Video: US Simulates A War with Iran Scenario

Any war with Iran will not be a walk in the park. Iran will respond asymmetrically, and in ways that the U.S. military establishment may not be able to predict.

The United States and Iran are balancing on the edge of a fully-fledged open military conflict, with many claiming that President Donald Trump had to respond militarily to the Iranian retaliatory missile strike on US military bases in Iraq. However, they have forgotten that in 2002 the Pentagon already ran a colossal wargame designed to simulate a war with Iran – and the US lost heavily.

Millennium Challenge 2002 was a $235 million USD military exercise that involved elements of all the U.S. armed forces, with over 13,500 personnel engaging in the most realistic wargames held up until that time. Almost immediately following the invasion of Afghanistan and ahead of the 2003 launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the exercise was clearly meant to test the Pentagon's new vision of waging war against a Middle Eastern enemy. The enemy that the OPFOR (opposition force) was modeled after was in fact the nation of Iran.

The commander picked to develop the strategy of the OPFOR, or "Red Team", and lead them in battle was retired USMC Lt. General Paul Van Riper. General Van Riper is a decorated combat veteran of the Vietnam War, who held many important commands over his 41 years of military service. At the time of Millennium Challenge, he was working with the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. He proceeded to do what everyone in the DOD command structure thought was impossible, defeat the U.S. military with a technologically inferior yet highly motivated and adaptive force.

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Van Riper knew that perhaps the greatest advantage enjoyed by the U.S. forces, their high-tech advantage in command and control and surveillance, was also a potential weakness. The U.S. military's overreliance on technology was exploited as its Achilles heel. The retired USMC general forbid his forces from communicating via radio communications, relying on motorcycle couriers and runners. He also conducted cyphered communication embedded in the Muslim call to prayer conducted throughout each day. The Blue Force had very little idea of what the Red Force was planning in the days leading up to the simulated amphibious assault.

The Bush Administration had just recently announced the pre-emptive strike doctrine that included the use of pre-emptive war against an immediate or perceived future threat to U.S. national security. Since then, Washington has been actively using these perceived future threats to justify its own actions all around the world. (The claim that the assassination of the Iranian national hero, General Qassem Suleimani, in Baghdad on January 3 was required

to prevent a war is an example of such a justification.) Therefore, with full knowledge of the preemptive war doctrine, the Red Force commander knew that an attack was imminent.

As soon as the Blue Force deployed in range for a strike on the simulated Iran, the Red team went on the offensive. Van Riper's forces decimated the U.S. naval and amphibious assault within approximately fifteen minutes. Nineteen warships, including an aircraft carrier, and five amphibious ships, were sunk, and an estimated 20,000 sailors and marines were lost. The Red Force used barrages of hundreds of land-based missiles coupled with swarms of small, explosive laden suicide boats to defeat a combined aircraft carrier strike group and amphibious ready group.

Those overseeing the exercise decided to ignore the opening failure of the Blue Team and reset the chess board. Not only did they erase what should have been a monumental lesson to everyone involved, they decided to add several constraints upon Van Riper which did not give him full flexibility in conducting his defense. The Red Force was not allowed to respond to an airborne drop conducted by the 82nd Airborne by hitting the landing zone with chemical weapons, which it possessed under the exercise script. His forces were not allowed to keep their positions hidden. For example, the Red Force had to position its air defense assets out in the open where they became an easy target for the Blue Force. On top of that, the Blue forces were able to leverage technologies that were not actually in service at the time but were inserted into the exercise anyway. Even with the odds artificially stacked in the Blue team's favor, the result was not what the Pentagon had hoped. Although in the end the U.S. invasion resulted in the defeat of the opposition, it did not result in total capitulation, but a strong guerilla war.

Van Riper had obviously learned a great deal about warfare in his years of combat in Vietnam, and deployments to the Middle East as well. He knew that technological advantage can never overcome an enemy that is calculating, ruthless and has the will to fight above all else. Reliance on technology is as much a weakness on the battlefield as a lack or logistical support or an unwillingness to embrace freedom of action. As a result of Millennium Challenge 2002, the U.S. military leadership should have learned this lesson as well. They did not.

Van Riper did his nation a great service by acting like a true soldier. He did what was needed to win and proved that his nation's armed forces were not prepared for the war they aimed to fight. He was hamstrung, undermined and ignored. Van Riper would go on the record and speak out against the conduct of the exercise. He would later join a group of retired officers who called for the resignation of then acting Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Fast forward eighteen years. The United States has escalated tensions with Iran with the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad on January 3rd. With the prospects of open conflict between the U.S. and Iran increasingly probable, it would behoove President Trump and his national security advisors to revisit the lessons learned from Millennium Challenge 2002.

Military operations of the 2020s differ significantly from all possible contingency planning variants of the 2000s. The current US military doctrine assigns the prior employment of mobile interoperable forces, unmanned and robotized systems, as well as massive strikes with high precision weapons in conjunction with the maximum usage of electronic warfare

and information warfare. Therefore, the scenario of a possible conflict will differ from those simulated in the Millennium Challenge 2002. Large-scale landing operations are unlikely. Apparently, the US military strike's main targets will be infrastructure objects and the objects of political and military command centers of Iran.

Despite this, any war with Iran will not be a walk in the park. Iran will respond asymmetrically, and in ways that the U.S. military establishment may not be able to predict. The lesson taught by General Van Riper may end up being learned the hard way.

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