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# Mitigating Divergence from Strategic Intent

by

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## Mitigating Divergence from Strategic Intent

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### Abstract

A central tenet of Carl Von Clausewitz theory of war is its inherent unpredictability. There is always the possibility that military action will create unforeseen impacts, some of which may be counter to strategic intent. This possibility is exacerbated when strategic objectives lack clarity or realism; yet the complex nature of contemporary security challenges makes setting clear, achievable objectives difficult. While the joint forces have made great progress in mitigating the potential for operational design, planning, and execution to create impacts that diverge from strategic intent, there are opportunities for further improvement. These center on better preparing emerging leaders to engage in civilian-military dialogue and better integrating non-military dimensions into operational design, planning, execution, and campaign assessment.

## Mitigating Divergence from Strategic Intent

For Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread.

—Alexander Pope<sup>1</sup>

A central tenet in Carl Von Clausewitz's treatise *On War* is the inherent unpredictability of war. Chance and probability form one of the three elements of Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity: "through the element of chance, guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war."<sup>2</sup> Given this reality, there is always the possibility that military action will create unforeseen impacts, some of which may be counter to strategic objectives. The ability to mitigate this potential divergence is essential for military success.

What does it take to mitigate such divergence? National security challenges are set within a complex backdrop of volatile political, economic, and social considerations. They cannot be solved through decisive military victory alone. Instead, military action is one piece of the strategy needed. Thus, practices to mitigate potential divergence from strategic intent need to account for the impact of military action on both military and non-military aspects of the operating environment.

To strengthen U.S. military effectiveness within this context, the joint forces should stay the course in deepening consideration of non-military dimensions of national security policy and operating environments. The joint forces have made great strides over the last 15 years. Nonetheless, systematically integrating military and non-military considerations across civilian-military dialogue, operational design, planning, execution, and assessment would further improve joint force effectiveness.

Demonstrating this requirement and identifying recommendations for improvement necessitates a systemic review of the war-waging and war-fighting process. First is examination of the strategic war objectives themselves. Are they clear? Are they achievable? What is the strategic role of the military vice other agencies?

Choices in strategic ways<sup>3</sup> to achieve objectives are second. These choices always contain risk; they are rarely certain or guaranteed to work. Often, the U.S. has several interests in an operating environment. This can create tension where advancing one interest may put another at risk.

An open, discursive dialogue between civilian and military leaders is essential to developing sound strategic objectives and making sound choices in strategic ways. This is the primary means for military leaders to influence objectives and strategic ways.

Ideally, operational design informs dialogue on strategic objectives and ways, while also serving as the basis for planning. Strong operational design and planning requires a finer-grained understanding of military and non-military dimensions of the operating environment. It also necessitates close coordination with other U.S. and international agencies active in theater.

Soldiers executing military actions face unique challenges. They are the furthest removed from strategic decisions and regularly deal with the vagaries of chance. In addition, soldiers in battle make critical decisions under extreme stress. The opportunity for degraded judgment leading to mistakes is a daily reality.

Last comes the question of assessment. How do the joint forces know if they are making progress? When strategic objectives encompass military and non-military dimensions, how well do campaign assessments track changes in all of these

dimensions? How well do they capture the impact that military action has across these dimensions?

The discussion herein is informed by interviews with ten U.S. military officers, one U.S. Department of Defense civilian, and one British military officer, along with review of literature and U.S. military doctrine. For the most part, information from interviews was substantiated through literature or doctrine sources. The exception was information on the current campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). There is not yet a body of literature on this campaign through which interview information could be triangulated. As such, additional research would be needed to confirm, contextualize, and add perspective to the examples used from that campaign.

#### Strategic Objectives in an Environment of Competing Priorities and Strategy

##### Uncertainties

Two aspects of today's national security challenges create unique implications for use of force decision-making and contemporary strategic objectives. First, most threats to the U.S. are not immediate existential threats, creating room for subjective interpretation of their severity and priority. Second, there are not clear, agreed upon strategic ways to address these threats. This means that decisions to use force and the strategic ways to be employed are subject to extensive political debate. When a decision to use force is made, the desire for future policy flexibility and the need for politically attractive objectives can lead to objectives that lack specificity and may be more aspirational than achievable. These dynamics raise the stakes for military leaders providing best military advice. The civilian-military dialogue provides military leaders

with the greatest opportunity to influence the formulation, clarity, and realism of strategic objectives and strategy.

