

The Challenges of Military Operations in Densely Populated Areas: An Australian Perspective

Mark Evans

As an operational and tactical commander responsible for the conduct of military operations in complex situations, my focus has been drawn to the relationship between the military and the civilian population. The conduct of military operations in cities and towns is particularly difficult due to the complexities of modern warfare that are always diverse, problematic, and full of errors, imperfections, and contradictions. Success, then, can only be achieved by comprehending the nature of war and characteristics of modern military operations, which is fundamental to managing the complex environment of operations and finding the right balance in dealing with the adversary, the civilian population, and the many other protagonists in the battle space. I would like to provide a doctrinal response to the challenge of conducting military operations in densely populated areas and my own personal perspective as a military commander of the Australian force.

Background

There is a perennial debate regarding war's nature and characteristics. Clausewitz was right in the sense that the nation state paradigm, on which he based his theory of war, is unlikely to change in the near future. While we have seen the proliferation of non-state actors, nationhood remains an attractive aspiration for many.

The nature of war remains unchanged. Clausewitz identified the relationship that exists between governments, civilian populations,

Lieutenant General (ret.) Mark Evan, former Chief of Joint Operations in the Australian Army

and military forces, and recognized that despite the emergence of new technologies, war is fundamentally about the human condition and is a political act concerning the clash between human wills. Hobbesian in its nature, war is brutal, violent, and hideous, embraces the soldier, senator, and citizen alike, and entangles the fortunes of nation states, military forces, and civilian populations. The possibility of a conflict occurring between military forces alone with no consideration given to the civilian populations is, therefore, unlikely.

Modern military operations are different from operations conducted in the past in the sense that they have gained a broader application than that of war alone. Military forces nowadays must be prepared to pursue national objectives and win the nation's wars expeditiously, effectively, and efficiently. Given the security challenges and complexities nation states are facing, military forces are now also expected to have a role in a broader campaign that includes the period of normalcy, which operational planners refer to as Phase Zero. Along with other arms of government, the military forces shape the environment, engage with the local population, and hedge against warlike operations.

The Character of Modern Military Operations

Influenced by a world of continual change, the character of modern military operations has transformed as well. Population growth, diminution of natural resources, enlargement of the wealth-poverty gap, climate change, the popularization of social media usage and its impact on "people power," exponential advances in technology, increasing world urbanization, and changes in the international political and social framework, including the proliferation of non-state actors, have all influenced modern military operations tremendously.

While military operations have always been complicated for the military commander, changes in the environment create emerging complexities also for military forces. Brigadier Kitson, a distinguished British military commander and operational expert, coined the term "low intensity operations" to describe the character of post World War II operations that were deemed less than war fighting but more than constabulary operations, like those in Malaysia, Kenya, Yemen, and Northern Ireland. The phrase "operations other than war" grew from that. From trends emerging in the 1990s, General Krulak of the United States Marine Corps used the term

“Three Block War” to describe a new military operation, where military forces were required to simultaneously conduct conventional war fighting, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian assistance within the space of three city blocks.

Some military theorists believe we are currently moving into the fourth generation of warfare, which is characterized by loose and ill-defined networks of the adversary, who becomes more powerful through information technology. This adversary is focused on the erosion of political will rather than on creating damage to the military forces that deal with him. Under these new conditions, military forces are required to show patience and restraint, unlike in past operations that demanded their ruthless pursuit of the adversary’s destruction.

Conducting military operations in populated areas is not a new phenomenon. Since war began, one military objective has been to control cities and ports and subjugate civilian populations. The hub, however, for future military operations is likely to be in densely populated civilian concentrations. As nations continue to urbanize, the adversary migrates to cities, where he cannot be as easily located, watched, or targeted. Military operations in densely populated areas will, therefore, be characterized by a ubiquitous scrutiny of journalists and international lawyers.

Each week, one million people migrate from rural areas to cities, where half of the world’s population currently lives. These cities are fragile, house a clash of civilizations from the mega wealthy to the ultra poor, and integrate agrarian, industrial, and high technology ages. They are the center points of political power, hubs of information, markets of transnational crime, and breeding grounds for terrorism. In the urban labyrinth of buildings, streets, tunnels, and sewer systems, the civilian population lives side by side with belligerents, non-state actors, terrorists, and criminals.

