

Developing a Common Understanding of Unconventional Warfare

By MARK GRDOVIC

In June 2009, the commanders of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) adopted the following definition of unconventional warfare (UW):

Unconventional Warfare consists of activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area.

The USSOCOM commander further directed that all forces assigned within his command adopt this single definition, concurrent with the official change to the doctrine that will follow pending the publishing of the new Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, in the near future.

This revised definition was the culmination of an effort initiated by USSOCOM in 2008 based on an identified lack of common understanding across the Department of Defense (DOD) as well as the special operations community. The working group that developed the final definition met for 3 days in April 2009 at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center (USAJFKSWC) at Fort Bragg. Subject matter experts included representatives from USSOCOM, USASOC, U.S. Army Special Forces Command, USAJFK-SWC, Joint Special Operations University, Naval Postgraduate School, and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

The catalyst for this effort came as a result of the USSOCOM Global Synchronization Conference in October 2008, where the lack of a precise and common understanding of UW became particularly evident. The coexistence of multiple definitions, compounded by varying interpretations, significantly hampered effective discussion or planning. The state of ambiguity not only undermined the credibility and value of the topic among military professionals, but also divided the special operations community into two main schools of thought.

One school argued that UW is an umbrella concept encompassing a wide variety of activities conducted by irregular forces. This concept includes support to resistance movements and insurgencies, as well as other operations conducted by irregular forces. This essentially delineates UW from other operations by the methodology of employing irregular forces. In this context, all missions conducted by irregular forces are considered UW. These missions could be conducted against a state or nonstate actor or an organization. Other special operations (direct action, special reconnaissance, counterterrorism) would be denoted as exclusively unilateral or coalition actions and would not involve irregular forces.

The other school of thought advocated UW specifically as a type of special operation, which is the enablement of resistance movements and insurgencies. Within this construct, UW can involve numerous activities, but these activities are not exclusive to the UW mission. While the associated tactics, techniques, and procedures for working with guerrilla forces and undergrounds greatly enable special operations forces to perform other special operations, the use of irregular forces alone does not make these operations UW. They are categorized by what they aim to achieve rather than their methodology or the type of force conducting them.

Evolution

Since the introduction of the term *UW* into the DOD lexicon in 1955, the definition has seen numerous changes. When the incremental changes of the last few decades are viewed collectively, it becomes apparent that the continued expansion and contraction of the topic have been counterproductive to the common understanding of UW.

By 1990, the UW definition was little more than a string of unspecific nonbinding phrases, followed by a list of possible associated tactics or activities. This definition left the reader with a vague description about UW and little in the way of anything defining the essence of the topic:

A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare, and other direct offensive, low visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and evasion and escape.¹

In June 2001, the Army definition was modified leading to a 2003 change in the joint definition. The genesis for this change, initiated in 1999, was largely due to a prevailing perception that the likelihood of conducting UW was low, if not nonexistent. Therefore, an effort had to be made to remove all wording that could be perceived as limiting. To this end, “normally of long duration” was removed and the phrase “through, with, or by” was added. The phrase “low visibility, covert or clandestine” was also removed along with the distinction of “indirect activities.” “Evasion and escape” was changed to the more UW-specific “unconventional assisted recovery,” and the caveat of “includes but is not limited to” was added to the list of activities:

UW is a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, predominantly conducted through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. UW includes, but is not limited to, guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and unconventional assisted recovery.²

Interestingly, as the definition changed over time, much of the amplifying material in the doctrinal text remained the same. However, history has shown that definitions must stand on their own merit of clarity without requiring the reader to do further research. Much of the previous UW doctrine included a definition of unconventional

Lieutenant Colonel Mark Grdovic, USA, is currently assigned to Special Operations Command Central.

warfare immediately followed by a paragraph clarifying the definition. The first line following the UW definition in the 1998 and 2003 JP 3-05, as well as the Army 1990 Field Manual (FM) 31-20 and 2001 FM 3-05.20, *Special Forces Operations*, stated, “UW is the military and paramilitary aspect of an insurgency or other armed resistance movement.”

