

**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
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NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY AND THE GWOT --- CHOOSING THE MEANS

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Following the heinous attacks of 9-11 the United States government declared that it was at war with international terrorism and terrorists. For over two and a half years since that day the US has conducted operations in that war, but to what end? Yes, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that overtly supported terrorists groups has been overthrown and the government of Saddam Hussein has been replaced, but do we really know the results of over two years of effort on the greater war to defeat or deter those that launched the 9-11 attacks? If the answer to that question is “we don’t know,” then perhaps not knowing whether or not two plus years of intense military effort, numerous tactical successes, and countless billions of dollars have brought the United States any closer to winning the war begun on 9-11, indicates a failure of the US to identify the correct means to achieve the desired strategic/political end. B.H. Liddell Hart said, “...nations do not wage war for war’s sake, but in pursuance of policy” and that “the object of war is a better state of peace—even if only from your own point of view.”¹ If that is true, has the current US strategy and its choice of means indeed moved the nation toward a “better state of peace?”

When designing a strategy a first step is to determine what that strategy is designed to combat or influence. In traditional inter state conflict the threat analysis has been fairly easy to do and quantify. A known enemy with known capabilities and occupying known terrain is something we can see, understand, and for which clear strategic objectives are fairly clear. We can identify enemy centers of gravity, know if we are winning battles, know if we are seizing terrain and generally understand whether or not we are on the glide path to success. In this traditional case, why an enemy fights seems to be much less important to success as defeating his capability to fight. Thus the military instrument of national power becomes an obvious primary tool.

¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, (New York, Meridian Printing, 1991) p. 338

The fight since 9-11 is not so clear-cut. We face an enemy with unknown capabilities, occupying no known terrain, with no easily identifiable center of gravity, and we have no real understanding of what they hope to achieve. Therefore, the threat analysis of what will “win” the fight becomes much more difficult and the efficacy of a military solution questionable.

When designing a strategy to defeat a threat force, it is intuitive that one must begin with an analysis of what are the desired end states of both sides. So, let us start by asking what is the goal of the United States? Is it to ensure no future attacks on US soil, is it to defeat “international terrorism,” is it to spread democracy, is it to ensure the economic security of the United States, or is it a combination of all four?” Regardless, each of those goals require the same result—to ensure those that would carry out actions against the United States do not retain the ability to do so. If we accept this as the strategic end, we can begin to analyze what means of national power are available to get there. While we thus have a general idea as to the goals of the United States, devising a strategy to reach those goals that does not take into account the desired end state of the opponent is doomed to fail. It would be analogous to running a race at a predetermined pace regardless of the speed of the opponent, assuring ultimate defeat.

Much has been written recently on how “terrorism” is a tactic and not an enemy. For this discussion, that debate is not germane. The issue at hand is that there is a nebulous group called “radical Islam” represented by Al Quaida (AQ) that is determined to wage war using terrorist tactics against the United States. So, what are the goals of AQ? The premise here is that we do not really know. Yes, there have been suggestions that the goals are the removal the US troops from Saudi Arabia, or the removal of “western” influence from the Middle East, or the establishment of Islamic governments in the Middle East and many others. The reality is that we do not really know what AQ seeks as their end-state and therein lays an inherent problem when

we seek to design a strategy to combat them. If we do not know what they hope to achieve in their struggle, can we identify their center of gravity and defeat them militarily? Going back to the earlier example, since this is not a “traditional” fight with known forces and capabilities, can we use a traditional military strategy based on destroying forces in the field, or should our emphasis be on eliminating the reasons why they fight? These are critical questions for determining the proper means, as the answers will dictate significantly different approaches.

To date, the US strategy in fighting AQ has relied heavily on the US military. Again, this strategy tends to emphasize the destruction of the enemy force and not the elimination of their rationale to fight. Perhaps some of the difficulty in determining the best strategy to combat AQ comes in our definition of what they are. By labeling them a terrorist organization do we tend to underestimate their capability? Terrorist organizations are thought of as small, loosely organized, with limited capability, and until now, mostly regional organizations. If we assume that the struggle of AQ is less a terrorist operation and more of an insurgency does our strategy and tactics change?