Military forces can reduce their footprints in cities by leveraging off their information technologies standoff capabilities, or by immersing in the environment and applying a human centric approach. Operating in cities provides the military force with the opportunity to become part of the environment instead of treating it as a threat and place emphasis on smart soldiers rather than on smart weapons.

Gauging from historical performance, the adversary attempts to neutralize the military’s strengths, amplify its weaknesses, and use the civilian population to his advantage. Within the city, the adversary is not

as likely to be accountable for his actions and needs to achieve less to be successful. He is, therefore, less disciplined and attentive to the laws of war. Militarily, the adversary endeavors to diminish the military force's standoff capabilities, attempts to draw the force into a game of attrition, and lets time degrade the force's moral legitimacy.

The military force may be ethically, culturally, and religiously different than the civilian population, and consequently must avoid the arrogance of believing it understands the local population. In Northern Ireland, I operated as a part of the British Forces in an environment where the force and civilian population shared the same language, watched the same television channels, worshipped the same God, practiced the same religion, and had the same ethnicity. We did not, however, understand the Irish as we did not share their history, tribal tribulations, or social nuances, and lacked the finesse and understanding of the situation to be tactically successful. While we operated in Northern Ireland for months, the local population and the adversary lived there all their lives, and when our force finally left the area, the local population merely saw a new force, which came in to start another cycle of searches, lift operations, and patrols. And if it is difficult when the differences between the soldiers and civilians are small, how much more difficult is it for the military force when the void is wider, like in the case of the Westerners in Afghanistan. The complexity of human networks can only be understood through long-term knowledge of their environments, which the force needs to invest time in understanding.

Leveraging off indigenous and human intelligence capabilities is vital, and can be done by using the civilian population's desire to return to normalcy. Although the civilian population is unlikely to be completely acquiescent to the military force, when provided with normalcy, they can be influenced to support the force. If the military force desires to win the hearts and minds of the civilian population, it must engage them as much as possible. The media is an important domain in that respect, as even in the poorest neighborhoods of the poorest cities, people receive information from blogs, televisions, radios, iPhones, Facebook, and Twitter. The media, then, has the ability to communicate, inform, educate, persuade, and provide hope for the general population.

The Australian Doctrinal Response

Australian military campaign experience since the early 1990s reinforces much of what has been said about the character of modern military operations. Australian forces have deployed in that time to Somalia, Cambodia, Bougainville, East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Our operations in population centers, such as Baidoa, Dili, Baghdad, Nasariyah, Tarin Kot, and Kandahar taught me that difficult environments present new complexities and require a less kinetic response.

The most valuable lesson learned by these instances has been the necessity of the military force to interact with the civilian population. While the Australian military force possesses superior firepower, mobility, and surveillance capabilities, the adversary has the advantages of surprise, population support, and time. Thus, our definition of success changed from destroying the enemy to securing the population.

We reviewed our military doctrine of *adaptive campaigning* through the lenses of complex physical, human, and informational environments. Based on the premise that military operations are only one aspect of a larger governmental campaign, we learned that our doctrine must also focus on conflict resolution and involve political, social, and economic strands.

The Australian army's doctrine identifies operations in complex environments as being a blend of different ambiguous and non-linear undertakings. Our military force engages with NGOs, the media, foreign intelligence services, irregular auxiliaries, police forces, possibly neutral forces, and various adversarial elements ranging from quasi-regular forces to militias, terrorists, and criminals.

The Australian doctrine changed to include more of the quality of the Australian soldier and human centric lines of operation. It recognizes the need for operations to be conducted inside the complex terrain, with a focus on scalable close combat capabilities. The distinction between low, medium, and high intensity operations is no longer seen as relevant because there is no transition from one to the other. Instead, focus is placed on close combat capabilities, such as engaging the adversary while developing a relationship with the civilian population, and enabling influence to win back a degree of normality.

Consequently, the military force requires an array of lethal and non-lethal capabilities. In addition, it needs the support of equipment and

technologies to enhance the protection of the force and population and the opportunity to engage with civilians as effectively as with the adversary.

The *adaptive campaign approach* sees the military operation as part of an integrated whole of government effort to resolve conflicts. The military operation influences and shapes the perceptions, allegiances, and actions of the civilian population. Our approach also believes in enabling peaceful political discourse and supporting the quick return to Phase Zero. The military is allowed to operate within a joint interagency task command that includes five interwoven and population centric lines of operation – maintaining and utilizing a joint close combat capability, population protection, public information, public support, and indigenous capacity building.

