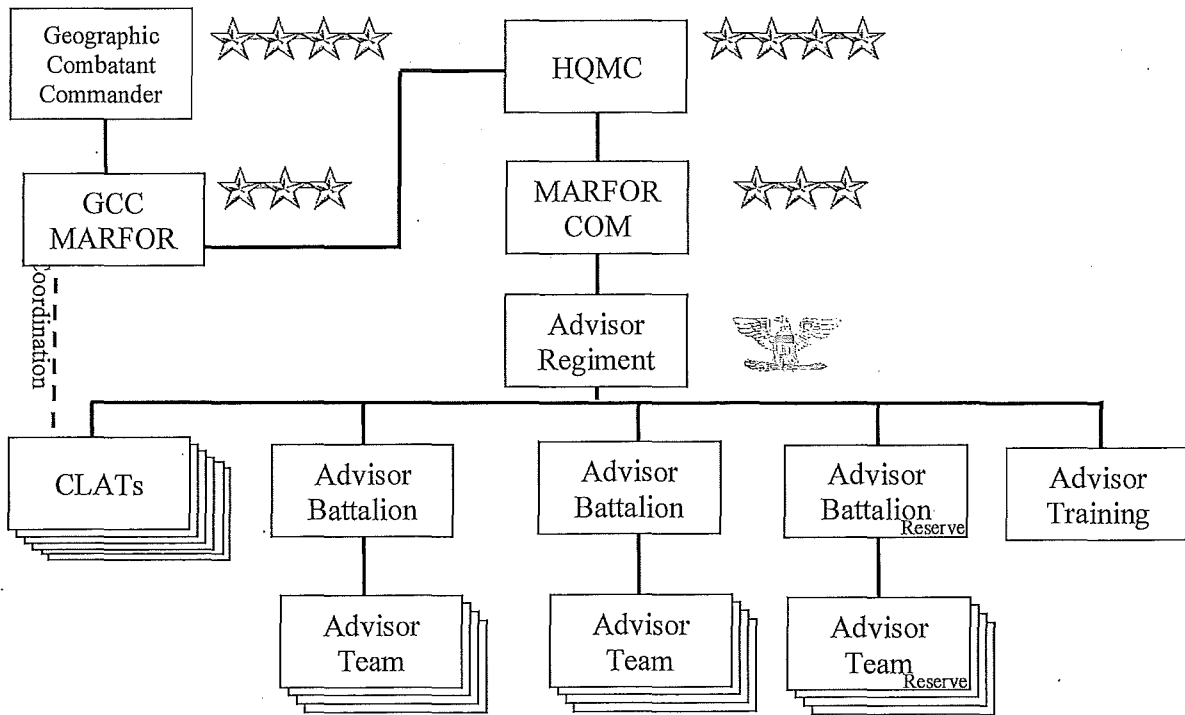


Table 1: Recommended Force Structure of Marine Advisor Regiment

The advent of an advisor regiment, along with recent changes in law, would allow for a longer-term view of security force assistance. The Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act made changes that now allow conventional forces to include training foreign security forces in their Project Objective Memorandum (POM).⁷ This inclusion in the POM extends the planning horizon for security force assistance and will allow the Marine Corps to better forecast and train for security force assistance missions, resulting in a greater degree of proficiency and unit cohesion, thus increasing the likelihood of effectiveness. The formation of an advisor regiment would also allow for continuity of effort, as many of the Marines on advisor teams would remain in the regiment and instruct subsequent teams during their preparation for deployment. An advisor regiment, accounted for in service manpower models, would alleviate the requirement for units to provide individual augments, resulting in improved force readiness.

In addition to dedicating operational force structure for advisor teams, the Marine Corps should also improve the training and education received by advisors. The advisor preparation currently offered by MCSCG is brief, with courses ranging from three days to four weeks.⁸ In contrast, the Marine Corps' Force Fitness Instructor Course, designed to develop Marines capable of enhancing the fitness of the Marines in their unit, lasts six weeks. The Advanced Mortarman Course, taught at the School of Infantry, takes seven weeks to teach its students fire direction, mortar gunnery, and mortar employment. While time is not the sole measure of importance or effectiveness, investing only four weeks in an advisor's resident schooling does not do justice to preparing Marines for such a complex mission.

Preparing advisors to be able to understand and influence their foreign counterpart should involve significant formal education. To achieve this, the Marine Corps should develop a Foreign Area Officer like program that allows advisors to spend time studying the culture,

history, economics, military, and religion, as well as the social and political nuances of the nation they will be operating in. This education should also include intensive language training that develops conversational proficiency in advisors. While this education would increase the proportion of Marines in a training status, it is a worthwhile investment that increases the chances of mission success and professionally develops Marines.

