



Aligning Means and Ends

Toward a New Way of War

Colonel Charles A. Pfaff, U.S. Army

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Colonel Charles A. Pfaff is the chief of International Military Affairs at Army Central Command. He is a 2010 distinguished graduate of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces and has previously published a number of articles on military and intelligence ethics and on police force development in Iraq. He holds a B.A. from Washington and Lee University and an M.A. from Stanford University.

PHOTO: U.S. Army officers meet with a construction contractor at the site of Forward Operating Base Qara Bagh in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, 29 October 2009. (U.S. Air Force, MSGt Sarah R. Webb)

THE UNITED STATES has failed to align its strategy with its war aims in Iraq and Afghanistan. This has led to “strategic surprise,” manifested by unexpected and costly counterinsurgency campaigns. The source of the mismatch between U.S. strategy and political aims is a misunderstanding of the nature of the aims. Briefly stated, the misalignment arises when the United States employs a strategy aimed at imposing its will, when it would be better off employing a strategy aimed at gaining acceptance for its interests.

To correct this situation, rather than simply preventing our adversaries from realizing their aims, U.S. strategists must better align means with ends and employ all instruments of national power to coerce (or entice) our adversaries into accepting U.S. interests.

A close examination of the U.S. “way of war” reveals the source of the mismatch. The U.S. way of war emphasizes the imposition of our national will on the enemy, and it typically relies on strategies of annihilation and attrition intended to eliminate the enemy’s capability to resist. However, in many conflicts the United States only seeks the enemy’s compliance with U.S. will. Achieving compliance requires a different kind of engagement than simply eliminating the enemy’s capability to resist. In fact, pure strategies of attrition and annihilation often undermine such aims, requiring an approach that uses multiple agency efforts and individual agency capabilities to wield the full range of national power.

The U.S. “Way of War”

Clausewitz famously characterized war as the continuation of politics by other means.¹ However, as the historian Victor Davis Hanson notes, Westerners, in practice, see war as a way of doing something politics cannot.² Thus, war does not so much continue politics as replace it. When war replaces politics, military objectives become political objectives so that defeating the enemy militarily becomes synonymous with achieving one’s political aims. As a result, argues Hanson, the Western way of war favors “head-to-head” battles aimed at annihilating or at least attriting enemy forces until they no longer have the capability to resist.³

But the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan is that military goals are not always synonymous with political ones. United States forces entered Iraq and Afghanistan expecting to fight—and win—using an attrition-based strategy that focused on capturing or killing Taliban fighters and Iraqi conventional forces. When that strategy failed to deliver the intended political goals, U.S. forces again employed a strategy of attrition aimed at capturing or killing insurgents. Unfortunately, the continued application of this strategy did not produce the desired results.

In response to this failure, the U.S. military revised its counterinsurgency doctrine to emphasize protecting the population rather than eliminating insurgents. The doctrinal revision, expressed in the Army and Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, argued that attrition alone would not defeat insurgencies. In addition to using lethal force against insurgent forces, the U.S. military would also be required to see to the physical and security needs of the populations where it operated. As a result, U.S. forces would have to emphasize protecting and caring for the population over combating insurgents.⁴

In a parallel effort, the U.S. government emphasized interagency cooperation and coordination. For example, the Joint staff and combatant commands created a number of interagency task forces comprised of representatives from various departments, including the Departments of State, Treasury, and Justice, to coordinate nonmilitary means to achieve military objectives. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the major commands have also created provincial reconstruction teams that bring together a range of civilian and military expertise to realize political and economic development on the ground.

Despite the welcome change in emphasis and increased inclusiveness of the elements of national power, the United States still has not achieved its strategic goals. Efforts aimed at political and economic development simply represent recognition that destruction of the enemy in counterinsurgencies requires synchronized political and military efforts. What we do not recognize is that *the destruction of the enemy is not always the best way to realize U.S. goals.*

“Wars of Acceptance” and “Wars of Compliance”

The gap between military and political objectives accounts for a surprisingly large number of cases where weaker states defeat stronger ones. In fact, according to a survey of armed conflict from 1800 to 1998, significantly weaker adversaries defeated stronger ones approximately 30 percent of the time.⁵ In particular, the report examined “asymmetric conflicts,” where the force ratio between strong and weak actors was greater than five to one. In such conflicts, it found not only a surprising number of weaker-side victories, but also that the frequency of those victories has increased over time. In fact, from 1950 to 1998, weaker actors in asymmetric conflicts won the majority—55 out of 90—of the conflicts surveyed.⁶

The reason for this result, as political scientist Patricia Sullivan notes, is the failure to match strategies with aims. According to Sullivan, war aims fall into two broad categories: targets of acceptance and targets of compliance.⁷ Targets of acceptance are associated with political objectives that one can achieve by brute force, such as the seizure of territory.⁸ Targets of compliance, on the other hand, aim at compelling the enemy to change a policy that runs counter to one’s interests. A war of acceptance only requires that an enemy accept a certain state of affairs, but wars of compliance require the enemy to actively realize and maintain a certain state of affairs. In a sense, a war of compliance requires the enemy to abandon his interests and adopt one’s own.⁹

Brute force alone can rarely obtain and maintain such support. In fact, Sullivan argues, strategies that succeed against targets of acceptance, like annihilation and attrition, actually work against one’s aims when fighting targets of compliance.¹⁰

In a sense, a war of compliance requires the enemy to abandon his interests and adopt one’s own.