Our success is predicted on adaptive action through knowledge. At the operational and tactical levels, it is vital to understand the environment and all aspects of the complex terrain, identify changes to systems when they occur, and correct or adapt to them before the adversary realizes them. The operational environment is seen as one of competitive learning with a continuous adaptive cycle of act, sense, decide, and adapt.

It is important to reinforce Mission Command through the methodology of command and control. Quick and robust decision making needs to occur at the appropriate level, which is difficult when our technologies actually enable centralized control of operations – what our soldiers refer to as the 12,000-mile screwdriver. Our decision making structures should be tighter and less hierarchical, and empower strategic corporals.

Given that the military force and the civilians are inseparable, our doctrine has provided a sound response to complex military operations by emphasizing the following:

- a. Needing a coherent whole of government approach that applies a cyclic campaign methodology, with no beginning, middle, or end, always hedging and shaping to remain in or return to normalcy.
- b. Establishing joint interagency command and control frameworks to coordinate the inputs of multiple agencies and maximize the effects of non-kinetic and kinetic options.
- c. Reinforcing Mission Command and empowering junior leadership.
- d. Applying adaptive and flexible tactics that put the consideration of the civilian population in the forefront. It is about seeing the engagement with the civilian population as critical to operational success. Lines of

operation are based on close combat capability, population protection, information and support, and indigenous capacity building.

- e. Encouraging a learning culture of adaptation, education, and training.
- f. Enhancing human intelligence, force and population protection, and a scalable mix of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities.

A Personal Perspective

A doctrine plays an important function for the military forces, as it sets out the basic tenets for operations. It is, however, the quality of the force, underpinned by national character, ethos, values, education, training, and discipline code, that sets the standards for the operation, as well as its success or failure.

Accentuating the Human Factors

According to the Australian perspective, we are largely cosmopolitan, democratic, liberal, well-educated, and technologically adept. Our forces operate well in the complex terrain of the 21st century. Considering that the human factor is the key to success or failure in today's military operations, there is a need to reinforce the following:

- a. Selecting and developing operational commanders
- b. Understanding the law of armed conflict and rules of engagement
- c. Adopting an eastern approach to time
- d. Disciplining the force
- e. Emphasizing junior leaders
- f. Setting the quality of the combat arms, particularly the infantry
- g. Training in populated areas

Selecting and Developing Operational Commanders

A military operational commander should be able to turn new complexities into advantages. This type of commander must be pragmatic, educated, smart, adaptable, comfortable with ambiguity, and versed in the rules and laws of war. He should also be tough and resilient, and possess moral courage, broader perspectives, and good communication skills. In addition, he should feel comfortable in a coalition and interagency environment, be mentally agile and dexterous, and able to get along with others. Finally, he needs to be humble and have a good sense of humor.

The selection of operational commanders should therefore be well-thought of, as they continually face the challenge to align the strategic and tactical intents with the operational ones. Some tactical commanders are comfortable with traditional roles and tasks but find it difficult to understand the strategic objectives and translate them into tactical actions. The danger with that is that actions on the ground are then misaligned with their strategic intent. The commanders of some of the battle groups in Afghanistan, for example, were trained and structured for warfighting but could not make the mental leap and understand that their core task there was not to kill insurgents.

Understanding the Laws of Armed Conflict and Rules of Engagement

In regards to the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC), simplicity is preferred over complexity. The combatant-civilian paradigm, however, presents new trends and complexities, such as the difficulty of identifying the combatants within the civilian population. Distinction and proportionality need as much lucidity as we can articulate, and therefore the combatant-civilian paradigm needs to be under constant review.

The LOAC's success or failure is determined in their application. In that sense, the laws are only effective if the combatants are committed to them and have a high ethical base within their force that is supported by professional ethos, values, and a robust, effective, and open military discipline with an intrinsic justice system. One of the major international issues is the vigorous pursuit and prosecution of politicians, soldiers, and non-state actors, who fail to adhere to the principles of distinction and proportionality and commit war crimes.

Rules of Engagement (ROE), then, need the full attention of military commanders, and not just that of lawyers or staff officers. Commanders must understand these rules, and visualize and operationalize them in order to communicate their meaning to their soldiers, the civilians, and the adversary. As a commander, I saw one of my key responsibilities as maintaining a balance between the ROE and the protection of the force and population, while still reducing the adversary's advantages.

