

Analyze That: Five Lessons in Strategy since 9/11

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On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was in Boston on advanced consulting training at the corporate headquarters of the business consulting firm I was working for at the time. That day the training was cancelled and we were sent to our hotels rooms. I remember being glued all day to that well-known 24-hours news channel. After the initial shock, the training resumed later that week. Once the course was completed, I rented a car and made the long drive home to Montreal, as airlines were still grounded across the US. This five-hour drive gave me time to think, as a senior officer in the Canadian Army Reserves, about where this could lead us to be involved in. Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda had sanctuary by the Taliban, was soon identified as a target. I never thought when military operations started that we would still be there 10 years later.

Not long after the invasion of Afghanistan by coalition forces, I was convinced that the Canadian Forces needed a capability to operate on the moral and informational plane (or non-kinetic), rather than just on the physical plane (or kinetic). In the Fall of 2002, I set out to influence and plan for the standing up of a new Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) capability in the Canadian Army. In late Nov 2003, I was officially given the go ahead to lead the creation and [development of the PSYOPS Capability](#). In about a year and a half, we deployed our first PSYOPS teams to Afghanistan, with the opening of the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar in Aug 2005. In Nov 2006, I deployed to Afghanistan. I have continued my study of Afghan history and culture, of strategy and counterinsurgency (COIN) since my return 4 years ago, and spent much effort comparing different proposed strategies to deal with the conflict in Afghanistan. Some of that work is referenced in previous posts here.

Putting together my new website here in the last few days with some of my selected briefings and writings has pushed me to reflect on the evolution of my thinking on strategy. I have briefly summarized below what I think are the most important elements of what I have learned in five precepts, each characterized by a series of questions:

- 1. Understand the Character of the Conflict.** Since 9-11, Western powers have been involved in several internal conflicts that have not turned out as originally planned. What is the character of the (internal, indigenous, regional, international, etc.) conflict? Is it a civil war where foreigners might be taking sides, a popular revolt, an insurgency or something else? In the case of counterinsurgency, dealing with insurgency should be a host nation government issue, not primarily a foreign one. Likewise, counterinsurgency (COIN) is an operational concept that can be of use by indigenous forces, but foreigners must stay away from COIN as much as they can. If they must get involved, they should attempt to keep an advisory role and not get pulled in actual combat. If foreigners are more motivated to do COIN than the host government and the majority of the population, the foreign hands will be in deep trouble. Where is the strategy, made by and for local nationals? Are indigenous energies mobilized? If social transformation must be made to achieve success, is there capable, legitimate indigenous leadership and a critical mass of the population behind the goals and their leaders for them to achieve success? As for assisting foreign revolts, the same questions from the opposite point of view apply.

2. **Differentiate Strategy vs Tactics.** No matter how great one gets at tactics, they cannot overcome the lack of a sound strategy, as Sun Tzu correctly noted: *Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.* Strategy deals with the relations among ends, ways and means of war. In terms of levels, policy are the ends, strategy are the ways and tactics are the means. Each are inter-related, but obviously the former always have priority and significance over the latter elements. Professionals may get mired in doctrinal templates that pertain to the tactical or operational level of war, rather than the strategic. Is too much confidence put on intellectually appealing tactical doctrinal templates rather than adapted policy and strategy? When assessing campaigns, is there just a mere tweaking of tactics and resources, or is sound strategy being crafted and implemented?
3. **Question Strategic Assumptions.** Strategists, both military and civilian, must uncompromisingly question received wisdom and assumptions. Several questions come to mind. What is the threat? Are there vital national interests at stake in this particular conflict? Is the strategy adapted to the kind of war that is being entertained? Is the strategy designed to effectively deal with the real threat? In other words, is the threat well understood, is it worth dealing with, well known how to deal with it, can the strategy be successful and can the human, financial, material and political costs be accepted? How do these interests stack up with others priority interests? What are the objectives, what is the end state and how does this end, realistically? Who are the real enemies? Why do they fight and who are they fighting? In the case of internal conflicts, who are the local allies to the foreign interventionists? Are they seen as legitimate in the eyes of their people? What are their interests? Whose interests are being served by (continued) foreign involvement? What is the potential for blowback? Have alternative options been assessed, other than to get involved militarily?
4. **Integrate the Political Dimension in Strategy.** In all matters of war and warfare, for conventional and unconventional operations, insurgency and COIN, popular revolt, other indigenous conflicts, foreign military intervention and assistance should be viewed from the lens of politics. By politics I mean, whose interests are at stake, what are the power relationships being served and rearranged, for and against whom? Strategists must ensure that they adequately analyze and include the political dimensions of strategy. One key element to assess, in the case of irregular conflict in foreign lands, is the character of the relationship between the foreign interventionists and their allies, indigenous and regional. What is the political strategy and what is the vision of a realistic end state? What is the architecture of the relationship with their allies? Does it make them dependent on their local and regional allies or the other way around? Do they need them more than the reverse in the way they shape their intervention? What are the levels of mobilization of the local leaders and indigenous groups?
5. **Master the Narrative.** Ensuring political support at home for foreign military interventions has been a challenge since 9-11. Can a clear and honest narrative to support the involvement in the conflict be crafted to sustain support at home for the duration of the involvement? This is the essential why should they intervene? If nations going to war cannot draft a simple, rational and mobilizing narrative to sustain support in their home countries for military involvement, where fundamental national security interests can be articulated and be well understood, then probably the strategy has not been well thought out. This precept, when adequately administered, can serve as a final litmus test of strategy formation.

These overlap somewhat, but in matters of strategy there are rarely clear-cut boundaries between concepts. I will let my readers decide whether these strategic questions and concepts have been answered since 9/11 for the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq or even recently in Libya.

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