A National Strategic Learning Disability?

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Any honest assessment must find that America's performance at the national strategic level has been lacking. Even after 10 years of war there is little evidence that we have learned much. Our national strategies and policies have dragged out operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, costing more in lives, sacrifices, money and political will than was necessary.

After the attacks of 9/11, we invaded Afghanistan. We successfully ejected the Taliban regime, but allowed Osama bin Laden and much of al Qaeda to escape to a Pakistan sanctuary. Believing,

falsely, that the job was done, we outsourced the Afghan theater of operations to NATO, leaving it under-resourced in troops, funds, strategy and attention. Then we invaded Iraq.

After successfully ejecting the Saddam Hussein regime, we believed, again falsely, that the job was done. We withdrew the overall headquarters that ran the initial invasion, and we under-resourced the Coalition Provisional Authority and V Corps/Combined Joint Task Force-7 as well as its associated military headquarters. Further, we not only stopped the deployment of more troops that would have helped impose security, but also planned the withdrawal of those engaged. In sum, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, we did not finish the job we had begun.

By the end of 2006, facing near defeat in Iraq, we changed strategies and resource policies. The counteroffensive that the surge of 2007–08 permitted—in conjunction with the Sunni Awakening, the Muqtada al-Sadr cease-fire, and the surge-facilitated growth in size and capability of the Iraqi security forces—produced the results we sought. By 2009, the situation in Iraq was substantially improved, setting the conditions for major troop reductions and associated cost savings. Afghanistan, however, continued to fester. Persistent inattention, lack of unity and coherence in our efforts, and under-resourcing provided the Taliban with a strategic opportunity. They took advantage of it, and by 2009, they again challenged the Afghan government for control of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

This challenge, outlined by GEN Stanley McChrystal in his assessment of 2009, led to a change in strategy and resource policies. This year, we have begun to see the positive results of those changes. Yet because of the President's drawdown decision, we again face the possibility of leaving the job in Afghanistan undone. We seem once more to be adopting strategies and policies that do not fit the realities on the ground.

With respect to the war against al Qaeda, the United States has disrupted the organization, but we have neither dismantled nor defeated it. The death of bin Laden was a significant blow to the organization, but it does not equate to achieving all of our strategic objectives.

Our performance of the last 10 years begs a number of questions about America's ability to wage war. I suggest four as illustrative of the kind of national discussion we should be having.

Do we have the ability to construct and execute a coherent national strategy? A national strategy requires identifying the political aims of the war and outlining the domestic political, economic, diplomatic, military and nonmilitary resources necessary to achieve those goals; constructing national policies that make those resources available for the duration of the war; and creating the set of organizations and management schemes necessary to ensure that not only are the resources applied in such a way that they have the desired strategic effect but also that the nation can adapt as the uncertainties of war unfold. A national strategy is supposed to balance—and rebalance throughout a war—strategic ends with available means, military and nonmilitary.

In Afghanistan, we had the balance right for the initial invasion but then lost it quickly. We regained it in 2009, but now risk losing balance yet again. Reducing troop numbers to the level the President announced not only puts at risk the gains we fought to achieve but also risks arresting, or stopping altogether, the momentum of the counteroffensive. In Iraq, we again did well during the initial invasion but lost balance even faster than we did in Afghanistan, and in many of the same ways. We regained the right balance for the surge period of 2007–08 and sustained it through 2010. We now risk getting out of balance once more. With respect to the war against al Qaeda, we have been out of balance from the start by not really deciding whether to treat al Qaeda as a war enemy or international criminals (it has elements of both) and overmilitarizing, at least initially, the strategy that we did execute. Finally, we have been out of balance from the start in that we have never figured out a way to pay for our operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and against al Qaeda—a key element of any national strategy.

In sum, for a decade our national strategy has been ineffective. Two strategically important results have emerged. First, American military forces have been at war, but for much of this period neither the government nor the nation has been at war. Second, we have spent blood, money and national reputation to *not* accomplish our strategic aims.

Have we lost the ability to use force decisively? Our approaches to operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq reveal a preference to use force incrementally; that is, apply the minimum amount of force—usually measured in troops and planes deployed—to get the job done. This approach seems to be the most economical, but as the last 10 years of war have shown, such economy is not real; it is only apparent. This apparent economy protracts war because it yields the strategic initiative to the enemy. They get to choose whether to "up the ante." In war, force should be applied in ways that reduce the options of one's enemies and increase one's own. America got this right during the conventional phases of both Afghanistan and Iraq—the phases that ended the Taliban and Saddam regimes—but then immediately got it wrong. In doing so, we protracted operations in both theaters.

