
SUMMARY

The likelihood that U.S. military forces will be called on to fight in cities is increasing. There are many reasons for this trend: continued urbanization and population growth; a new, post–Cold War U.S. focus on support and stability operations; and a number of new political and technological incentives for U.S. adversaries to resort to urban warfare.

For instance, urban warfare is thought by some adversaries to be a useful asymmetric approach to fighting the U.S. military. They believe the American public has an antiseptic idea of war, an unrealistic expectation that it can be waged with minimal casualties. In this view, such sensitivity becomes an Achilles heel because inflicting a sufficient number of American casualties has the potential to undermine U.S. domestic political support. Cities offer physical cover—three-dimensional urban terrain—and political cover—the more stringent rules of engagement (ROE) associated with the presence of noncombatants. Both types of cover limit the effectiveness of U.S. heavy weapons such as tanks, artillery, and airpower. Weaker opponents can use cities to avoid heavy weapons, leverage the non-combatant population, and “even” the odds by fighting infantry-versus-infantry battles only.

If urban warfare is more likely to occur, it is imperative that U.S. military forces be ready to fight in cities. At the present time, U.S. doctrine on urban operations—also called Military Operations on

Urbanized Terrain (MOUT)—is based in part on historical case studies that occurred seventeen years or more in the past.¹

Lessons that predate the early 1980s may be irrelevant or less important today, especially because of the larger number of political considerations that have restricted the use of force in more recent urban operations. U.S. MOUT doctrine requires an update that accounts for lessons from the last ten years. This monograph is an exploratory case study analysis of three recent urban operations: U.S. peace operations in Somalia (specifically, the Mogadishu firefight of October 3–4, 1993); Operation Just Cause (specifically, the urban battles that occurred in cities, towns, airports, and bases throughout Panama in December 1989); and the Chechen War (specifically, the battles for Grozny in December 1994–February 1995 and August 1996).

These three cases are similar to MOUT studied in the past in that combat occurred and in that the essential unit of analysis—the urban battle—remains the same.

The Mogadishu firefight started with a special-purpose raid by a company-sized element of U.S. commandos to abduct hostages from Mohammed Aideed's Somali clan. The mission went awry after two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down. Thousands of Somali guerrillas and civilians swarmed around the embattled U.S. commandos and convoys sent in to rescue them. Eighteen Americans were killed.

Operation Just Cause was a joint operation by over 26,000 U.S. troops to attack 27 objectives throughout Panama, including enemy troop concentrations and airports, and media, transportation, and command nodes. U.S. forces were ordered to overthrow the dictatorship of Manuel Antonio Noriega. Urban combat occurred during airfield seizures and deliberate attacks on Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) positions in military bases and cities. Most fighting was over within a couple of days. Twenty-three American soldiers were killed.

¹In *Modern Experience in City Combat* (1987), R. D. McLaurin et al. distilled lessons from 22 urban conflicts ranging from Stalingrad (1942) to Beirut (1982). This particular report served as the basis for historical lessons that appeared in the official manual, Department of the Navy, *Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT)*, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-35.3, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998.

The Chechen War was fought between Chechen insurgents seeking independence and the Russian army, air force, and internal security forces. This two-year guerrilla war ran the gamut of urban operations, from small-scale Chechen raids into the Russian cities of Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar-Pervomaiskoye to high-intensity MOUT within the city of Grozny. The two major battles for Grozny involved tens of thousands of Russian soldiers and hundreds of tanks. Over 6,000 Russian soldiers were killed overall.

The primary objective of this monograph is to determine whether recent changes in the nature of urban operations are significant and to identify any policy implications for U.S. Army doctrine.

The main findings of this research are as follows:

- Several important elements of urban operations that previous studies have identified—such as situational awareness, intelligence, airpower, surprise, technology, combined arms, and joint operations—are no more decisive today than they were in the past.
- In the last decade, technological, social, and political changes have caused the following MOUT elements to become relatively more significant: the presence of the media, the presence of noncombatants, ROE, and information operation tools such as psychological operations (PSYOP), public affairs (PA), civil affairs (CA), and political-military strategy.
- Information technology, recent historical precedents, asymmetric responses, and shifting political justifications for the use of force have combined to exacerbate a longstanding geostrategic problem for conventional powers: how to wage restricted urban warfare while keeping casualties below some threshold of public tolerance.
- Recent trends indicate that urban operations should focus more on information-related factors that manipulate the will of the opposing population. This is not to say that information-related factors such as PSYOP or public affairs are more decisive than a “traditional” MOUT factor like airpower or combined arms teams. Killing the enemy’s troops will probably remain the most efficacious way to defeat his will to fight. However, the marginal

return from leveraging an information factor—such as the media—may be greater than the marginal return of applying more firepower.

THE CHANGING FACE OF URBAN OPERATIONS

Political, technological, and social developments appear to be changing the way democratic nations justify and conduct urban operations. These developments—which include the spread of information technology, the growing presence of the media and noncombatants, changing standards of morality, and the increasing number of humanitarian operations, insurgencies, and asymmetric responses by weaker opponents—have increased the importance of information operations (and related activities). Information operations focus on the perception and will of the people fighting the war: the support of both the domestic population at home and the support of the indigenous population in the urban operations theater. Recent urban operations reinforce the notion that winning a conflict is about subduing the will of the enemy through information operations as well as destroying his military forces. To use a mythological metaphor, Mars, the Roman god of war, needs to be unmasked to reveal how warfare is increasingly waged in both the physical and informational realms.²

In the last decade, the political environment behind urban operations changed in several ways. For the United States, military operations were characterized by greater concern over public opinion, casualties of all sorts (including friendly, noncombatant, and even enemy casualties), and humanitarian issues. Because military action was justified for moral or humanitarian reasons, it was important for U.S. forces to gain the moral high ground. This more altruistic concept of national interest has been called “the Clinton Doctrine.” When military action was conducted for less-than-vital national security threats, political support at home was more fragile and sus-

²Some authors believe that the Greek god Athena is the metaphor most appropriate for the information age. See John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, MR-880-OSD/RC, 1997.

ceptible not only to casualties, but also to enemy information operations.

