

# War Games

Basics Never Change, Circumstances Always Do

*Mark T. Kimmitt*

Early on, President Obama and his Administration sent unmistakable signals that they intended to fulfill a significant promise he made during last year's presidential campaign: to direct more effort to the war in Afghanistan through a new strategy, a larger troop presence and the provision of more resources on behalf of a vital national interest. A cottage industry has since emerged on "getting Afghanistan right." Quite beyond the avalanche of think-tank programs and study reports, we now see arrayed before us a set of strategic reviews initiated by the National Security Council, the Joint Staff and Central Command, and the ramping-up work of Ambassador and Presidential Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke.

As all this effort goes forward, it is crucial that we reflect on a simple axiom: War doesn't play itself out systematically like mathematics or logic. A set of tactics, successful in operation A, will not necessarily succeed in operation B. The transitive property of mathematics is rarely observed in warfare. Afghanistan is not Iraq. That said, there are enduring principles that carry over from one conflict to another in these very different environments.

Execution of the combat operations in both countries was quite similar. The United States conducted the 2003 campaign in Iraq using

many of the same operational principles as it did in the 2001 campaign in Afghanistan. In neither case was overwhelming troop strength employed. Instead, the Bush Administration substituted technology, speed and air support for mass. Both campaigns led to rapid regime changes. In the aftermath of the military campaigns, central governments were established and before long national elections ratified those governments. The United States and its allies deployed (inadequate) resources to build institutions, infrastructure, indigenous military forces and economies in both theaters. Operational surroundings in both cases initially resembled post-conflict environments such as those in Bosnia and Kosovo: difficult, yet familiar.

Another similarity is that, in due course, both situations deteriorated. In Iraq, the downturn occurred in a matter of months, while in Afghanistan it took several years. In both cases, however, insurgencies emerged in response to unfulfilled expectations and inadequate nation-building efforts, and in both the United States needed to find a mechanism to solve the problem. In Iraq, that mechanism was the "surge" of military forces and nation-building capacities. Today, the Obama Administration is contemplating much the same for Afghanistan.

To many observers, the logic of Iraq should apply to Afghanistan. Simply pour in the troops, and success will soon follow. If five brigades worked in Iraq, then—allowing for differences in population, territory and estimated size of enemy strength—about 30,000 troops should do the trick for Afghanistan. Nonetheless, on the heels of a "wildly on the mark" surge in

---

*Mark T. Kimmitt is a retired Brigadier General and was recently Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs. Before that, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Affairs.*

Iraq, most military professionals and strategists are skeptical. While the differences between the tactical situation in Iraq in 2006 and Afghanistan today, along with the differences in histories, natural endowments and cultures, would suggest that few of the lessons from the Iraq surge should apply to Afghanistan, there are a number of enduring principles between the two conflicts that should be kept in mind.

## “Battleship” Counterinsurgency

How can we distinguish useful lessons from misleading ones? Let’s begin with a heuristic device: the well-known board game “Battleship.” Clifford van Wickler (the game’s inventor) and Milton Bradley (the game’s publisher) gave us more than just a child’s game of warfare and logic. By judiciously considering its rule structure—and then by systematically tinkering with it—we can use “Battleship” to model not only classical conventional state warfare, but also many of the nuances and challenges of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.

The game as designed demonstrates five important characteristics. The first is equivalence of strength: All players have forces of the same type, and each side starts with the same quantity. The second is equivalence of value: The loss of a battleship costs the same to each side. The third is equivalence of space: The board, like the oceans, provides no advantage to either side. Fourth is equivalence of rules: Each side must behave identically and operate according to the agreed-upon norms. Last is equivalence of information: A barrier divides the game board, preventing each player from knowing the configuration of the other’s forces. In essence, then,

the game provides a fair chance and equivalent probability of success through the use of identical rules to either player. Barring lucky guesses, the winner will be the player who applies better logic, insight and tactics.

These rules match classic conventional warfare as practiced since the time of the Roman Legions. It is not the American “way of war”, however, nor is it the insurgent’s. Americans fight well, but they do not seek to fight, in a mathematical sense, fairly. It is not U.S. military practice to fight with equivalent force; rather, overwhelming force remains a tenet of U.S. military operations. The insurgent, too, rarely fights with equivalent or symmetrical strength—not by choice, but by necessity. Obviously, insurgents do not have access to national defense budgets, nor do they typically outnumber the defense and interior forces of a nation—at least in the early stages of an insurgency.

