

Knowledge Is

Adaptations Required To Survive In the Human Domain

U.S. Army/Pfc. Dixie Rae Liwanag



As a superpower, America should be able to prevail across the spectrum of conflict, from traditional military threats posed by rival nation-states, to irregular threats posed by terrorist groups and nonstate actors like al Qaeda, to hybrid threats that bridge the two. When the decision is made to commit land forces in order to achieve an objective abroad in support of national interests, the Army owes it to the American people to make sure it has the proper tools available for the joint force commander to get the job done effectively and efficiently. As the Army prepares for an admittedly uncertain future, it can look to the present and recent past to help determine if, in fact, it possesses the necessary suite of capabilities required to prevail in 21st century warfare.

Twelve years of war in Afghanistan are especially instructive when examined through the lens of the existing warfighting domains. The International Security Assistance Force, of which the U.S. Army provides the largest component, possesses absolute dominance over the Taliban—quantitatively and qualitatively—in the land, air, maritime, space and cyber domains. Therefore, the question must be asked: How is it that a ragtag, largely illiterate guerrilla force, equipped primarily with AK-47 assault rifles, RPG-7

rocket launchers, unsecure handheld radios and flip-flops, can drive the best-trained, best-equipped, best-educated, most technologically advanced and most networked military in the history of warfare to its longest war, one that will most likely conclude—in the most optimistic of analyses—as a stalemate? Perhaps it is because the Taliban possesses a decisive advantage in what is emerging as the relevant domain in “wars among the people”—the human domain.

The human dimensions or human factors of war are nothing new. War is, after all, a human creation, a form of conflict that is ultimately waged upon, among and between humans. The allegedly new idea that has emerged in modern conflict is not the *existence* of the human being in conflict; it is the *relevance* of the human being in conflict. Just as airspace has existed for millennia, even before the existence of humans, it was not until the invention of the airplane that air—and the ability to skillfully and meaningfully contest within it—became truly relevant to the outcome of wars and conflict. This, in turn, merited the recognition of an air domain, the establishment of the U.S. Air Force, and the development of new capabilities, integrated operational concepts, and necessary doctrinal, organizational, training and leader development transformations. Today, we cannot

Power

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U.S. Army/Staff Sgt. Jason Epperson

Near left: Staff Sgt. Omar Jackson (left) and 2nd Lt. Ross Hines, 509th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, greet Afghans while on patrol near Enzarkay Pass in eastern Afghanistan's Paktia Province. Opposite page: Spc. Dustin Emkewalker, Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, pulls security during a patrol in Paktia Province.

imagine fighting a war—or prosecuting any lesser conflict—without dominating the air domain.

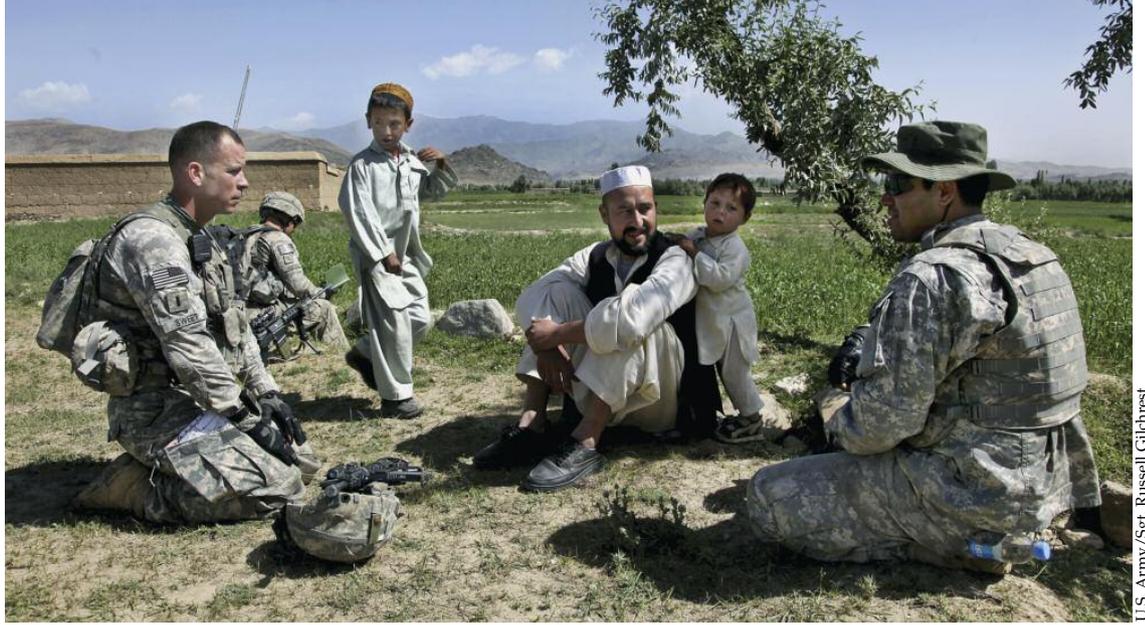
The relevance of the human being in war was a lesson the Army experienced in Vietnam yet chose not to learn. Instead of looking to acknowledge and build warfighting competencies in the human domain, the Army chose to say “never again” to fighting unconventional, protracted, messy wars in far-off places. Instead, it chose to develop and pursue a doctrine of active defense focused on defending Western Europe from a Soviet invasion. This was the right and necessary decision, given the context of the Cold War and the state of the Army at the time, but it was ultimately wrong to essentially ignore the lessons of Vietnam.