Flexibility is, hence, necessary for this approach to succeed. The doctrine of "shoot to kill" in land battles, for example, does not calculate warning shots that could prevent civilian casualties. Too many non-combatants who moved around the operational area in Iraq and Afghanistan were shot

because they failed to heed or understand warnings. In these instances, warning shots would have perhaps provided them with a moment for comprehension. Because it took too long to adapt to protect the civilian population, our legitimacy eroded, and we were often too slow to introduce new operating procedures and capabilities.

The organizational dexterity and adaptability must be constructed better so we can retain lessons learned at a faster pace. The hard lessons learned in Iraq regarding escalation of force were transferred to the battles in Afghanistan at a very slow pace. The need for scalable capabilities short of lethal is fundamental to the new environment, as well.

International laws, rules, and conventions must be fundamental and underpin the way operations are conducted with weight given to the protection of the population. My experience from Northern Ireland, Timor, and the Middle East reinforces for me that if we blur the lines or caveat because a particular circumstance suits our own needs, we start to resemble that enemy we are fighting against and debase the very principles we fight for.

Time: Adopting an Eastern Approach

In recent conflicts, I was struck by the imperative of time and how differently our Western military forces viewed it versus the Eastern adversary. As Westerners, we have an instinctive need for action, and are strategically, operationally, and tactically harnessed to the need for quick victories. We want to change the status quo, and are driven by political cycles, budgets, the media, and public opinion.

The Eastern adversary, however, thinks in terms of seasons, years, and generations. In many ways, he could be content with the status quo, at least in the short to mid term, and can use our impetuosity to his ends. While we find it important to secure a particular objective or kill a particular target tonight, the adversary does not care if the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) he has laid on the route to the patrol base hit its target today, tomorrow, or next week.

This perception of time works against us sometimes. One night the Australian Special Forces in Southern Afghanistan were involved in a raid aimed to capture or kill an insurgent commander, who was believed to have been at a certain house. It was a well-planned and rehearsed operation with what appeared to be robust intelligence, but the insurgent

had unfortunately decamped, and the operation was completed early, some time before the helicopters were due to arrive. Eager to achieve a positive outcome, the commander was disappointed and, along with his force, decided to try another house in the time they had available. Clearance had not been obtained, time was beginning to compress, and intelligence was less robust, but the raid went ahead. Inadvertently, a number of civilians were killed, no insurgent was captured, and this small activity turned into a disaster. If we had been more circumspect instead of hostages to time and the need to achieve quick results, we would have captured the insurgent eventually and certainly not ended up with civilian casualties.

Our Western approach can thus have catastrophic results with strategic and political consequences. Unnecessary high military and civilian casualty rates or incorrect targets being neutralized have a deleterious impact on the campaign and start to consume the force. Does it really matter if we do not capture a particular target today as long as we do capture him eventually? We should choose the time of events instead of getting drawn into actions that are, in fact, reactions. It is crucial, then, that we re-evaluate our concept of time and adopt a fresh look at priorities and what constitutes military success in a campaign paradigm.

Discipline of the Force

In Timor, my brigade's tactical accomplishments were highly lauded by the Australian community, the fledgling Timorese Government, and the United Nations. All of that great work by about 4,000 highly professional troops was almost undone by the ill discipline of a few soldiers and their relationship with the civil community. Even though the incidents were relatively minor and did not hurt civilians, like drinking or trespassing, the media were willing to create a storm and our good reputation was in danger of being sullied.

Generally, an indigenous population will be accepting of a tough force as long as it is also empathetic and highly professional, but it will also quickly become hostile to perceived ill discipline. These communities have long memories, as can be concluded by the German army's conduct in Belgian towns during WWI or the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry, Northern Ireland. Hence, a disciplined force is a critical part of the mission's success and is based on its junior leader's strength, morality, quality, and common sense. Consequently, it is extremely importance to

provide junior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and young officers with high quality leadership courses that emphasize military discipline, cultural awareness, LOAC, and ethics.

Emphasis on the Junior Leader

Along with NCOs, young officer corporals and sergeants are responsible for the standards of the operation and determine its tactical success. In many ways they are the guardians of the tactical force's character and values.