Arguably, the last existential threats to the U.S. were World War II and the Cold War. While the country has fought several wars since, these have not threatened U.S. existence. Absent a clear existential threat to unify the nation, decisions on the use of force, and threats of force, are subject to the democratic process in which trade-offs and compromises are made among differing interests, values, and priorities.<sup>4</sup> The President, Congress, and public debate the interests and values at stake and their importance as compared to other contemporary issues. This continues throughout military action.

The absence of clear solutions to today's security challenges creates space for more debate on strategic ways. Contemporary examples of such challenges include how to address ISIL; what to do about the Syrian civil war; how to deter North Korean nuclear activity; how to encourage China to be a responsible global leader; and how to respond to Russia's resurgence. The former Undersecretary of the Navy, Janine Davidson, and co-authors wrote: "Scenarios from the South China Sea to Syria can only be 'managed,' not solved outright."<sup>5</sup> Defining a desired end state and clear objectives when solutions are not clear is extremely difficult. What is certain is that military action alone cannot resolve these challenges. Major General William E. Rapp wrote: "The wars of the past decade show that military force is insufficient in and of itself to achieve all policy goals."<sup>6</sup> This echoes military theorist B.H. Liddell Hart, who wrote in 1954, "History shows that gaining military victory is not in itself equivalent to gaining the object of policy."<sup>7</sup>

In such circumstances, decisions to use force hinge on political leaders' subjective valuation of multiple factors: the importance of the national interest at stake; the potential negative impact and opportunity cost action would have on other interests; the degree of success that could be achieved; and the means required. In pursuit of information and influence, political leaders request advice and options from the military. This can pose a challenge for military leaders in their role as apolitical professional advisors. Yet, best military advice is essential to inform political leaders on what military action could and, importantly, could not achieve, what non-military contributions may be required, and the impact of action on other national security issues.

This dynamic demands a new concept for civilian-military relations.<sup>8</sup> The concept must support development of realistic objectives likely to produce an outcome consistent with U.S. policy and beneficial to U.S. national interests. Military objectives must be developed in the context of a sound U.S. government strategy with realistic objectives set for other departments and agencies whose effort is required to move toward a desirable outcome.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the concept must maintain clear civilian control of the military. Finally, it needs to be sufficiently resilient to allow for adaptation to changes in political leadership and desired outcomes.

Rapp and Davidson have proposed concepts for civilian-military relations to address these needs. Rapp proposes that, "to be effective and to assist the president in crafting and implementing national-security policy involving military force, senior military leaders must embrace a more involved role in the back-and-forth dialogue necessary to build effective policies and workable strategies."<sup>10</sup> Rapp and Davidson concur that senior military leaders cannot limit their engagement to questions of military force.

Davidson and co-authors note that military advice needs to include the impact of military options on other U.S. interests.<sup>11</sup> Rapp goes further, arguing that it is incumbent upon military leaders to actively participate in the full range of issues at hand.<sup>12</sup> To do this, senior military leaders must understand the politics of the issue and the “non-military complexities of policy implementation.”<sup>13</sup> In giving advice, “military leaders must help broaden the dialogue to all means of national power” so that they “provide ‘best military advice’ as part of a holistic strategy to achieve national objectives.”<sup>14</sup> In effect, military leaders need to function as supreme commanders described by Clausewitz, “On the one hand, he is aware of the entire political situation; on the other, he knows exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal.”<sup>15</sup>

While military leaders must be prepared for and seek this dialogue, civilian leaders in the executive branch and Congress must request it and respect military leaders whose professional judgment may counter civilian preferences. Though rigorous debate does not guarantee successful strategy choices, civilian leaders have made some of their worst strategic mistakes when they have shut down such debate.<sup>16</sup>

The 2013 letter from General Martin E. Dempsey to the Senate Committee on Armed Services regarding the Syrian civil war provides an example of military advice on use of force options. It demonstrates the requirements Rapp articulates. While not overtly advising on non-military matters, Dempsey advocates for a holistic strategy, offers his perspective on objectives, and cautions on potential unintended consequences:

Too often, these options are considered in isolation. It would be better if they were assessed and discussed in the context of an overall whole-of-government strategy for achieving our policy objectives in coordination with our allies and partners. To this end, I have supported a regional

approach that would isolate the conflict to prevent regional destabilization and weapons proliferation. At the same time, we should help develop a moderate opposition - including their military capabilities - while maintaining pressure on the Assad regime.