In defining types of insurgencies, Kass and O’Neill recognized one type they called “reactionary-traditionalists.” They defined that type of insurgency as one designed to “...restore a system that existed in the past....the values they articulate are primordial and sacred—rooted in ancestral ties and religion...seeking to re-establish an ancient regime which they idealize as a golden age.”² If we use the reign of the Taliban as a model of what success may look like for AQ, does that not fit the definition above? The point is that defining the threat matters in determining the kind of strategy to defeat it. Specifically, if we define AQ as an insurgency we have learned from experiences in Vietnam, Iran, Nicaragua, El Salvador and many others the

² Ilana Kass, and Bard O’Neill, The Deadly Embrace, (New York, National Institute for Public Policy and University Press of America, Inc., 1997) p.5.

limits of military power in defeating an insurgency. Again from Kass and O'Neill, "whereas a terrorist threat necessitates intensified police work, guerrilla warfare calls for a low-level military response....an undifferentiated, inconsistent approach is fraught with peril."³ For the sake of the argument, if we suppose that Islamic religious fundamentalism is the new "nationalism" of the 21st Century, a nationalism that transcends traditional borders and significantly broadens the battlespace, the problem becomes even greater, yet more defined. One can survey the many counterinsurgency campaigns of the past two hundred years and glean insight on the long-term efficacy of the use of overwhelming force as the primary means of combating the insurgents vice achieving victory by taking away they reasons why insurgents fight.

Let us now jump from defining how the United States may try and define the goals of AQ to looking at how AQ may try and define both the goals of the United States and its resultant strategy. Assume the goals of the US are to prevent further attacks on United States soil, ensure the stability of international economic markets and to promote democracy and human rights around the world. If we are AQ, how does that translate...maintaining US dominance of the international economic system that supports and ensures Islamic nations remain under the control of secular dictatorships? If that is the perception and the goal is the elimination of US influence; politically, militarily and economically from the region, then again we have a classic insurgency to rid a region of "colonial" influence with many historical examples from which AQ can choose a strategy.

As an AQ planner it would be crystal clear that we could not defeat the United States in traditional military conflict. But, we can draw from our history of defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan to the use of suicide bombers in Palestine to learn lessons on how to counteract or negate the military superiority of an industrialized enemy. An AQ planner would also have to

³ Kass and O'Neil p. 45.

understand wherein lays his strength. As with any insurgency, much of that strength lies in popular support. Thus, if the goal of AQ is not to “defeat” the US, but rather to achieve their end state of a theocratic based Middle East devoid of western influence then are the US's current actions only furthering their cause? In classic counterinsurgency campaigns, heavy-handed military responses have often led to a further alienation of the local populace toward the government in power as well as pushing the local elites toward the insurgents. Successful counterinsurgency campaigns on the other hand have had a tendency to respond militarily to specific threats, while devoting significant resources to addressing the underlying conditions that make the alternatives proposed by the insurgents acceptable to the local populace and elites. The recent US experience in defeating an insurgency in El Salvador is a prime example. Therefore, if the AQ planner understands the need to retain popular support, and understands that much of the populace in the Islamic world may not share his goals for a theocratic future, what does he do? History again answers the question. As with many other successful insurgencies, the strategy becomes one of engaging the US in small unit attacks that attempt to provoke large responses that can be used to rouse and maintain public sympathy / support for the cause, as well as wear down the will of the US.

Thus, do US military actions to destroy AQ and AQ sympathizers, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, or elsewhere, without a commensurate effort to address the underlying reasons that make AQ seem an acceptable alternative, just reinforce the AQ position and in fact drive more of the populace and local elite to their ranks? A case in point is the current situation in Iraq. While there may be debate as to whether or not AQ is the main enemy in Iraq, the case is illustrative of the phenomena. The demonstrable sign of US power in the country is the US military as it reacts to insurgent attacks. Meanwhile, the populace and elites

only seem further alienated by what they see as heavy-handed responses while they still are afraid to walk the streets at night, unemployment is rampant and the quick introduction of a market economy has driven up prices and perhaps left them less well off than before the war.

Thus, the AQ strategy may be as Liddell-Hart wrote to, "...always aim to produce the enemy's increasing overstretch, physical and moral."⁴ Or, as Raymond Aron laid out in his theory of international relations, the restated AQ strategy may be one of "winning by not losing" with the US once again in the role, a la Vietnam, of "losing by not winning."⁵ Restated, if Paul Kennedy's premise in the Rise and Fall of the Great Powers is correct and the overextending of the economy of a nation is indeed the recurring theme in the fall of a "great power,"⁶ then is the AQ strategy of making the US react militarily worldwide with the accompanying strain on the budget and US economy furthering the United States along the path to decline?

The common denominator for both the US and AQ in ultimately winning may thus be role of the local elites. While Americans sitting in their living room may not understand what drives well educated and economically well off individuals to support an insurgency, history would show that in fact disaffected elites traditionally have been the driving force behind a successful insurgency. It is not happenstance that insurgent leaders as diverse as Cromwell, Lenin, Mao, Castro, bin Laden and indeed most of the 9-11 hijackers were not peasants but instead well educated members of their societal elite. The important role of the elites in any successful insurgency / counter-insurgency campaign is well documented. Theorists as diverse as Karl Marx to Max Weber to Barrington Moore have all written on the role of the elites in social change. While social scientists have written volumes on what causes the dissatisfaction of

⁴ Liddell-Hart, p.366

⁵ Raymond Aron, Peace & War A Theory of International Relations, (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2003). p.36