Hence, the first exemplary rule variance from “Battleship” is the asymmetry of strength in an insurgency. As in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the qualitative and quantitative force advantage falls to Coalition forces, and as national forces have been established, the disparity in strength becomes greater still. While it is true that the insurgencies have grown in both Iraq and Afghanistan, neither set of insurgent forces has ever come close to the power differential levels enjoyed by the Coalition/national side.

This power differential would be a profound advantage in “Battleship”, and in conventional warfare—but not in Iraq and Afghanistan because the remaining parameters of value, space, rules and information all favor insurgencies. Insurgencies are less capital-intensive, so discrete losses are less crucial. Insurgents know the terrain better, ignore rules of engagement as it suits

### Rules of the Game

The rules of “Battleship” are simple. Both players arrange “fleets” of identical size and composition on a grid (typically ten spaces by ten spaces). Once arranged, the players take turns “shooting” at their opponents’ fleet by calling out grid reference points that represent their best guess of the location of their opponents’ ships. The first player to correctly guess the location of the entire enemy fleet of destroyer, carrier, battleship, submarine and patrol boat wins the game.

them, and often enjoy intelligence advantages. These advantages often overwhelm the advantage of strength enjoyed by counterinsurgent forces.

In "Battleship", there is no value differential. The loss of a destroyer has the same cost to either opponent. Following the rules of conventional attrition warfare, the game is won when one side destroys the physical capabilities of its adversary. Five hits on an aircraft carrier and it sinks; five ships sunk and the game is over.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a significant value differential between the United States and the insurgent forces. For the United States, neither Iraq nor Afghanistan is perceived as an existential struggle, so losses are magnified and challenged in the eyes of the home population. Every casualty becomes fodder for examination or scrutiny. Every loss of a tank or helicopter matters. The perceived worth of each loss is far higher than it would be in an existential struggle.

By contrast, the insurgent recognizes that his cause, his very existence, hangs in the balance. Failure is not an option. The willingness of insurgent forces to take far greater casualties in proportional or absolute terms, to fight a foe far better equipped than they, and to intentionally seek out opportunities to inflict casualties shows that they are well aware of this asymmetry of value and employ it to their advantage.

Unlike "Battleship", the Afghan insurgency is not conventional attrition warfare. Insurgencies are not won by attriting the physical capabilities of the enemy but by leveraging the value differential inherent in an asymmetrical fight. By attriting the will of the enemy's home population—a strategy of exhaustion—rather than destroying the physical capability of his adversary, the insurgent seeks an indirect manner in which to conclude the conflict to his advantage. Exhausting the opponent's will to fight is why strategic communication and propaganda campaigns are crucial to any battle with an insurgency. They are critical components to reinforcing the existential nature of the fight to its adherents and a tool to diminish the support, patience and will of its adversaries.

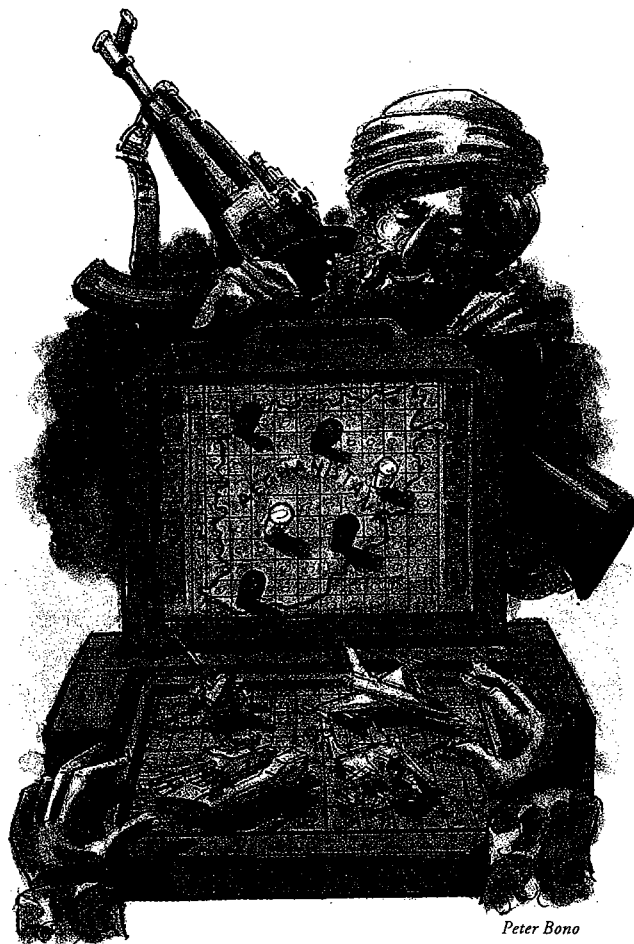
Rules, too, are non-equivalent in insurgent warfare. In "Battleship", rules are clear and followed by both sides. Turns are sequential,