Similarly, the first line in the 2003 Army FM 3.05.201, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare Operations* (also derived from amplifying material in the 1992, 1998, and 2003 JP 3-05), seemed necessary to provide clarity to the previously stated definition: “The intent of U.S. UW operations is to exploit a hostile power’s political, military, economic, and psychological vulnerability by developing and sustaining resistance forces to accomplish U.S. strategic objectives.”

The vagueness within the actual definition led some to interpret the last line—“UW includes, but is not limited to”—in a manner similar to a menu of activities that could be considered UW. However, this offered little value to decisionmakers, as the majority of these activities (or tactics and techniques) are not considered exclusive to the conduct of UW by others in DOD.

The same community of interest listed above conducted a similar effort in 2005 to clarify the definition. Although initiated based on a recognition of a lack of clarity following the two successful UW campaigns in Operation *Enduring Freedom* in 2001 and Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in 2003, the ongoing debates regarding the war on terror and counterinsurgency at the time inadvertently changed the effort from one of clarifying the topic of UW to an effort to make it more applicable to the current campaign. As a result, the topic of UW was presented as more of a methodology than a type of operation. The description declared the methodology of working through, with, or by irregulars as the construct that defined UW.

While this situation theoretically broadened the applicability of UW to all scenarios and adversaries, the unintended consequence was the subsequent removal of previously requisite knowledge and skills associated with the topic of supporting resistance movements and insurgencies. Doctrine, unlike concepts, is based on proven best practices and principles. This new concept was first presented in the form of Army doctrine in 2007. The resulting confusion was evident by the inclusion of “Support to Insurgency” as a topic separate from UW in the early drafts of the 2008 Irreg-

ular Warfare Joint Operations Concept and the 2008 Army FM 3-0, *Operations*.

The highly successful UW campaigns of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 were quickly labeled as outdated versions of traditional or classical UW. This derogatory categorization gave rise to new phrases such as *Advanced UW*, *Black UW*, and *Modern UW*, all of which are as inaccurate as they are unhelpful. Subsequently, the operational shortcomings of those campaigns remain largely unstudied and unresolved 8 years later.

by 1990, the UW definition was little more than a string of unspecific nonbinding phrases, followed by a list of possible associated tactics or activities

While various concepts labeled as new applications of UW were presented as alternative methodologies for countering irregular warfare threats, it was largely unnoticed that most if not all of these new concepts already existed in the form of other doctrine. Examples of concepts from the last few years that have sometimes been misrepresented as new UW concepts include the support to tribal irregulars, such as the Sons of Iraq or Afghan tribal elements. Army foreign internal defense doctrine accounted for this tactic since 1965, and it remains in the current doctrine:

Remote area operations are operations undertaken in insurgent-controlled or contested areas to establish islands of popular support for the HN [host nation] government and deny support to the insurgents. They differ from consolida-

tion operations in that they are not designed to establish permanent HN government control over the area. Remote areas may be populated by ethnic, religious, or other isolated minority groups. They may be in the interior of the HN or near border areas where major infiltration routes exist. Remote area operations normally involve the use of specially trained paramilitary or irregular forces. SF [Special Forces] teams support remote area operations to interdict insurgent activity, destroy insurgent base areas in the remote area, and demonstrate that the

HN government has not conceded control to the insurgents. They also collect and report information concerning insurgent intentions in more populated areas. In this case, SF teams advise and assist irregular HN forces operating in a manner similar to the insurgents themselves, but with access to superior [combat support] and [combat service support] resources.³

Similarly, the notion of using irregulars to conduct attacks against terrorists or insurgents as a form of UW seems to be a reinvention of long-standing direct action and counterterrorism doctrine. It is a common misconception that direct action refers to U.S. unilateral action. However, the term *direct action*, first introduced in special operations doctrine in 1969, was meant to imply quantifiable offensive action taken directly against an



Air Force pararescue specialists are trained and equipped to conduct conventional and unconventional operations

U.S. Air Force (Liliana Moreno)

enemy—not action conducted *directly* by U.S. forces unilaterally. Counterterrorism doctrine, although limited, includes attacks against terrorist infrastructure, whether conducted by U.S. unilateral forces or with the assistance of other forces, be they regular or irregular. The methodology used or type of force conducting the operation does not change the type of operation.