All of these options would likely further the narrow military objective of helping the opposition and placing more pressure on the regime. We have learned from the past 10 years; however, that it is not enough to simply alter the balance of military power without careful consideration of what is necessary in order to preserve a functioning state. We must anticipate and be prepared for the unintended consequences of our action. Should the regime's institutions collapse in the absence of a viable opposition, we could inadvertently empower extremists or unleash the very chemical weapons we seek to control.<sup>17</sup>

Syria demonstrates the challenges of a problem only partly subject to external influence, which coercive force cannot solve and for which there are no guaranteed successful strategic ways. The U.S. foreign policy end state under the Obama administration was “a Syrian-led political process aimed at ending the war and transitioning to a new and more representative government.”<sup>18</sup> This proved to be more aspirational than achievable, despite diplomatic efforts to negotiate a ceasefire.

The inherent likelihood for strategic objectives to lack clarity and to potentially be as much aspirational as achievable fundamentally undermines military efforts to ensure that strategic ways, planning, and execution maintain fidelity to strategic intent. Civilian-military dialogue is the primary tool the joint forces can employ to mitigate this. As Rapp wrote, “educating and developing strategic-mindedness in our rising senior military officers is an imperative that trumps nearly all other aspects of their professional competence.”<sup>19</sup>

### Choices in Strategic Ways

Even with clear strategic objectives, choices in strategic ways can create divergence. This may be rooted in trade-offs between objectives in a theater. The

campaign against ISIL provides a contemporary example. Alternately, strategic ways may generate detrimental second- or third-order effects. The de-Ba'athification policy and dissolution of the army in Iraq illustrate this. In both cases, mitigating unintended divergence requires strong understanding of military and non-military dynamics that informs robust civilian-military dialogue to enable decision-making. This necessitates that military leaders have a holistic grasp of the operating environment, understand linkages between foreign policy objectives, can anticipate potential trade-offs, and proactively engage civilian leaders in dialogue on the choices at hand. Further, it necessitates civilian leaders open to dialogue and able to weigh advice from the full spectrum of the national security team.

An illustrative conflict in the ISIL campaign relates to providing military support to partners. A key partner in Iraq is the Kurdish Peshmerga militia. Yet, by supporting the Peshmerga in the fight against ISIL, the joint forces may be creating a greater challenge to achievement of the U.S. objective of maintaining a unified Iraq. By 2016, the Peshmerga had pushed ISIL out of much of northern Iraq “and in the process, expanded territory held by the Kurdistan Regional Government by 30 percent.”<sup>20</sup> Iraq’s Kurds have long-standing aspirations to gain independence for the Kurdistan province.<sup>21</sup> Thus, U.S. support has contributed to the military strength and territorial expansion of an Iraqi province that seeks to break from the country. In this example, the president made the final choice in which foreign policy objective would take precedent by concurring on the strategic choice to build Peshmerga capacity.<sup>22</sup> In Syria, important partners in the ISIL fight are the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The protection units, though, arose from assistance by the separatist Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK),

a recognized terrorist group. The PKK has been fighting Turkey, an important U.S. ally, since the mid-1980s. Some analysts see the protection units as part of the PKK. The choice to work with the YPG against ISIL has complicated U.S. relations with its ally Turkey.<sup>23</sup> How a stronger Kurdistan Regional Government and YPG will affect the region remains unknown. It is possible that the U.S. will rue its strategic choices if they ultimately undermine Iraqi or Turkish stability.