cheating is prohibited, and players record moves to maintain accountability. There are similar international conventions and laws of land warfare that circumscribe behavior on a conventional battlefield. One of the main characteristics of insurgency warfare is the asymmetric adherence to international norms of conduct. The insurgent violates rules of acceptable behavior in combat as a deliberate tactic in order to gain advantages. Killing prisoners, using non-combatants as human shields, and utilizing facilities such as religious sites, hospitals and schools are all long-standing practices among insurgent groups.

Another difference from "Battleship" is the asymmetrical use of space. Insurgencies are not fought on the sea or on just any piece of land; they work most successfully in populated areas. In this manner, the insurgent again mitigates the advantage of the stronger conventional force by seeking sanctuary in spaces that blunt the advantages of conventional forces by diminishing the advantages of speed, maneuver and firepower. Mountains, forests, heavily populated cities and other inhospitable terrain are areas where the insurgent trains and seeks battle to redress the imbalance of the opposing force's strengths. In "Battleship", space is a neutral factor; in counterinsurgency warfare, it can be the decisive factor.

## Asymmetry of Intelligence

The last and most important difference between "Battleship" as designed and as a model to study variation in basic conditions of warfare is asymmetry of information. The information advantage that accrues to the local insurgent is decisive. In "Battleship", the game barrier hinders situational awareness of the enemy. Imagine if the barrier were instead a one-way mirror. The advantage to one side would be incalculable, changing the entire game (indeed, making it a lot less fun). The player who could see through the mirror would know the strength and position of the opponent and could easily pick off the pieces. An opponent who could see only his own forces would need to muddle through the process of gaining intelligence on the enemy.



Peter Bono

Asymmetry of information is the advantage that insurgents employ to its greatest effect. The ability to know the locations, strength and often the intentions of the conventional forces while denying the conventional forces knowledge of own capabilities is the “one-way mirror” effect that bedevils counterinsurgent forces. It is arguably the single most important debility that faced Coalition forces in Iraq, and it will continue to face U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. In Iraq, Coalition forces played “Battleship” with an opaque wall (translucent at best) in front of them while the insurgents enjoyed the advantage of a transparent wall. They know the culture, the mores and the norms of the local society, as well as how to keep that information away from the Coalition. In addition, the insurgents developed and exploited a transparent “view through the wall” of a less-than-stealthy Coalition living on huge combat bases, conducting highly visible and predictable armored patrols, and employing a large number of Iraqi nationals who lived in

the local communities and remained available for intelligence exploitation and intimidation.

These advantages enabled insurgents to infiltrate neighborhoods and conduct attacks in cities such as Baghdad and Mosul with little forewarning. The absurdity was that these attacks often took place in broad daylight, completely out in the open. How could the locals allow such destructive behavior to occur? How could Coalition forces and the nascent Iraqi security forces be killed in front of dozens, often hundreds, of Iraqi civilians without the slightest advance indicator? How could the “Battleship” wall dividing the opposing forces be so opaque for the Coalition and so transparent for the insurgents?