The current USSOCOM- and USASOC-approved UW definition is significant for several reasons. First and foremost, it provides instant clarity to decisionmakers. With clarity come credibility, confidence, and trust, all of which are essential in the relationship between the special operations community and senior decisionmakers. Secondly, this definition brings a degree of accountability previously absent from this topic. Specifically, it ensures that individuals and organizations possess the associated professional knowledge and operational capabilities to claim proficiency in UW.

In 1983, Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh stated, “Doctrine is the cornerstone upon which a special operations capability can be erected. . . . Our failure . . . to develop doctrine has prevented special operations in the Army from gaining permanence and acceptability within the ranks of the military.” Ideally, this level of clarity will foster the development of the capabilities specifically required for UW in the 21st century. Perhaps more importantly it will lead to the integration of the topic into mainstream professional military education and training, thereby enabling the special operations community to better complement the conventional force capabilities as well as offer the geographic combatant commands a full spectrum of options for the challenges of today and tomorrow. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Joint Publication (JP) 3–05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 28, 1992).

² JP 3–05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, December 17, 2003).

³ Field Manual 3–05.202, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2007).

Operational Commander’s Intent

By MILAN VEGO

The commander’s intent is the key element in providing a framework for freedom to act and thereby enhance and foster initiative by subordinate commanders during the execution of their assigned missions. Yet despite its great importance, the commander’s intent is still not understood well in the U.S. military. All too often, its purpose, content, and execution are either misunderstood or misused. There is also little recognition that its importance varies for each Service and at each level of command. Another problem is that the commander’s intent is increasingly (and wrongly) used for purely administrative and other noncombat activities in peacetime. Perhaps the main reason for this is the lack of knowledge and understanding of the historical roots and the-oretical underpinnings of the entire concept and its purpose.

In general, the importance of the intent depends on the character of the military objective to be accomplished, levels of command, and the nature of the medium in which pending operations will be conducted. The advantages of applying the commander’s intent are generally higher in a decentralized command and control (C²) because it is there that a large degree of freedom of action is required so subordinate commanders can act independently and take the initiative in accomplishing their assigned missions. In general, the more nonmilitary aspects of the objective predominate, the greater the need for centralized C², and therefore the smaller the importance of the commander’s intent. In other words, the intent is much more critical in a high-intensity conventional war than in operations short of war. The higher the level of command, the greater the factors of space, time, and force, and thereby the greater the importance of the commander’s intent. It plays a relatively greater role in land warfare than in war at sea or in the air. This does not

mean that the intent is unimportant in naval and air warfare.

Term Defined

The *intent* can be defined as the description of a desired military endstate (or “landscape”) that a commander wants to see after the given mission is accomplished. In terms of space, the intent pertains to the scope of the commander’s estimate (in U.S. terms, the commander’s area of responsibility plus an undefined area of interest). Depending on the scale of the objective, tactical, operational, and strategic desired endstates can be differentiated. For example, in a major operation, the commander’s intent should refer to the situation beyond a given area of operations plus the area of interest, while in a campaign, it should encompass a given theater of operations plus the area of interest.

The Purpose

The main purpose of the intent is to provide a framework for freedom to act for subordinate commanders. In general, the broader the operational commander’s intent, the greater the latitude subordinate commanders have in accomplishing assigned missions. The intent should allow the subordinate commanders to exercise the highest degree of initiative in case the original order no longer applies or unexpected opportunities arise.¹ In issuing the intent, the higher commander informs subordinate commanders what needs to be done to achieve success even if the initially issued orders become obsolete due to unexpected changes in the situation.² The intent should provide an insight into why the higher commander is embarking on a particular course of action.³ The higher commander’s intent should define

Dr. Milan Vego is Professor of Operations in the Joint Military Operations Department at the Naval War College.