In contrast to choices among competing U.S. objectives, the de-Ba'athification policy and dissolution of the Iraqi army are widely recognized as mistakes that led to foreseeable detrimental impacts. De-Ba'athification decimated the ranks of public administration professionals, crippling Iraqi social service delivery, eliminating income for families of government workers, setting the stage for widespread failure of government performance, and heightening sectarian and ethnic tensions. Dissolution of the army created a security vacuum in a country that had until that point been controlled through force, while at the same time putting men trained in arms on the street without employment.<sup>24</sup> The tragedy of these decisions is that many people, both military and civilian, recognized the potential for widespread lawlessness, violent resistance to occupation, sectarian conflict, and creation of a new base for Al Qaeda. This was not a failure to anticipate potential divergence from strategic objectives, but rather a failure of dialogue on strategic ways to enable good decision-making. Civilian decision-makers chose not to utilize civilian-military dialogue these strategic decisions.<sup>25</sup> Mitigating these types of mistakes relies on both the strategic-mindedness and moral courage of senior military leaders, with no guarantee of a positive civilian response.

## Operational Design, Planning, and Interagency Coordination

The joint forces seem to have significantly improved their approach to mitigating divergence from strategic objectives in operational design and planning over the last 15 years. Contrasting today's campaign against ISIL with the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars illustrates this. Judging the full extent of this progress will have to await future analysis of the ISIL campaign.

Two factors, in particular, contribute to the progress: senior military leadership focus on enabling a future peace by protecting civilians and infrastructure; and close interagency coordination. Both of these hinge on military leadership and staff understanding military and non-military dynamics of the operating environment, as well as the holistic U.S. government strategy. Focusing on the desired peace echoes the advice of theorist Liddell Hart, "it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire."<sup>26</sup>

While the ISIL campaign illustrates difficult policy trade-offs, it also demonstrates significant consideration of how military action fits with non-military action and of minimizing non-military impact of kinetic attacks. The campaign design was premised on the understanding that a solution to violent extremism depended on the population seeing a better future without extremists. Thus, the military objective was to remove ISIL from the terrain, thereby enabling humanitarian actors to provide medical, housing, and other needs. The joint forces have closely coordinated each territorial advance with humanitarian services to achieve this. From the beginning, the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) Combatant Commander stressed the importance of minimizing civilian casualties to not turn the population against the Iraqi and coalition forces. Further, he

stressed the need to minimize infrastructure destruction so that the campaign would leave the best foundation it could for the population to rebuild and recover.<sup>27</sup> Former USCENTCOM Commander Lloyd J. Austin, III, expressed this:

... we've been very careful in how we've gone about conducting strikes because we want to avoid unnecessary collateral damage. Had we killed a lot of innocent civilians, and specifically in Sunni areas, I think that it's fair to say that we would be in a much different place at this point. But because we've done this the right way, we've secured the support of our Sunni Arab partners in the region. And together, we are making progress.

... the United States military is contributing and enabling a broader whole-of-government effort that is currently under way. In addition to helping to counter ISIL and gradually degrade their capability, which we are doing, we're also taking the necessary steps to enable the Iraqis to secure their border and to regenerate and restructure their security forces. ...

And also even more important, we want to change conditions inside of Iraq and Syria so that what we see happening there now does not happen again in the future.<sup>28</sup>

Critical to the success of the broader whole-of-government effort were relationships and early joint planning. The former USCENTCOM J5-Strategy, Plans, and Policy Director, Major General Steven W. Busby, credits the USCENTCOM U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Senior Development Advisor for helping him appreciate that military actions needed to set the conditions for successful humanitarian actions. Operational design and planning of military and humanitarian actions must be coordinated and mutually responsive to the needs of the other. Recognizing this reinforced the emphasis on minimizing collateral damage. Further, knowing that the fight against ISIL would be succeeded by assistance to reform Iraqi forces influenced how the U.S. partnered with those forces in fighting.<sup>29</sup>

The attention given non-military impacts in the ISIL campaign contrasts sharply with the joint forces' experience in the early years of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. In

Afghanistan, the joint forces lacked the understanding of Afghanistan politics and peoples, as well as the relationship with Pakistan, which was essential to informing strategic decisions and operational design. Attempts by coalition forces to create a Pashtun alternative to the Taliban in 2001 and 2002 failed, at least in part, because the Pashtun leaders whom coalition forces supported did not have popular support.<sup>30</sup>

This lack of understanding of non-military dynamics persisted through 2010. Major General Michael T. Flynn, the senior intelligence official in Afghanistan in 2010, and co-authors wrote a highly critical assessment of the intelligence function at the time:

Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the level of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers—whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers—U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency.<sup>31</sup>

