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The United States in Afghanistan: Implications for Future U.S. Strategy Development

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- A strategy is rarely finished; it is a continuous process involving senior representatives of the federal government, agencies and departments, and it must incorporate the advice of functional experts, synchronize the tools of national power and coordinate the application of finite resources to achieve political objectives.
- Developing viable political strategic objectives is a reciprocal negotiation between political desires and demands and the reality of what can be achieved.
- Despite being a superpower, the United States relies on international organizations, partners and allies to implement strategy; recognizing, understanding and accounting for outside interests is a necessary reality.

Introduction

The U.S. bureaucracy sits at a decision point—to benefit from lessons learned, or to pay lip-service while changing nothing, continuing a troubling strategy development and implementation.

The rapid withdrawal of U.S. partner and allied forces from Afghanistan, and the simultaneous and precipitous fall of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)-supported Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government to the Taliban, has reignited the debates among senior political leaders, retired military leaders, academics, media pundits and many others on the failures in the Afghan strategy. While everyone can talk, identify failures and find fault in the execution of strategy—or the lack thereof—and even go so far as to identify particular decisions that resulted in such a collapse, the fact of the matter is, everything has happened too recently to allow the wide scope necessary for a proper evaluation of events. The nearness in time, the classification of source materials, and limited adversarial sources, combined with personal and emotional connections, hinder the full understanding of these events, resulting in unsatisfying answers unlikely to identify a grand purpose or justify the human and fiscal expenses.

The debate's current focus seems to bypass several critical facets of strategy. Strategy is not a science, nor is it ever a finished product. The U.S. military should not develop or implement a strategy without continuous discussion and guidance from senior political leaders. Correspondingly, strategy executed in coordination with partners and allies must be developed in consultation with them and, as such, is almost always a compromise. Admittedly, though these maxims on strategy are crucial to understanding, implementing and developing a sound strategy, in some instances, an ideal strategy does not exist. Sometimes, the only possible strategy is to manage a situation by trying not to make it worse.

While it might be easy to identify and focus on all of the failures in the Afghan strategy, it is ultimately more constructive to identify and focus not only on the weaknesses but also on the strengths of what occurred,

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working to understand, develop and refine the formation of strategy for future warfare. This is not a call for a dictated or legislated process for strategic decisionmaking. Decisionmaking is personality- and relationship-based, and, because elected and appointed leaders need the flexibility to develop systems that match their capabilities and desires, a dictated process can be restrictive rather than enabling.

Understanding Warfare and Strategy

Warfare is not a hard science; no theory of warfare is supported by a strict application of the scientific method because a scientific theory specifies a repeatable process in which a series of quantifiable inputs leads to a known and predictable outcome. As Clausewitz stated, “War . . . is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.”¹ War is designed to compel or influence an individual or group toward a desired outcome based on their own decisions. This does not mean that there is no scientific aspect of war, but that the application of strategy is a series of responses to the other side’s activities and independent choices. It is necessary to create an ongoing process of developed and implemented reactions to outside stimuli to inform movement toward a desired political objective.

Strategy is not formulaic, nor are there recipes for solutions; this means that case-specific definitions, perceptions and models of strategy are significant. The U.S. military most commonly understands strategy through the Lykke model, which visualizes it as a three-legged stool, constructed of the three components of ends, ways and means; strategy = ends + ways + means. If any of the legs are under-resourced or over-extended, the stool becomes unbalanced and at risk of toppling over. While the Lykke model does present a useful method of understanding strategy, it is limited in that it can lead to a false perception that strategies are complete once adopted; it can also result in discounting an adversary’s response.

Developing a strategy requires repetitive examination of the issue and concurrent analysis with other events and priorities. Because the U.S. military is under civilian control, executing missions and operating at the direction of civilian leadership, military leaders must rely on U.S. political leadership to establish criteria for deciding when a conflict or operation is finished or when a goal is achieved. This political dynamic reinforces Clausewitz’s aphorism: “War is a continuation of policy with other means.”² Discussions are not held in a vacuum; benchmarks and decisions cannot occur without direct coordination with the other tools of national power. Without such accountability, military resources risk being misaligned or wasted.

Coordinating Strategy in War

In addition to being inclusive, these discussions must occur regularly to shepherd and adapt the strategy toward the desired political outcome(s). Military leaders, in coordination with the other governmental agencies, cannot create a situation defined by the political leaders as victory without continuous guidance. During the Vietnam conflict, President Johnson, his National Security Council, members of the Joint Chiefs and the commander in Vietnam routinely failed to hold recurring open discussions; this was noted as one explanation for the strategic failure of Vietnam in former National Security Advisor and retired Army Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster’s book, *Dereliction of Duty*.³

This coordination is further complicated by political administrations changing every four to eight years. The subsequent cyclic appointments of cabinet members, military commanders and advisors make it difficult to develop and implement long-term strategy. However, neither this nor the myriad other duties that make demands on senior leaders’ time and energy relieves their responsibility for ensuring that finite resources are being coordinated and utilized to meet national interests. In 2003, during the third year of the War in Afghanistan, the National Security Council met only three times to manage the conflict.⁴ This is not just an issue within the civilian bureaucracy; General Stanley McChrystal, USA, Ret., spoke to President Obama only once in the first hundred days after taking command of ISAF.⁵ During these critical periods, lack of oversight by civilian leaders and limited discussions between civilian and military leadership can easily create gaps between the strategy and the adversary’s responses.