In addition to improving training and education, the Marine Corps should also revise its manpower policies to encourage some of its most capable Marines to serve as advisors. The Marine Corps must be willing to assign high quality personnel who demonstrate professional competence, maturity, patience, empathy, and above all the ability to exercise persuasive leadership, to advisor billets.⁹ Identifying Marines who possesses both an aptitude and a desire to serve in an advising capacity requires a screening process that identifies the most appropriate, rather than the most available, Marine for the job. While advising is by its nature an economy of force mission, it must not be allowed to be an economy of talent effort.

Identifying the appropriate Marines and allowing them to spend time as advisors will require deviation from traditional career paths. Current career paths are structured around officers and Marines filling key billets at certain points in their career to remain competitive for promotion and command opportunities. The time investment required to train, educate, and employ an advisor may preclude a Marine from spending time in a billet traditionally viewed as key to professional advancement. Rather than penalize the Marine for failing to conform to traditional career progression, the Marine Corps should recognize that advising provides a unique tour which develops a diversity of experience that should be embraced.

The Marine Corps touts the power of diversity as a force multiplier. It recruits diverse populations that provide eclectic perspectives which strengthen the team. While the Marine

Corps should continue to seek diversity, it must take a nuanced view of diversity, measuring it not merely by physical differences, but in terms of thought and experience. With this in mind, the Marine Corps must seek not only to recruit diverse populations but must promote ways to develop cognitive and experiential diversity as Marines progress through their careers. If Marines attend the same schools, fill the same billets, and conduct the same types of deployments for twenty plus years, they are likely to develop the same circumscribed institutional outlook. However, if Marines diverge from beaten paths, experience different cultures, and learn different methods for viewing and solving problems, they develop a diversity of experience that will benefit themselves and the Marine Corps. Marines should not be forced to follow the same narrow career paths that imbue them with the same patterns of thought. If the Marine Corps genuinely values diversity it should not only allow, but should encourage and reward, Marines who follow divergent paths that develop diversity of experience and thought.

As Marines develop these diverse skill sets, the Marine Corps must track those with advising skills for future utilization. In 2014, the Marine Corps recognized this requirement and created the free military occupational specialty (FMOS) of foreign security force advisor. This FMOS, 0570 for officers and 0571 for enlisted, is granted to those who graduate the MCSCG Marine Advisor Course or those who have operational experience as an advisor.¹⁰ While the development of an advisor FMOS is a positive change, slight revisions in awarding the MOS should coincide with increased advisor education. The FMOS of 0570 should be granted to those who complete advanced advisor education that includes language training. The FMOS of 0571 should be granted to those whose advising skills are developed through the experience track. This differentiation allows for leaders to see what level of education and experience each Marine advisor possesses and how he or she might be best employed in future assignments.

Resistance: Entrenched Paradigms, Redundancy, and Technological Solutions

The Marine Corps' continued institutional reluctance to embrace security force assistance results in part from an entrenched Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) paradigm, institutional paranoia over redundant capabilities, and an American fascination with technological solutions to war. While the Marine Corps' role will remain as an expeditionary force in readiness, as circumstances evolve, so must the ways and means for achieving desired ends. In articulating the role of the Marine Corps, a report from the 82d Congress states:

American History...has fully demonstrate the vital need for the existence of a strong force in readiness. Such a force...will constantly have a very powerful impact in relation to minor international disturbances...[and it] can prevent the growth of potentially large conflagrations by prompt and vigorous action during their incipient stages. Such a ready force, highly mobile, always at a high state of combat readiness, can be in a position to hold a full-scale aggression at bay while the American Nation mobilizes its vast defense machinery.¹¹

At the heart of this mandate is the intention to prevent burgeoning conflicts from becoming large-scale wars and, failing that, to provide time for political leaders to make and implement strategic decisions. As security challenges transform, the Marine Corps must seek diverse and complementary ways to strengthen their ability to fulfill this role. In this light, the Marine Corps should view the concept of a force in readiness not only as reactive employment of the MAGTF, but as a proactive employment of advisors to shape the environment.

Such a complementary employment of forces demands a progressive perspective on the role of Marine advisors. The traditional Marine paradigm views the expeditionary force as a MAGTF comprised of four elements: command, ground, aviation, and logistics. Advisors do not fit cleanly in to this accepted MAGTF model, thus advising is often seen as being at odds with the Marine Corps' traditional role. Marines must be cautious about adhering to constructs simply because that is the way things have always been done. In keeping with the Marine Operating

Concept's key task 6.2, evolve the MAGTF, Marine leaders should view advisors as important enablers, rather than simply as competitors for finite resources.¹²

By conducting advising missions, advisor efforts will not only shape the environment by empowering partner nations, they can also enable the MAGTF. In the course of their duties, advisors can serve as collectors, providing information that enhances the understanding of the MAGTF. Ideally advisor actions offer proactive solutions that obviate the requirement for the employment of larger forces. However, if employment of additional forces becomes necessary, advisors could serve as an inside force that provides access and facilitates the arrival of a MAGTF. These supporting actions allow advising forces to complement and enhance, rather than detract from the MAGTF. Marine leaders should be wary of adopting a false dichotomy perspective that sees advising at odds with the MAGTF. Instead, leaders should recognize that security force assistance has a role to play in national security and can also enable the MAGTF.