Military intelligence informed action against insurgents, but had little value for strategic decisions on how to undermine popular support for the insurgency. Not only did intelligence lack needed information, it failed to warn against counter-productive coalition attacks. As stated by Flynn and co-authors, “merely killing insurgents usually serves to multiply our enemies rather than subtract. This counterintuitive dynamic is common in many guerrilla conflicts, but is especially true in the revenge-prone Pashtun communities whose cooperation we are trying to earn and maintain.”<sup>32</sup>

The joint forces had similar challenges in the early years in Iraq, where they did not understand the impact that the killing and detention of Iraqis had on conflict dynamics. Emma Sky provides two clear examples in *The Unraveling*. As late as 2007, U.S. forces released video footage of coalition forces killing a person laying an improvised explosive device to the media, insensible to the potential alienating and polarizing effect it could have with segments of the Iraqi population. In the same period, a briefer in the regular Battle Update Assessment reported five Enemy Killed in Action, one of which was laying an IED; the other four were children. The briefer reported that the atmospherics around the incident were positive, again demonstrating lack of sensitivity to the impact that killing children would have on the community.<sup>33</sup> In Anbar province, joint forces regularly detained individuals, such that up to 8,000 people may have been detained overall. The detention enabled those opposing coalition forces to network with others from across the country, making them more dangerous when they were released than they had been prior.<sup>34</sup> In addition, “the human rights abuses committed in the fight against the insurgents made the enemy more determined.”<sup>35</sup>

Thankfully, the joint forces recognized these issues and changed course. That it took several years for this to happen raises the question of how campaign assessment informs review of strategy and reframing of operational design. Does it provide the analysis of impact of military action and changes in the operating environment needed to support decisions on reaffirming versus reframing the operational approach?

Before turning to assessment, there are particular elements inherent in battlefield execution to consider.

## Execution

Execution on the battlefield presents unique challenges to ensuring that military action supports strategic intent. Soldiers on the battlefield are the most removed from strategic discussions, in distance, training, education, and function. Battlefield execution is where chance, fog, and friction act to disrupt plans and introduce unforeseen elements. It is also where life and death decisions are made in the context of danger and exhaustion, both physical and mental. It is unsurprising that mistakes and misconduct happen. It is a credit to joint force training, discipline, and professionalism, that these are relatively rare exceptions.

A number of characteristics of fighting forces and combat present potential challenges to ensuring fidelity between military action and strategic aims. First, soldiers responsible for battlefield execution are often young, in the range of 18 to 22 years of age. As such, they have less experience and education than professional military officers responsible for operational design, campaign planning, and higher levels of command. They may or may not have the training, education, and experience to understand the strategic intent, campaign plan, and how their actions are intended to nest within it.<sup>36</sup>

Second is the relative isolation in which frontline soldiers operate. In decentralized fighting, it is rare for a brigade to be able to link back to the strategic level. A brigade's day-to-day grind is many steps removed from the overall campaign plan and the strategic end. Each unit focuses on its niche.<sup>37</sup> This relative isolation limits the ability of those executing to ensure that their actions advance achievement of strategic ends without creating divergent effects.

Third, the extreme psychological, moral, and physical stress inherent in battle brings a constant risk of impairing the judgment of even the finest soldier. Clausewitz discusses this related to the characteristics needed in a commander. “Four elements make up the climate of war: danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance. If we consider them together, it becomes evident how much fortitude of mind and character are needed to make progress in these impeding elements with safety and success.” He writes “it is the impact of the ebbing of moral and physical strength, of the heart-rending spectacle of the dead and wounded, that the commander has to withstand – first in himself, and then in all those who, directly or indirectly, have entrusted him with their thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears.”<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary understanding of traumatic stress and the relationship between empathy and violence add greater depth to Clausewitz’s insights. Modern psychology has shown that traumatic stress causes impairment of cognitive processing and decision-making.<sup>39</sup> As one psychologist put it, “The physiological shift [induced by traumatic stress] makes us stop thinking and mobilize for immediate action.”<sup>40</sup> Repeated or continued high levels of stress can delay the resumption of normal cognitive processing and increase bodily fatigue.<sup>41</sup> The relationship of empathy and violence may add another emotional challenge. Research suggests that it is difficult for people to feel empathy while engaging in violence.<sup>42</sup> Other research has shown that when people empathize with victims, they tend to be more violent toward perpetrators.<sup>43</sup> Taken together, these types of biologically rooted responses to conditions inherent in combat could risk impairing soldiers’ judgment.