These junior officers need to be physically and morally courageous, empathetic with the civilian population, able to leverage the support provided by other agencies, and able to see the concept of minimum force being more than the application of maximum force for a minimum period of time. As they identify the nexus between tactical actions and strategic outcomes, junior officers need to lead troops to emulate the style of a "mailed fist in a velvet glove" and apply their training in a principle based way rather than through rote and dogma.

It is often the lack of junior leadership that is the cause of tactical failures. Training our junior leaders and investing in them is fundamental, as they are the instruments we use to win the hearts and minds of the non-combatant and defeat the adversary.

Importance of the Quality of the Combat Arms

In this new operating space, the infantry is the most important task force on the battlefield due to its participation in close combats and the relationship it forms with the civilian population. The infantry soldier maintains the relationship between the military force and the population, determines the level of this relationship, and the influence the force will have on the civilians as well. These soldiers must also intuitively understand, however, that the military benefit of searches, prolonged vehicle checkpoints, and seemingly arbitrary checks of fighting aged males may outweigh the adverse reaction of the civilian population as it is trying to claw itself back to normalcy.

In modern warfare, the task of the infantry soldier has become more intricate. While other force tasks need smart and capable soldiers, I believe it is especially important for the combat arms – and particularly the infantry – to have high quality people, who are above average in intellect, possess

good communication skills, see the bigger picture, feel empathetic towards the local population, and understand that their interaction with them is critical to long term success. While toughness of body and mind should be focused against the adversary, empathy should be developed towards the civilian population, as they are not adjuncts of the adversary.

In essence, conflicts are about the human condition and are fought by human beings. In order to meet the challenges of operations conducted in urban sprawl, we need to ensure that our force is more agile in its thinking than any adversary and to combine the intelligence of our soldiers with a principle based approach.

Tier One Special Forces play an important role against the adversary by their nature of operation from securing bases to their focus on killing and capturing. This type of operation, however, has drawn them away from the civilian population and caused them to lack a real understanding of the local community, attained only by a battle group living within the community. Commanders need to ensure that a correct balance is placed on special operations vis-à-vis residential operations of the conventional battle group.

Training for Operations in Populated Areas

Undoubtedly, our training for complex warfighting needs to be comprehensive, rigorous, and realistic in its simulations' venues and the players representing the adversary, non-government actors, and civilian population. The way in which the individual soldier and the force comprehend LOAC, ROE, and ethical underpinnings should constantly be validated in order to ensure the tactical training remains relevant to the changing environment.

Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly urbanized, it is inevitable that Western forces will engage their adversaries where there are non-combatant civilians. Battles in unpopulated areas, such as those in El Alamein in the Libyan Desert during World War II, will become less likely.

It is less clearly known how to handle the challenge of operations that have numerous facets and components, such as peacekeeping, combating an adversary, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and the like. All of these operations may be occurring simultaneously, bringing new

challenges for the force to deal with and revealing its limitations. It will require us to look differently at what is considered success at the tactical and operational levels. Furthermore, it will demand we use a longer-term comprehensive campaign approach in military operations that strive to remain in Phase Zero for much of the time and build up capital with the civilian population.

Operations in densely populated areas need a whole of government approach and clear strategic objectives that can be communicated consistently all the way down to the soldiers on the ground. Thought should be given to the utilization of a joint interagency model of command and control at the operational level at least, which would leverage off all the capabilities of soft and hard power in a coherent way.

The military force needs to be well trained both collectively and individually with ethos and values. It must demonstrate dexterity, flexibility, and agility in its decision making processes and also leverage off technology to maximum benefit without enslaving to it, as human interaction is extremely important in these complex environments.

The most important need, however, is to invest in the soldiers' education and training, as it promises they will be well-prepared for the new style of conflict. Nowadays, the corporals are strategic corporals, who need the wherewithal to work inside the city and attack the adversary's center of gravity, while maximizing the relationship with the civilian population.

Force protection becomes intricately linked to population protection, considering the combat force engages with the civilian population and forms close and personal relationships with it. The quality of tactical success becomes more important as our forces face cunning street fighters and are dependent on the closeness they have with the adversary (and with the civilian community by extension). This high level of tactical competence should also be linked with the quality of compassion for a defeated adversary and the empathy for a suffering community.

Finally, those who win the hearts and minds of civilians, both at home and in other countries, win the war. This is the reason as to why highly ethical fighting of professional and disciplined forces that comply with LOAC and understand the complex environment in which they operate is so important.