Part of the Marine Corps' institutional aversion to advising missions comes from a perceived redundancy with other advising forces, including special operations forces (SOF) and Army advisors. In the quest for institutional relevance and survival, the Marine Corps often avoids capabilities that are perceived as redundant with other services, as these become vulnerable to cuts when the inevitable budget reductions occur. While SOF has significant advising capability, its operational tempo driven by its role as the global synchronizer for both counterterrorism and countering weapons of mass destruction, limits its capacity.¹³ The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Commander, General Raymond Thomas, recently provided Congressional testimony in which he stated that the many demands placed on SOF have SOCOM "constantly on guard against overcommitting this relatively small force."¹⁴ Although SOF remains a highly effective tool of national security, it is not a panacea.

Acknowledging that SOF has finite capacity allows for burden sharing and a symbiotic relationship with conventional forces. Recognizing the importance of this relationship, Secretary of Defense Mattis stated in December 2017 that he expects conventional forces to increasingly undertake missions that were once the sole province of SOF.¹⁵ One element of this collaborative relationship can be the realm of security force assistance, where the roles of special operations forces and conventional forces can and should be complementary, not competitive. Likewise, Army advisors and Marine advisors can fill complementary roles. The development of an Army Security Force Assistance Brigade is a milestone in security force assistance that will benefit U.S. national security. As with many missions, the Army and the Marine Corps have unique roles to play. The Marine Corps' expeditionary mindset, service culture, and maritime nature make it distinctive and endow it with characteristics that are well suited for certain advisor missions. Based on unique capabilities and capacities, the Marine Corps, Army, and SOF will reach an advising equilibrium that reflects national security priorities, demand signals from combatant commands, and the abilities and requirements of foreign security forces.

Beyond interservice rivalry, another challenge related to security force assistance is the American obsession with technological solutions. The United States is both a casualty averse nation and a world leader in technology. These influences combined produce a false perception that technology can somehow sanitize war and make it a near casualty free endeavor. To further complicate matters, there are strong economic incentives associated with technologically advanced combat platforms like the MV-22 Osprey, the F-35 Lightning, and the amphibious combat vehicle, which produce billions in revenue for the defense industry. There is no corresponding economic incentive for advising because security force assistance relies largely on human capital. While technological solutions are an important component of war, there must be

corresponding investments in individual Marines. Just as high-technology solutions take years to shape and refine, investments in training and educating people must be made ahead of time to develop leaders who can navigate human terrain and serve as effective advisors. While acknowledging the integral but limited role that technology plays, the United States must guard against the temptation to develop technological solutions to human problems.

Ultimately the Marine Corps' ability to overcome institutional resistance to advising lies in its efficacy as a learning organization. The Marine Corps must not become a victim of antiquated paradigms and rigid thinking. Instead, it must recognize and seize emerging opportunities to gain an advantage. This sort of innovation requires the support of senior leaders. As Williamson Murray writes in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, "Without the emergence of bureaucratic acceptance by senior military leaders, including adequate funding for new enterprises and viable career paths to attract bright officers, it is difficult, if not impossible for new ways of fighting to take root within existing military institutions."¹⁶

Institutional Benefits

These recommended reforms, including the creation of an advisor regiment, increased advisor training and education, and revised manpower policies, would enhance the Marine Corps and by extension U.S. national security. The benefits of these reforms include developing leaders with diverse experiences, institutionalizing advising capabilities that could be expanded in the case of a large-scale counterinsurgency, and creating a cadre of officers and staff non-commissioned officers that can serve as the foundation for additional combat units in the case of large-scale conventional war.

The Marine Corps has long placed a premium on its people. The 2017 Marine Operating Concept reemphasizes the importance of human capital by articulating a critical task to "exploit

the competence of the individual Marine.”¹⁷ In keeping with this outlook, developing and employing capable Marine advisors should be viewed as an investment that not only provides a return during a Marine’s advisor tour, but continues to pay dividends throughout a Marine’s career. Advising tours develop cultural understanding as only complete immersion can. This understanding of the human dimension of conflict and the interplay of people, culture, and politics, equips Marines with a unique perspective that is difficult to acquire simply through training or education. Advising also develops leaders who are adept at balancing risk, able to make decisions in ambiguous environments based on commander’s intent, and capable of exercising organizational leadership where the art of persuasion and a reliance on moral, rather than legal, authority is key.