What are the decisions soldiers make in these conditions? The first involves protecting civilians. When soldiers' lives are at risk, minimizing civilian casualties creates an inevitable dilemma. Protecting civilians can mean that soldiers have to take greater risks themselves.<sup>44</sup> Just war theory describes this as the tension in balancing due risk, to not put soldiers unnecessarily at risk, and due care to protect the lives of noncombatants.<sup>45</sup> For a practical example, consider a gunner in a convoy who sees a car trying to pass. Does the gunner shoot to protect the convoy from a potential car bomb, risking killing an innocent civilian, or let the car pass, putting forces at risk from a potential car bomb?<sup>46</sup> Is there a right answer?

A second set of decisions relates to interactions with local people in non-threatening circumstances. Respectful and lawful treatment of civilians, prisoners, and the dead is essential to maintaining acceptability of military action in the public eye. The standards used to judge acceptability are specific to the culture of the particular public in question. The American public judges acceptability of military action within the American cultural and legal frame of reference. Actors in a particular theater will judge acceptability of military action within their cultural and legal frame of reference. The public of coalition nations will judge based on their frame of reference. Thus, actions by the joint forces are judged by multiple standards, further complicating soldiers' decision-making. This is compounded in countries with cultures very different from that of the soldiers, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

When the complexity of battlefield decision-making and the challenges to sound judgment are considered, it is not surprising that mistakes and misconduct occur. Nonetheless, extenuating circumstances are irrelevant when these create negative

strategic impact or constitute criminal acts. Again, it is a testament to the joint force that this is fairly rare.

Two incidents in the Afghanistan War illustrate how mistakes and misconduct can undermine strategic objectives. The accidental burning of Korans at the Bagram airbase in 2012 was a serious, yet unintentional, mistake in the view of the U.S. government. Yet, for many Afghans, it constituted a profound insult and serious crime, so much so that it sparked riots for several days, leading to the deaths of more than 30 people.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians by an Army staff sergeant in 2012 was criminal. The soldier received a life sentence without the chance of parole for “the worst case of civilian slaughter blamed on a single, rogue U.S. soldier since the Vietnam War.” The soldier’s court martial defense “argued that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and a brain injury.” A statement at the hearing cited that he “had expressed a desire for revenge after a fellow soldier stepped on a roadside bomb and lost his leg below the knee...” The massacre sparked protests and suspension of U.S. combat operations.<sup>48</sup> All of this contributed to greater popular support for the Taliban, directly counter to U.S. strategic objectives.<sup>49</sup>

Ascertaining whether execution is faithfully implementing the envisioned strategic ways and whether it is bringing conditions closer to a desirable end state is the role of campaign assessment.

### Assessment

Assessment is a critical part of the system to mitigate divergence from strategic intent. The joint forces’ understanding of the operating environment will always be imperfect. Friction and chance will always be in play. Thus, the joint forces need a

strong assessment function to ascertain on a continuous basis whether the operational approach and military actions are creating desirable effects, advancing achievement of strategic objectives, and moving conditions in theater closer to a desirable end state.

As stated by Rapp, “accurate assessments of changing situations are much harder to build than outside observers might expect.”<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the joint forces are working to improve their campaign assessment function. As in operational design and planning, improvements in assessment are primarily due to the incorporation of non-military dynamics. Whereas assessments used to focus primarily on the performance and effectiveness of tactical military action, the joint forces are developing multi-dimensional campaign assessments to inform strategic decision-making. Again, contrasting the assessment function in the current ISIL campaign with that of the Afghanistan campaign in 2012 illustrates the progress made.

USCENTCOM struggled with developing a strong assessment framework for the ISIL campaign. Planners knew they needed both quantitative data and people’s qualitative “gut feelings.” MG Busby reported that the framework they developed does that. It also incorporated information from coalition and civilian partners. Despite this, the former J5 felt that more learning was needed on assessments.<sup>51</sup> Future analysis of how well the ISIL campaign assessment supported decision-making will show where the joint forces have addressed assessment capability needs and where gaps persist.