⁶ Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, (New York, First Vantage Books, 1987)

a nation's elites, that question is well beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that all of the nations where AQ has a strong base have common characteristics: authoritarian rule, lack of constitutional freedoms, heavy secular role in life, economic malaise, and lack of democratic institutions, among others. While this is not to suggest those factors are causal, that they are common to all the nations indicate a strong relationship to the dissatisfaction perceived by the elites and must be addressed if maintaining the allegiance of the regional elites is indeed imperative to success. So, while AQ will try and exploit those social issues the US must minimize them. As classically described by Karl Marx in The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, historically whichever side does this the best; understanding of the concerns of the elites, cobbling together a significant number of different elite groups and the populace to consolidate a power base, will be the ultimate victor in this struggle.

If we accept the definition of AQ as a religious-based reactionary-traditionalist insurgency, the historical examples of the failure of military centric responses to defeat insurgencies, and the important role of the regional elites we have a basis to assess US strategy and its choice of means. Firstly, a quick study of historical counter-insurgency campaigns indicates a military centric solution is unlikely to quell the AQ movement. While the US military must be able to counteract, and indeed pre-empt attacks, it must be used judiciously in that role. Indiscriminate or heavy handed foreign military action, no matter how noble the cause, tend to stir up sympathy for insurgents among the local elites and populace. While high visibility strikes at targets of opportunity may have domestic US political appeal, a more long-term role for the military may be one more focused on engagement and less on direct action. A good example is the role of the US military in Latin America, where in the past twenty years, through the use of medical, engineer and logistics assistance, the US military has gone from a

perception of a colonizer to a force for democratic change. That role has affected not only the local populace perceptions, but also how the local militaries themselves operate and have helped to strengthen democratic institutions in those nations.

Secondly, while understandable that the US is now using the existing regimes in the region as allies in the GWOT, an assessment must be made as to whether or not those regimes are part of the solution or in fact merely part of the problem in causing the dissatisfaction among their population. If we accept that “the ballot box...has proven to be the coffin of revolutionary movements”⁷ then the goal must be to instill democracy in those nations. However, one size fits all instant democracy may not be the answer and the path to stability may require a more gradual approach. The US must take a hard look at those nations and attempt to influence them to accept economic liberalization and the institution of constitutional liberalism. Democracy itself may need to be not the immediate, but rather the long-term goal. The South Korea, Taiwan, and Chile models of evolution from chaos to democracy may indeed prove to be the preferred solution in the near term. Lastly, the US must accept that, like with other insurgencies, long-term victory comes from within and not with solutions imposed by a foreign power. If the role of the elites is in fact the common denominator, it appears one side, Al Quaida, has a strategy to ensure the support of that segment of the population. While the other, the US, has a strategy that essentially ignores them.

So what is the answer to our question of whether or not two years of efforts have pushed the US toward a “better state of peace?” Couple our discussion of theoretical and historical examples with the fact that AQ still has the capability to strike, still is an unknown quantity, still holds the ability to strike with surprise, that US direct military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan

⁷ Theda Skocpol, Social Revolutions in the Modern World, (Boston, Cambridge University Press, 1994) p.65.

appear to have created more support for AQ among the populace and elites in the Islamic world, and the answer would have to be no. If that is so, then the fault may lie in the current choice of direct military action as the primary means to achieve the US strategic ends. As in other successful counter-insurgency campaigns, changing that answer may lie in shifting the strategy from destroying AQ's capability to fight, to eliminating the reasons why they fight. While the scope of this essay does not allow a detailed discussion of why AQ fights or why they seem a viable alternative to well-respected members of Middle Eastern societies, the fact is that they do. The United States must address why that is so and devise a strategy that counteracts that trend if it is to have any chance for long-term success. That strategy must focus on economic and security elements of power that enable the elites and middle class to see a brighter future in supporting the US position than is supporting that of AQ.

In conclusion, while the military absolutely must remain a key element in the strategy on the war on terror, it must not be the primary means for achieving victory. Unless we are so arrogant as to believe that, unlike most historical examples, we are somehow better than the great powers of the past and can win with a military based response, we are doomed to repeat the lessons of the past and have a future full of high profile tactical successes followed by strategic defeat. It comes down to choosing the means to propagate the fight. In concert with military action must be a shift in US strategy to focus on using the means of national power (economic, humanitarian, informational, and diplomatic) that can address the underlying social ills that drive local elites to support AQ and form the basis for why they fight. In this non-traditional fight, we cannot remain focused on the traditional goal of destroying the enemy's capability to fight, we must focus on eliminating his reason to fight. This is no easy task and may involve a significant change to US strategy and support for regional governments that have been traditionally allied

with the United States. But the choice is clear...change our means of conducting the campaign to “defeat” Al Quaida...or lose.

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