These are indispensable skills that are in keeping with the Marine Corps’ maneuver warfare philosophy and are relevant across the spectrum of conflict. In *Mars Learning*, author Keith Bickel chronicles the Marine Corps’ campaigns in the Banana Wars. When discussing the formative advising experiences of Marines such as Chesty Puller and Mike Edson, Bickel writes, “a generation of Marine officers received in the fields of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua some of the best combat leadership training a young officer could have received during the pre-World War II period.”¹⁸ Today, Marine leaders continue to benefit from advising tours. Reflecting on his advisor experience in Iraq, Colonel William McCollough stated that it was “The most important tour I had to prepare me to be a battalion commander.”¹⁹ This from an officer who prior to battalion command completed tours as a company commander, and as an operations officer and an executive officer at both the battalion and regimental levels.

In addition to developing individual Marines, the professionalization of security force assistance also institutionalizes the skill, making it part of the professional repertoire. While it

may seem absurd to a contemporary observer that the U.S. military could ever forget the skill set of security force assistance, one need not look any further than early stages of Afghanistan and Iraq to see how severely American advising skills had been allowed to atrophy. A failure to institutionalize the small wars lessons of Vietnam just a few decades earlier led to discovery learning in the Middle East that consumed American blood, treasure, time, and credibility.

An institutionalized security force assistance capability has the most practical utility in shaping operations, but if necessary it can also be expanded to support post conflict stabilization operations, including counterinsurgency. While the United States has no discernable plans to conduct a forced regime change followed by reconstruction, the future is uncertain and the United States may one day find that it is in the nation's best interest to do just that. The past sixteen years have aptly demonstrated that overthrowing adversaries is easier than leaving a sustainable government and security force in place. While the United States rightly spends much of its focus on ensuring it is able to defeat a peer threat, it must also develop the capability to train foreign security forces which allows for a viable exit strategy rather than indefinite occupation. Institutionalizing security force assistance will begin to develop the necessary skill sets and form a unit, the Marine advisor regiment, that could be greatly expanded if required.

An additional benefit of a Marine advisor regiment, is a cadre force of field grade officers and staff non-commissioned officers. In the event of a large conventional war, these leaders could serve as the foundation for additional conventional combat units. While junior Marines and officers can be developed from the civilian population fairly rapidly, producing field grade officers and staff non-commissioned officers with a decade or more of experience takes time. A Marine advisor regiment would serve as a repository of leadership that could be tapped in the event of major war.

Conclusion

U.S. conventional military dominance makes it unlikely that adversaries will contest the United States via direct conventional means. Instead, competitors will likely seek to operate in gray zones short of conflict that challenge the United States, but still leave a degree of ambiguity and plausible deniability. In these gray areas, security force assistance will allow the United States to demonstrate commitment, empower partners to address nascent issues, and contribute towards conflict termination. In advocating for such an approach, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates writes,

Wherever possible, U.S. strategy is to employ indirect approaches - primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces - to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military interventions. In this kind of effort, the capability of the United States' allies and partners may be as important as its own, and building their capacity is arguably as important as, if not more so than, the fighting the United States does itself.²⁰

In this context, security force assistance will continue to be a relevant component of future war. Marine Corps actions to institutionalize security force assistance by creating an advisor regiment, improving advisor training and education, and modifying personnel policies will develop leaders with diverse experiences, further professionalize the skill of advising, and provide a cadre of leaders available in the event of major war. Such actions will make positive long-term contributions to the national security of the United States.

In a world full of threats, the United States will continue to face difficult decisions of how to allocate finite resources to influence seemingly endless problems. As the United States continues to adapt to an evolving security environment, it must ensure that it does not allow itself to adhere to antiquated paradigms simply because they play to American strengths. The United States must recognize both continuity and change in the environment and innovate accordingly, all the while remembering that dominance is not always synonymous with relevance.²¹

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- ¹² Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, “Marine Operating Concept,” (Washington DC, September 2016).
- ¹³ Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas, III, Commander United States Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee of the 115th Congress, 4 May, 2017.
- ¹⁴ Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas, III, Commander United States Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee of the 115th Congress, 4 May, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Department of Defense News Release, “Lines Blurring Between Special Ops, Conventional Forces, Mattis Says,” 29 Dec 2017 <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1406143/lines-blurring-between-special-ops-conventional-forces-mattis-says/>
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- ¹⁷ Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, “Marine Operating Concept,” (Washington DC, September 2016).
- ¹⁸ Keith Bickel, *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps’ Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940* (Westview, 2001), 250.
- ¹⁹ William McCollough, interview with the author, 17 Nov 2017.
- ²⁰ Robert Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” Foreign Affairs, January 2009.
- ²¹ James Mattis, “Irregular Warfare, Hybrid Threats, and the Future Role of Ground Forces,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 June, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1ZM3CfWh1I>

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