

Overstressing Safety Is Leaving Momentum Behind

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There have been claims for years that America's small-unit tactics have failed to keep pace with those of traditional foes. The justifiably proud U.S. military has universally ignored those claims. Everyone knows human life is more heavily prized in America's ground forces than in Hideki Tojo's Imperial Japanese Army, Hitler's Wehrmacht, Stalin's Red Army, Kim Il Sung's North Korean army, Mao's People's Liberation Army, Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnamese Army and Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. So how could U.S. squads not be as well prepared for their life or death struggle?

U.S. infantry units have won almost all their battles, just not the associated wars, since 1945. Of course, there are any number of outside influences on that final outcome. How then—after a long succession of highly responsible leaders—could U.S. small-unit capabilities have fallen behind?

There is only one way. The emphasis on modern-day firepower has been so great that well-meaning commanders have overstressed safety in their maneuvers. In a fast-moving combat environment, too much concern for short rounds and collateral damage might also sacrifice momentum.

Overwhelming Resistance

The American way of war has long involved overwhelming enemy resistance with firepower. That takes the massing of available weaponry. This is most easily accomplished through a preponderance of linear formations. Such formations don't like much



small-unit activity to their front, because their fires will then be masked. With fewer squad-sized patrols and outposts (not to mention offensive spear tips and defensive strong points)—comes less small-unit ability.

The self-sufficient squads of an Eastern army then fail to appear at Fort Benning, Georgia, or Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. How can those Eastern armies—though highly authoritarian in nature—so easily produce them? It has mostly to do with cultural background. Eastern armies are Asian in orientation and thus operate from the bottom up, while those in the West are modeled after the British or French, and operate from the top down. In one, the front-line fighter has a valued opinion; in the other, he is just a “know-nothing” new guy. But the answer goes a little deeper. While Asian communists do not care about each soldier's life, they do seek his strategic contribution.

Modern combat is still mostly about the machine gun, because Eastern armies continually seek to minimize the effect of more modern technologies. The current state of the art for squad infantry tactics may have existed from 1944 to 1975 in the Japanese, German, Russian, Chinese Communist, North Vietnamese and North Korean armies. At that point, it began to atrophy in the Chinese and Soviet

forces through too much emphasis on technology. In fact, the small-unit maneuvers of all six armies appear to have been almost the same for most battlefield scenarios. That's because they were all chasing the vision—defeating an opponent possessing more firepower.

Mutual Tactics

A former commanding officer of the Marine Corps' School of Infantry-East confirms that this nearly identical effort made the shared tactical procedures of those six Eastern armies the worldwide state of the art at the time, because those armies were not all allies.

This historical discovery can now be turned into an instant asset. U.S. units have a choice. They can take their ideas into the field and through simulated casualty assessment eventually come up with advanced techniques, or they can slightly alter how surprise was generated by any Eastern army of the World War II era and use that core maneuver immediately in modern combat. ★

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Paratroopers with the 173rd Airborne Brigade on the move at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany.

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