The reason for such a counterintuitive result is that militaries are adept at discerning how much force is required to defeat another military force, even given environmental complications such as terrain, weapons capabilities, and leadership.¹¹ However, it is much more difficult to discern how much coercive force is required to compel people to change their minds. As Sullivan notes, “the amount of coercive leverage an actor can derive from fixed amount of destructive capability is contingent on the target’s willingness to absorb the costs imposed.”¹² This fact places the target more in control of the outcome of the conflict, since he gets to decide how much tolerance for suffering he has. Additionally, he does not need to directly confront his adversary’s military force in order to determine that tolerance, allowing him to employ indirect strategies designed to increase the cost of the conflict, rather than decisively defeat adversary forces. As Sullivan notes, “It is difficult to predict costs or plan military strategies with any type of precision when success is dependent on reaching an inherently unknowable enemy breaking point.”¹³

Operations in Afghanistan illustrate this point. When killing one insurgent motivates many others who were otherwise not in the fight to take his place, killing that insurgent increases the enemy’s combat power. In Afghanistan, according to the International Security Assistance Force Commander’s Guidance, “The intricate familial, clan, and tribal connections of Afghan society turn ‘attrition math’ on its head. From a conventional standpoint, the killing of two insurgents in a group of ten leaves eight remaining... from the insurgent standpoint, those two killed were likely related to many others who want vengeance.”¹⁴ To the extent this “math” is accurate, strategies of attrition actually empower, rather than undermine, the enemy’s capability to resist.

Realigning U.S. Strategy: Clausewitz Meets Sun Tzu

Sun Tzu argued that the best general achieves his goals without resorting to force. In fact, Sun Tzu admonished military leaders not to put “a premium



(U.S. Air Force, TSgt. Joe Laws)

James Morris, U.S. Department of State representative to Provincial Reconstruction Team Kapisa, visits with children in Surobi District, Afghanistan, 21 August 2010.

on killing” and noted that “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”¹⁵ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two colonels in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, argue the United States does not realize that, after its 1991 victory over Iraq, many would-be adversaries abandoned the idea that they can impose their will on the United States. However, the Chinese colonels claim prudent adversaries can find ways to compel the United States to accept their interests by shaping and constraining the choices U.S. policy makers have.¹⁶

Employing the language of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, they argue that war is not best characterized as “using armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will,” but instead as “using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.”¹⁷ This characterization is very similar to Sullivan’s concept of “wars of compliance,” where the aim is not to destroy the enemy’s military capability but to compel him to change a policy.

This broader view of war suggests that there is not one kind of warfare, but many. In addition to conventional Qiao and Wang also list the following kinds of warfare:

- Atomic
- Diplomatic
- Financial
- Network
- Trade
- Biological and chemical
- Intelligence
- Resources
- Ecological
- Psychological
- Economic
- Space
- Tactical
- Regulatory
- Electronic
- Smuggling
- Sanctions
- Guerrilla
- Drug
- Media
- Terrorist
- Virtual
- Ideological

Additionally, one can combine these types of warfare in many ways to form other kinds of warfare. For example, they describe the U.S. “war on terror” as “national terrorist warfare + intelligence warfare + financial warfare + network warfare + regulatory warfare.” In fact, as Qiao and Wang note, “To a very great extent, war is no longer even war but rather coming to grips on the internet, and matching the mass media, assault and defense . . . along with other things which we had never viewed as war.”¹⁸

In the application of such combined warfare, the United States’ greatest strategic vulnerability, they argue, is its failure to recognize these other methods as war and thus not being prepared when adversaries employ these means against U.S. interests.¹⁹

Qiao and Wang’s thesis is reflected more comprehensively in their army’s concept of *shashou-jian*, or “Assassin’s Mace.” Assassin’s Mace is an umbrella term for doctrinal development and acquisition of weapons systems aimed at enabling the “inferior” to defeat the “superior.” This doctrine relies on surprise as well as deceptive and unorthodox methods “unknown to the adversary.” The means employed under this doctrine are intended to achieve the effects of deterring, decapitating, blinding, paralyzing, or disintegrating enemy forces.