Our approaches also reveal a paradoxical understanding of a "decisive" use of force. On one hand, we applied force decisively to end both the Taliban and Saddam regimes. No one ever doubted that either regime could stand up to our initial onslaught. On the other hand, it has taken us years to figure out what decisive force means after conventional operations are completed. The clearest demonstration of this misunderstanding is President Bush's May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, but we risk a similar demonstration in Afghanistan, for many now believe that with few al Qaeda in Afghanistan

today and bin Laden dead, the mission is accomplished.

Have we forgotten the difference between decisive battles, decisive campaigns and decisive wars? We fought a decisive campaign, containing multiple decisive battles, in both Afghanistan and Iraq to eject the Taliban and Saddam regimes. In neither case, however, did the war end, for the enemy wasn't defeated. They merely changed operational methods.

Wars contain multiple campaigns. Those in Afghanistan and Iraq each contain at least three macro-level campaigns. The first was the campaign to oust the former regimes in both states. This campaign was waged successfully in both theaters. The second was the campaign to secure the peace and make the transition to a new government. In both countries, this campaign faltered. Through the surge and its associated consequences—a counteroffensive, the Sunni Awakening, the Sadr cease-fire, and the accelerated growth of the Iraqi security forces in size and capability—we recovered in Iraq. The jury is still out concerning Afghanistan, but the recent withdrawal decision reduces the likelihood of success. The final campaign uses diplomatic, political and economic "forces" as well as military. We have not yet reached this point in Afghanistan, but in Iraq, we seem to be faltering. To win a war, America must be decisive in each campaign.

Do we confuse ending a war with an "exit strategy" to leave a war? Our confusion over the concept of decisive leads to this second conceptual error. Ending a war entails defeating one's enemies (meaning they accept that they have been defeated) and achieving one's strategic political aims. Having an exit strategy could be interpreted as having a national strategy to defeat one's enemies and achieve one's objective, thus setting the conditions for significant troop redeployment. Too often, however, it is interpreted as having a schedule to leave—regardless of whether one's enemies are defeated or aims achieved.

Our national discussions concerning Afghanistan and Iraq are too often governed by the "exit strategy as redeployment schedule" interpretation. The 2004–05 troop withdrawal plans in Iraq—made and publicly discussed even in the face of a rising insurgency and inadequate Iraqi security forces—provide a good example. The current troop reduction plan in Afghanistan also demonstrates an understanding of exit strategy more as a schedule than as the result of defeating one's enemy and attaining one's aims. Leaving an enemy undefeated is not a real exit strategy. Rather, it is a way to extend a war longer than necessary.

Do we lack strategic imagination? War comes in many varieties. In *On War*, Clausewitz describes war as a chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. Yet in 2004, we could not conceive that an insurgency had developed in Iraq; in Afghanistan, we adopted a counterterrorist strategy following the fall of the Taliban—even as the Taliban used insurgent tactics to begin their return; and we have yet to understand that al Qaeda, a non-nation-state, has

been waging a global insurgency.

At the national strategic level, we still appear to cling to the notion that war is best defined conventionally. America's national security institutions as well as the international norms and conventions are optimized for this type of war. Ten years of evidence that war has more than one form seems to have been insufficient to prompt adequate adaptation—domestically or internationally. Current discussions often find adherents claiming that the conflict in Libya is not a war, for example, or that war cannot be waged in cyberspace. Without adequate strategic imagination, America perpetually risks not only applying a strategy that does not match the specific enemy and situation of a given case, but also having a set of institutions and procedures equivalent to attempting to fit a round peg into a square hole. Thus we risk more examples of spending our strategic capital—lives, sacrifice, money and will—in not attaining our strategic aims.

Certainly this is an incomplete set of questions. On the list, for example, could be our continued belief, as demonstrated in Libya, that—even in the face of empirical counterevidence—airpower alone is sufficient to achieve military objectives and political aims. The list is sufficient, however, to illustrate the need for a serious national strategic-level review of our actual capacity to wage war. We need such an honest and thorough review. While we may be tired of war and want only to focus on our important domestic challenges, the unrest, instability and uncertainty of the strategic environment suggest that war may not yet be tired of us. □

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