Five years on, the answer is clear. It is not a lack of information on the part of local non-combatants. They know their neighborhoods. They know their neighbors. They know which car is not from the local area, and which activities in the middle of the night are not normal. They know which of their sons and cousins are working with insurgents. They know the insurgent leaders. Information and intelligence resides within the population, and it is available to the insurgents. This information is not, however, readily available to the Coalition forces because of co-option and intimidation.<sup>1</sup>

Co-option and intimidation of the population remains the strongest weapon in the insurgent’s armory. Typically, the insurgency wins over a small portion of the population, deriving either active or passive support for its cause. This support can be for ideological reasons (anti-occupation, oppression by the state, political or religious philosophies), or for reasons as simple as earning money. The remainder of the population is kept in check by fear, intimidation

<sup>1</sup>This very phenomenon exists in our own low-income urban neighborhoods. Residents often mistrust the police, hesitate to come forward with information on crime, and adhere to local, almost clan-like codes of behavior.

or simply a rational calculus of passive fence-sitting or hedging. The insurgent thus follows Mao's dictum to operate not like just any fish in the water, but to operate like a predator fish that "schools" all the others. In doing so, an insurgency can construct and maintain an opaque information barrier against vastly superior forces. The barrier was high and impervious in Iraq, for a time. If the Coalition had not suffered an intelligence deficit of such dimensions, it could have finished the fight by the weekend and been home in time for dinner on Monday.

All this was understood by commanders like then-Major General Marty Dempsey. In December 2003, Dempsey described the battles in Baghdad as ones in which the purpose was not just to kill or capture insurgents; they were just as important for gaining intelligence. Operations were conducted to achieve tactical objectives, but also to gain more knowledge of the enemy and its operating cells in Baghdad. General Wayne Downing used to call this process a "virtuous cycle" of intelligence. Fight to gain intelligence. Use that intelligence in subsequent operations to achieve tactical effects and, equally important, to gain more intelligence. Press these intelligence-directed operations time and time again. At an operational level, this is a far more complex requirement than merely finding and killing or capturing bad guys. It is part and parcel, too, of the logic of "protecting the population." Protecting the population as a key counterinsurgency imperative has been debated for years, but as a means of increasing intelligence flow and reversing the asymmetrical intelligence advantage possessed by the insurgent, there should be no question that it is key.

The intelligence advantage remained the insurgents' greatest point of leverage throughout the early years of the Iraq conflict. It greatly mitigated the Coalition's massive force advantage. But the insurgents lost sight of one of Mao's warnings to guerrilla forces: Without water, the fish dies. Lose the support of the people, lose the ability to operate freely and invisibly among the population, and you inevitably lose the war. This was the greatest fear of the Chinese guerillas in 1946, the Viet Cong in 1966 and the Iraq insurgents in 2006. By protecting the population from co-option and intimidation,

the Coalition made the insurgents' worst fears come true.

While protecting the population as a counterinsurgency imperative has many humanitarian virtues and political rewards, its power to reverse the insurgents' intelligence advantage most clearly commends its use. Protection of the population changed the tide in Iraq, and it was a change that grew out of Iraqi social dynamics. Al-Qaeda alienated its hosts, facilitating the collapse of the insurgents' intelligence advantages. It was not simply the surge in American troop strength that made the difference (although anticipation of that surge may well have played a role in the calculations of the Awakening leadership).

Nonetheless, to many observers progress in Iraq was a simple product of the temporary increase in force levels. Others argue that the increased U.S. troop levels enabled a surge in Iraqi security forces, and that the combination of those two elements proved decisive. Still others contend that the brilliant leadership of General David Petraeus and Lieutenant General Ray Odierno resulted in better tactics. Yet another group has argued that behind the military operations lay the quiet, steady hand of Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who led a "non-kinetic surge" through a revised political strategy. If increased troop levels and this admittedly brilliant team of strategists and diplomats were the recipe for success in Iraq, then the same recipe ought to work just as well in Afghanistan, say the wise. Alas, these wise people don't play "Battleship." If they did, they might learn the difference between local tactics and universal principles; that what works in Kirkuk may or may not work in Kandahar; that what succeeded in 2006 may fail in 2009. Unreflectively transplanting the tactics of the surge from Iraq to Afghanistan is a fool's gamble.

We need to closely analyze the similarities and differences between Iraq and Afghanistan with regard to the asymmetries of strength, value, rules, space and, most important, intelligence. Only then can we know which tactics from Iraq might work in Afghanistan. There are no shortcuts, no magical formulas of troop numbers or personnel. The hard way is the only way to get Afghanistan right. 🌀