The idea that war is more about shaping an adversary’s interests than imposing one’s will suggests that U.S. strategists should learn to articulate a range of acceptable end states and recommend a broad application of coercive and attractive elements of national power to make U.S. interests acceptable to an adversary. This idea also suggests that in addition to designing broad strategies aimed at shaping our adversaries’ interests, U.S. strategists need to be aware of adversaries’ efforts to shape our own.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully articulate how one may best implement a strategy of compliance. However, at a minimum, the United States should overcome barriers to interagency coordination and cooperation, either by creating a central authority or by dispersing responsibility to an agency and giving it the authority to task others as required. Of course, each of these options will come with their own sets of difficulties that will have to be



(U.S. Air Force, MSgt. Jim Varhegyi)

U.S. Air Force 1LT Lee Turcotte, right, a civil engineer, and Teresa Morales, civil engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, discuss the progress of a school construction project with contractors in Panjshir Province, Afghanistan, 4 August 2007.

managed. Centralizing authority and responsibility will require creating a “super-agency” that would need to be able to plan as well as execute national policy. To do so, it would require the authority to task agencies for personnel and other resources, which could undermine the ability of those agencies to fulfill other responsibilities.

An alternative would be to place a single agency, like the Department of State or Department of Defense, in a supported role and allow it to task other agencies for personnel. This approach might be suitable for addressing short-term concerns, but for longer-term conflicts the responsible agency would eventually accrue authorities that make it function like the super-agency, thus risking other subordinate agency goals that do not serve the national security concern at hand.

These difficulties are not insurmountable and there are structures in place that can help overcome them. Interagency task forces, for example, already serve as coordinating cells for multiple agencies’ efforts to achieve particular goals, but they cannot realize true unity of purpose because they only coordinate other agencies’ voluntary efforts. To make them truly effec-

tive, they need directive authority, as well. Where these entities operate in Joint operational areas, like Iraq and Afghanistan, the Department of Defense is already the supported agency. In this role, it could obtain the authority to task the other agencies and departments as required to meet U.S. objectives in the operational area.

Given the limited duration and decreasing scope of these operations, granting this authority will not likely have significant impact on the other departments’ operations outside the area. After December 2011, the U.S. presence in Iraq will likely be limited to an office of security cooperation that would fall under the U.S. ambassador’s control, thus transferring the supported role to the Department of State. While there will likely be significant numbers of U.S. forces in Afghanistan for a few more years, that presence is already decreasing and operations there will eventually transition to advisory and material support under the U.S. ambassador, as is currently happening in Iraq.

In areas outside a Joint operational area, embassies already provide space for various agencies to execute U.S. policy where adversaries are

confronting U.S. interests. However, ambassadors can only approve or disapprove of another agency's activities. They can do little to shape, direct, or even coordinate them. By giving the ambassadors such authority, the agencies can better direct their efforts and resources against specific goals. Placing this authority within the embassy minimizes the risk of undermining the supporting departments' broader domestic and international goals by limiting their commitment to just those assets they have in country.

U.S. government agencies should also consider how their capabilities can impact across the range of national power. For example, the Department of Defense should consider how it can use military force to create an economic, cultural, ecological, or other impact. Similarly, the Department of Justice should consider how its capabilities in building police and judicial expertise might affect the military situation.²⁰

Conclusion

Unless U.S. strategists shift the emphasis in warfighting from imposing U.S. will to making adversary interests compatible with those of the United States, current military efforts are not likely to yield victory. It would be wrong to conclude that wars of imposition are a thing of the past, but our prudent adversaries are not going to fight them. They will look for other ways to shape U.S. interests, instead.

This analysis suggests that the outcome of wars of compliance will be dramatically different from that of wars of imposition. There will be no formal surrenders and no victory parades. In fact, like economic recessions, we may only know a war is over long after it actually ended. Even then, such a conclusion may be controversial because shaping others' interests often means the adversary comes away having achieved some of its goals, as well. **MR**

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Anatol Rapaport, ed. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968), 119. Depending on one's translation, what Clausewitz said is that war is "the mere continuation of policy by other means." However, in his discussion, he clearly argues that war is not simply an instrument of politics, but itself a political act.

2. Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 22.

4. FM-3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006).

5. Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, 26, no. 1 (Summer 2001), 96-97.

6. Arreguin-Toft, 97.

7. Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 5 (June 2007): 502.

8. Sullivan, 503-504. For example, in the early days of World War II, the Germans seized control over much territory and resources in Europe. To do so, they only needed to destroy their enemy's ability to resist, thus forcing them to accept German control. Conversely, the Germans lost this control when these countries, with their allies, rebuilt that capability.

9. *Ibid.*, 504.

10. *Ibid.*, 505. According to her research, when the objective of the use of military

force is to affect a policy change, stronger states lose to weaker ones in over 75 percent of cases. See Sullivan, 511.

11. Sullivan, 506.

12. *Ibid.*, 507.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Memorandum, Subject: ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance, 2, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf>.

15. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 77.

16. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999). English translation available at <<http://www.terrorism.com/documents/TRC-Analysis/unrestricted.pdf>>, 24.

17. *Ibid.*, 7.

18. *Ibid.*, 146.

19. Jason E. Bruzdinski, "Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace Concept,'" in *Civil Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel eds. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

20. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, a lack of competent police advisors delayed the development of local police, considered a cornerstone of any successful counterinsurgency.

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