As we have learned, thinking enemies will seek to avoid our strengths—combined arms and decisive campaigns of annihilation—and attack our greatest weakness with their greatest strength: the ability to conduct protracted, exhausting campaigns primarily within the human domain. Indeed, if America ever finds itself once again contesting in wars in which the object is not the destruction of enemy forces but instead to influence relevant populations toward our desired ends, then Army formations and land forces must understand the people they are trying to influence.

Adapting for the human domain will be challenging. For example, its requirements are largely contrary to current and traditional Army personnel management and staffing paradigms. The Army’s longstanding personnel management systems and policies are optimized for traditional, industrial-age warfare. It is acceptable for leaders—officers and senior noncommissioned officers—to serve in tactical units for two-year stints because, ultimately, these leaders are designed to be rapidly replaceable. In the context of large-scale traditional warfare, platoon leaders, company commanders, and even battalion and brigade commanders can be killed in the blink of an eye. Indeed, their entire formations could be wiped off the map within minutes during a large-scale, high-intensity, combined arms battle. The point is this: Leaders and soldiers within formations optimized for conducting combined arms maneuver in the land domain must be rapidly replaceable.

This is not to suggest the Army should completely do away with its existing personnel management model. Again, it is necessary and sufficient for the realities of prosecuting a large-scale, conventional war against a rival nation in the traditional land domain which remains our nation’s principal military deterrent. Recent events remind us

Platoon leader 1st Lt. Kevin Sweet (left), 503rd Infantry Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, and an interpreter speak with an Afghan man in the village of Ibrahim Khel in the Nerkh District of Wardak Province.



U.S. Army/Sgt. Russell Gilchrist

that this is a potential reality for which the Army must always remain prepared, but this model is insufficient for building and maintaining the type of expertise and long-term relationships required to prevail in the human domain. There are no cookie-cutter solutions for defeating threats across the spectrum of conflict.

We learned the difficulty of employing AirLand Battle doctrine against threats like the Taliban and al Qaeda because it largely was not relevant to the nature of the conflict. We continue, however, to employ a cookie-cutter solution—optimized and configured for industrial-age maneuver warfare—when it comes to the development, utilization and employment of our Army’s officers and senior noncommissioned officers. This does not make sense if the Army desires to have balanced and optimized capability prevail across the spectrum of conflict. Perhaps it is time to adapt the Army personnel management model to the broader requirements of both land and human domain warfare.

Our current national strategy documents and joint warfighting concepts acknowledge the complexity of the future operating environment. Conflict and war—as an interaction between humans—have been, and will continue to be, complex endeavors. In the paradigm of industrial-age warfare, the complexity posed by humans in the land domain is reduced by rendering them largely irrelevant—killing enemy soldiers, destroying key military and economic infrastructure, and bypassing or isolating civilians

and noncombatants. Today, modern democracies are generally unwilling to accept the massive collateral damage associated with these methods of reducing complexity. In addition, they lack the patience to sustain costly, protracted wars against irregular foes. This does not prevent democracies like America, however, from deploying military force to deter, defend, engage in or pacify an intolerably violent situation abroad when national interests are at stake.

If we accept the aforementioned assertions as true, then it would behoove the Army to study the capabilities required for operating in the human domain and then develop the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities necessary to prevail there. The more we know about the places our soldiers will be deployed to—and, most importantly, the people that reside there—the better we should be able to at least comprehend (yet admittedly never fully reduce) the complexities encountered. This knowledge should provide the necessary context and understanding to help inform better, more effective decisionmaking across the levels of war, from the tactical to the strategic. Developing Army competencies in the human domain can potentially help translate the appropriate mix of hard and soft power into a more strategically useful and coherent application of smart power.

To be clear, adapting the Army for the human domain will not guarantee victory, nor will it make future warfighting any easier; there is no such magic bullet. Nevertheless, Army formations must be able to understand the people in the areas they are trying to influence. This sense of understanding will enable Army leaders across all echelons to better visualize, describe, direct, lead and assess meaningful actions toward solving the problem at hand. Learning from the past in order to better prepare for the future, the Army should begin taking concrete actions toward at least studying the human domain to determine the necessary adaptations required to adequately contest against our current and unknown future adversaries within this most complex of environments. We can no longer afford to navigate it by Braille. ★

Lt. Gen. Charles T. Cleveland assumed command of U.S. Army Special Operations Command in July 2012. He has commanded from the Special Forces detachment level through the sub-unified command level. He holds a bachelor’s degree from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a master’s degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College. **Lt. Col. Stuart L. Farris** is a Special Forces officer currently commanding 1st Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne). He has served six tours in Afghanistan as a member of the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne). He holds master’s degrees in theater operations from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College’s School of Advanced Military Studies and international relations from Webster University.