



IDSS COMMENTARIES (21/2003)

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Chinese Views of the US War in Iraq: Warfighting Lessons

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16 June 2003

Chinese readings of the US war in Iraq in respect of warfighting have been divided between those who took an information-centric warfare (IW) view, and those who adopted the people's war (PW) view. The key assumption of IW view is that information technology (IT) and related concepts were so thoroughly utilised that they were central to the US military victory in Iraq. The PW view, however, focused on the unconventional tactics that were or could have been used by Iraq to exploit the US vulnerabilities. This paper sets out the main outlines of the two views as reflected in the Chinese military press and journals, and attempts to synthesize the analytical dynamic that underlies China's military modernization drive.

Information-centric warfare view. The findings of the IW view can be summarized as follows: the US won largely because it had asymmetrical advantages over Iraq in command and control, strikes, mobility, and logistics, which can be attributed to the intense assimilation of IT and related concepts by the US military. The high quality, real time information generated by IT-based sensors and computer processing, and shared through a digital communications and display-based network, enabled US commanders to have a high level of situational awareness of the battlefield. This translated into quick, flexible, and effective strategies, tactics, and coordination to diminish the Iraqi defence. The Iraqi forces command, however, was hampered by poor sensors and communications, and weakened by the US "decapitation" campaign (to destroy top leadership targets), the US bribing of Iraqi commanders to quit their positions, and a culture of self-deception (subordinate covering up bad news and reporting only good news to the superiors). Consequently, Iraqi commanders fought with "deaf ears" and "blind eyes," and its units were mostly "a host of dragons without a head" (*qunlong wushou*).

IT was also central to the effectiveness of US strikes because time-sensitive target information provided by the sensors, combined with the standoff platforms and munitions enhanced by the IT-based navigation and positioning systems, rendered US strikes long-

range, fast, and precise. Such strikes made it extremely difficult for the Iraqis to engage the US forces in close combat and to prolong the war. In comparison, the Iraqi strikes were largely ineffective, because they could not get close to the US forces without being destroyed, or were unable to gain accurate targeting information with weak IT.

IT also gave the US an advantage in mobility. IT-based information and positioning support prepared well for US long-range outflanking movement to draw Iraqi forces out to exposed positions (as in the US drive toward Baghdad). The same support, combined with probes, helped to detect gaps and vulnerabilities in Iraqi defence, which led to quick, deep thrusts to cut up, encircle, and annihilate the Iraqi forces (as in the battle of Baghdad). IT-based point precision strikes of Iraqi targets also increased the speed of mobility of US forces (by removing obstacles and resistance to create a “security corridor”). Information support also ensured the security of the long logistics tail from sabotage and ambush. In contrast, Iraqi forces, confused and confounded by US mobility-driven momentum, became increasingly slow, exposed, and disorganized.

People’s war view. The PW view emphasized the US vulnerabilities that were or could have been exploited by the Iraqi forces through unconventional tactics. It maintained that the initial US strategies of “decapitation” and “shock and awe” did not work, because there was no sign of the Iraqi leadership collapsing, nor massive surrender of Iraqi forces and big exodus of refugees. This was because the Iraqi command and control were dispersed, and Iraqi nationalism continued to sustain the will to resist. Also, US coordination was not seamless. The US Army’s vulnerable Apache helicopters, which flew deep into Iraqi defence, suffered heavy damage, mostly from small arms fire. Such damage could have been avoided if such deep strikes were conducted by the invulnerable A-10s of the US Air Force.

The dependence of US precision strikes on IT-based sensors and navigation and positioning systems meant that their effectiveness could be hampered by jamming (as when US missiles strayed to places outside Iraq) as well as sandstorms and smoke from oil fire. The enmeshing of Iraqi para-military forces with civilian crowds and installations in towns such as Basra rendered it difficult for the allied forces to launch precision strikes.

The rapid advance of US forces to Baghdad may have left them overextended and exposed their flank and rear. The Iraqi forces could have exploited this by reorganizing themselves into smaller units to wage a guerrilla war. Such warfare could have entailed sinking ships to block the ports, mining roads, blowing up bridges, and laying ambushes to tie down the US forces. Moreover, US special operations units, paratroopers, and logistics convoys operating in unfamiliar territories could be vulnerable targets for Iraqi forces to

ambush (as happened near Nasiriya). Finally, the dependence of US forces on supplies such as fuel, munitions, food, and water, together with the overly extended and exposed logistics tail and the human and equipment exhaustion caused by the high heat, might offer opportunities that the Iraqi forces could have exploited to weaken the US offensive.

Implications. The US victory in Iraq would have reinforced the IW view and weakened the PW view, because the Iraqi resistance was insignificant and ineffective. Drawing this conclusion would suggest that several major changes are likely to be made to the PLA (People's Liberation Army) in future. In command and control, some layers of the PLA bureaucracy and some nonessential political-military and logistics organizations may be eliminated. The current tree-shaped structure would gradually become a more flat, network structure enhanced by IT. The downsizing would help to free up resources for IT development and shorten response time. In force structure, smaller, more mobile, more versatile, better integrated, and new types of forces enhanced by IT may gradually replace the existing manpower-intensive or heavy formations. Gradually IT-based capabilities may be developed and deployed for competition in the multi-dimensions of space, air, ground, sea, information, and psychology. Finally, training, education and recruitment may place a new emphasis on bringing up the IT knowledge-intensive personnel.

Challenges. Even though the PW view appears to be discredited by the war, the above account suggests that it is still influential in the PLA. It implies that the war only proved that Iraq was a poor student of PW, not that PW was an anachronism.

The persistent influence of PW view may lead to conceptual and organizational problems that pose challenges to China's military modernization. Conceptually, the PW view connotes a condition of "inferior fighting superior," where the human factor can overcome the material obstacles. Such a bias seems to be so entrenched in the mindset of some PLA commentators that during the war, they made wild and erroneous claims and predictions about the development of the war. The underlying assumption that an "inferior" Iraq could defeat the "superior" US was so out of touch with reality that these comments drew strong criticism from the public, who branded their authors as "propaganda tools rather than military experts," who had "a cold war mentality with Chinese characteristics." Indeed, unless a conceptual transformation takes place, the self-denial sustained by the PW view-driven misinformation and misjudgment may make it difficult to introduce some serious changes to transform the PLA.

Organizationally, the PW view justifies the existence of the party and political apparatus in the PLA, because it assumes that war is in essence a political and human affair. The

substantial party and political apparatus in the PLA contributes to several organizational problems. First, the party committee deliberation and the requirement for the political commissar to cosign orders of the commander tend to slow down the decision process and thus lengthens the response time. This apparatus also competes with the command and staff and technology departments for program budget, officer positions, and training time, but does not directly contribute to combat effectiveness. Finally, this apparatus tends to disrupt the development of professional norms and distorts information by inserting political agendas into the military programs.

It is certainly true that for the past two decades, the PLA has been trying to “internalize” and “professionalize” this apparatus by reducing its size, and shifting it toward military functions such as military administration, morale enhancement, discipline enforcement, and psychological warfare. But under the dual pressure of IW and tight budget, more may have to be done to minimize the role of this apparatus in the PLA, if modernization is to be fully accomplished.

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