Information technology increased the reach and responsiveness of the media. News reporters were present on the battlefield in greater numbers. The growth of media technology capable of recording battlefield drama introduced new political constraints on the use of military force. Democratically elected leaders were loath to expose voters to the brutal images of war.

These changes in the nature of urban operations have increased the significance of the media, noncombatants, ROE, information operation tools such as psychological operations (PSYOP), public affairs (PA), civil affairs (CA), and political-military strategy. Many of these elements are synergistic, so a successful political-military strategy must integrate information operation tools (PSYOP, PA, and CA) with the media. For example, public affairs, civil affairs, and psychological operations can help manage the perception of people within the area of operations. PSYOP and civil affairs units help remove noncombatants before a battle commences (thereby lowering possible noncombatant casualties) and increase human intelligence (HUMINT). PA and CA units interact with the media. ROE affect PA, CA, and PSYOP. Permissive ROE can precipitate civilian casualties, which attract more media. Overly restrictive ROE can cause friendly casualties. Some ROE—like graduated response approaches that use loudspeakers, warning shots, and firepower demonstrations—have PSYOP implications.

Specific lessons from Panama, Somalia, and Chechnya help illustrate how these elements interact:

- The presence of noncombatants significantly affected tactics, planning, ROE, and political-military strategy. Noncombatants were present in greater numbers, they played an active role in the fighting, they made ROE more restrictive, and they attracted the media.
- Balancing ROE proved to be difficult, especially in the high-intensity case. Constructing and managing flexible ROE that were neither restrictive nor permissive was critical. When improper ROE resulted in excessive civilian deaths and collateral damage, other MOUT elements such as the media and enemy IO

could exploit the damage for their own interests. ROE also affected tactics and prevented the use of armor, artillery, and airpower on occasion. As a result, MOUT tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) sometimes conformed more to a political logic than to a military logic (at least before excessive casualties begin to occur).

- The media was more significant because of the larger number of reporters and the portability of their information technology. It was easier for reporters to gain access to peace enforcement missions. All belligerents found the media a useful information tool for PSYOP, IO in general, civil affairs, and public affairs.
- PSYOP and civil affairs operations proved indispensable in influencing the will of the civilian populations involved. PSYOP were used to increase the number of noncombatants present. PSYOP were conducted by combining daring military raids with media exposure.
- The failure of political leadership to communicate the national interests at stake in Somalia and Chechnya lowered the public's threshold for casualties. It was important to have clear objectives before using military force, to avoid mission creep, and have a clear exit strategy. The lack of political leadership also had a corrosive effect on morale in one case.

Recent urban operations also showed that many elements of MOUT have not changed in any fundamental way. In particular:

- Complete situation awareness will remain an elusive goal for some time to come, just as it was in the past.³ There were two reasons for this in our case studies—the unavailability of HUMINT and an inability to transmit sufficient information in the harsh electromagnetic conditions of the urban landscape.
- Airpower proved to be a mixed blessing in recent urban operations because of the presence of noncombatants, ROE, and capable air defense threats.⁴ Urban terrain, poor weather, and an inability to precisely engage dispersed infantry with air-to-

³In fact, complete situational awareness may never be possible.

⁴For the purposes of this monograph, airpower includes rotary-wing aircraft.

ground munitions also contributed to the mixed performance of airpower. Airpower was effective in joint operations around the perimeter of small villages and towns that could be isolated, against specific strongpoints that could be pinpointed, and in open areas in clear weather. Helicopters were vulnerable in MOUT environments where dismounted infantry carrying man-portable surface-to-air (SAM) weapons could conceal themselves within crowds of noncombatants.

- Urban warfare technologies employed in the 1990s did not differ significantly from technologies available before 1982. Weapons remained essentially the same, especially when ROE prohibited the stronger side from fielding advanced tanks and artillery. Commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) equipment, nonlethal weapons, and precision-guided munitions (PGMs) were either not used, not considered, or were not decisive.
- The advantage of surprise was critical to the outcome of all three case studies, but it was neither more nor less decisive than in the past.
- Combined arms teams were essential if friendly casualties needed to be minimized, but they also resulted in more collateral damage and noncombatant casualties. In the surgical and precision cases, combined arms teams were generally restricted by ROE.
- Command, control, and communication problems continued to plague joint operations. Communication between air and ground forces was a problem in all three case studies. Miscommunication between ground units and close air support (CAS) assets also caused some cases of fratricide.

When civilians are present in large numbers, their support may be the center of gravity, especially in insurgencies. Noncombatants can conceal the enemy, provide intelligence, and take an active role in the fighting. In this age of restricted warfare, the effort to subdue the will of the enemy requires a systems approach that combines information-related activities with the application of military force. Information-related activities such as civil affairs, public affairs, PSYOP, balanced ROE, and information operations in general can

possibly offer higher marginal returns (for resources expended) when noncombatants are central to the urban operations.

In future conflicts, it should be anticipated that some U.S. adversaries will recognize the growing importance of these information elements and leverage them as part of an asymmetric response to American firepower. War has always been waged in both the physical and the informational realm, but the changes under way today make it imperative that we pay more attention to the latter.