Another complication exists in the desire of military leaders to “get to yes” and to preemptively “solve problems.” Military leaders do not always stop to ask, “Should we be doing this, or should someone else?” This leads to the fostering of an environment of ever-expanding missions, colloquially known as “mission creep.” As long as military forces are available, commanders at all levels are not inclined to say no to expanding responsibilities,

ultimately resulting in the misapplication of limited resources for actions on the ground that are not aligned with original mission intent. These actions naturally influence adversarial actions, creating larger and larger gaps between national strategy and finite resources. For example, in 1992, U.S. military leaders recommended deploying U.S. military forces to backfill the United Nations (UN) mission in Somalia, planning on temporarily stabilizing the region with U.S. military forces under the assumption that those forces would quickly be replaced by a larger and more capable UN security force. Ultimately, however, the UN forces never materialized, and U.S. forces were left in a strategic dilemma. The on-the-ground missions became misaligned with the U.S. national strategy of conducting direct action rather than limiting involvement to providing security for food aid delivery and being ready to hand the reins over to UN reinforcements.

Working with International Partners

The United States has rarely gone to war by itself, often relying on partners and allies' support for basing, access and overflight—as well as for international legitimacy. These partners and allies often have an unrecognized influence on U.S. strategy. The U.S.-led NATO ISAF mission demonstrates how foreign parties influence the already-complex battlefield in Afghanistan. ISAF was organized as a combined command construct, with select nations commanding limited geographic areas and operating under different rules of engagement. The Taliban exploited these various rules of engagement, often using the grey space between regional commands.

Expanding beyond nations on the battlefield, other actors, including regional states and non-state actors, can also significantly influence strategy development and implementation. Pakistan and Iran's tacit and open support to opposition fighters significantly influenced the strategic outcome in Afghanistan. While simultaneously acting against U.S. strategic interests, Pakistan received U.S. diplomatic and fiscal aid that permitted overland logistics access for NATO forces—reinforcing the reality that the U.S. could never force a strategic success through the strength of military arms alone.

The need for continuous dialogue between the U.S. administration and the U.S. military, combined with regular discussion with foreign parties on the development and implementation of strategy, mean that strategy is almost always a compromise. It is worth noting that host nations can also impose limitations and requirements. For example, in 2013, President Karzai introduced demands limiting U.S. operations before he would sign the Bilateral Security Agreement.⁶ Implementing a combined strategy that supports both U.S. national interests and the national interests of select partners and allies creates a viable strategy that fills many of the gaps exploited by adversaries, resulting in more achievable goals.

Flexibility in Strategy: Revising for Reality

All of this leads to the most troublesome maxim: sometimes, the best strategy may simply be to not make a problem worse. There are instances and conditions which are not within U.S. national interests; it is challenging to accept a reality that a preferred outcome has become unachievable with the given set of authorized and available resources. Such instances might include scenarios in which the options include either withdrawing current forces or maintaining the status quo while knowing that resources being applied are merely a short-term, stopgap measure, with no viability as a long-term solution.

Changing a strategy or accepting that a strategy is only mitigation versus a solution can be further complicated by media commentary, direct or indirect, that such revisions are an admission of failure or defeat.⁷ The media's focus on brief talking points versus nuanced discussions constrains the ability of senior leaders to make decisions. President Obama deliberately staffed *Operation Neptune Spear*, the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, with limited personnel to prevent leaks to the media, providing the administration decision space that was outside of the media's twenty-four-hour news cycle.⁸ Acknowledgment of this complicating factor does not discount the media's vital role in the public debate on the use of military resources and the national interest or national strategy.

As war is the continuation of politics with other means, the U.S. political leadership, with senior military leaders' advice, decides when wars begin and end—but national interests are subject to change over time. For example, the British government's choice in the 18th century to withdraw military forces from the American colonies to focus

on fighting the French and Spanish and to protect other trading colonies is a key example of strategic reevaluation. The British were presented with a strategic dilemma; should they suppress the American rebellion, or should they defend other royal colonies from French and Spanish military threats? Recognizing the limits of her resources, Britain decided that protecting the other colonies was the greater national interest; therefore, Britain withdrew military forces and eventually signed a peace treaty with America.

Conclusion

Strategy is complicated and often without clear answers. It should not be formulaic, but rather be an iterative process where senior civilian and military leaders and experts work to create conditions that coax foreign actors to voluntarily shift their activities to align or support U.S. national interests. It is critical to define the criteria for a “political” victory, which allows both for initial coordination and internal synchronization and also for subsequent engagement with partners and allies in applying finite resources. Likewise, when developing strategy in coordination with political leadership, the advice of senior military officers must necessarily be concerned with more than only the application of military resources. Overarching national interests must be regularly reevaluated and prioritized based on changing conditions.

Never complete and rarely perfect, strategy development is a reciprocal process that will always involve conversation with domestic political and military leaders, foreign states, leaders and organizations, all of whom are trying to make the best use of the application of finite resources (often with the threat or backing of military force) to manage a situation and move toward a desirable outcome—while continuously responding to and adjusting for external influences.



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Notes

- ¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- ² James R. Holmes, “Everything You Know About Clausewitz Is Wrong,” *The Diplomat*, 12 November 2014.
- ³ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (1997; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 2017).
- ⁴ Graeme Wood, “Review | America’s SLOW-MOTION Military and Policy Disaster in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Washington Post*, 2 February 2018.
- ⁵ Peter Baker, “From McChrystal’s Mouth to Obama’s Ear,” *New York Times*, 30 September 2009.
- ⁶ “Hamid Karzai refuses to budge over delay on security pact,” *The Guardian*, 26 November 2013.
- ⁷ Thomas E. Ricks, “Situation Called Dire in West Iraq Anbar Is Lost Politically, Marine Analyst Says,” *Washington Post*, 11 September 2006.
- ⁸ Garrett Graff, “I’d Never Been Involved in Anything as Secret as This,” *Politico*, 30 March 2021.