General (retired) James Mattis, U.S. Marine Corps, captured the Iraq War assessment challenge in 2009, “It’s a very humanistic war, this war amongst the people. So it’s hard to measure.”<sup>52</sup> Assessing non-military dimensions had been the most difficult. A 2012 study found that joint force analysts were most concerned about their

inability to answer questions with sociocultural and political dimensions, such as levels of corruption in Iraqi ministries and capacity of the Afghan National Security Force.<sup>53</sup> This was consistent with the concerns of commanders, who “expressed the greatest uncertainty concerning sociocultural and political factors and events. ‘Is it a big deal that an elder has come back [from being an expatriate]? Is it a big deal that Badr Corps is fighting with Jaysh al-Mahdi?’”<sup>54</sup>

The difficulty is two-fold. First, it is very hard to measure sociocultural and political phenomena. Second, the joint forces mostly lack expertise in sociocultural and political-economy theory and analysis. Sociocultural and political phenomena are subjective and malleable by nature. Assessing them requires examination of attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and practices, which are not readily defined or quantified. Joint Operations Research/Systems Analysts education centers on quantitative analyses such as cost analysis and mathematical modeling.<sup>55</sup> While this is invaluable for many joint force analytical needs, it is not well suited for assessing sociocultural and political dynamics. Recognizing this, one commander supplemented his team’s analysis with expert views from other fields: “At the strategic level, you take advantage of academics ... and think tanks.’ He believed that solicitations from SMEs [subject matter experts] were pivotal for campaign assessment, and anthropology was particularly useful.”<sup>56</sup>

It is not yet clear how much progress the joint forces have made in campaign assessments. Even if the ISIL assessment proves robust, it seems that analyst education gaps may persist.

## Recommendations

This review of war-waging and war-fighting functions, from setting strategic objectives through execution and assessment, demonstrates inherent challenges the joint forces face and the progress they have made. It also highlights where further gains are possible. The common thread in these recommendations is deepening the understanding of non-military dimensions of national security issues and strengthening its application. The recommendations offer potential starting points. Each could be the subject of a thesis in its own right. All build on existing practices or initiatives.

### Influencing Strategic Objectives and Choices in Strategy

Civilian-military dialogue presents the greatest opportunity for the joint forces to influence strategic objectives and choices in strategic ways. To prepare emerging military leaders for their role in this dialogue, the joint forces should consider how to further develop strategic mindedness, bureaucratic political savvy, and moral courage.

Given the importance of non-military factors to “strategic mindedness,” the joint forces should find opportunities to introduce political, economic, and sociocultural analysis to officers earlier in their careers. Training in political, economic, and sociocultural analysis should be integrated into professional military education and applied in exercises. Assignments to other U.S. government agencies and serving in the private sector should support development of strategic thinking.

Bureaucratic political savvy is essential to navigating civilian-military dialogue. The joint forces should recognize the importance of assignments to Congress, the National Security Council, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense for emerging

senior military leaders. These are invaluable for understanding and influencing policy formulation.

Moral courage may be the greatest challenge in civilian-military dialogue. At times, military leaders have paid a significant price for providing best military advice that runs counter to civilian desires. The fate of Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki is one of the better-known examples from the Iraq War. He testified to Congress that he estimated many more troops than planned would be needed for stabilization. “[Then Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld publicly repudiated Shinseki’s assessment; Shinseki was marginalized by the other JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] members and ultimately forced into early retirement.”<sup>57</sup> At the same time, military leaders who choose compliance after giving dissenting best military advice may face their own moral dilemma and public blame. Former Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson considered resigning after President Lyndon B. Johnson rejected the joint chiefs advice on the Vietnam War. He decided to stay, later saying that he would go to his grave “with that lapse of moral courage on [his] back.”<sup>58</sup> General Johnson and his fellow joint chiefs were later subject to public blame for withholding candid assessments and acquiescing to the administration during the Vietnam War.<sup>59</sup> Despite the dilemma military leaders may face, “to operate properly, and especially in war, the nation ... needs to know when its war aims, strategies, policies, and military operations are failing.”<sup>60</sup>

The joint forces can help emerging military leaders prepare for such challenges. Civilian leaders bear the responsibility of opening dialogue and weighing military advice without prejudice. Nonetheless, frank examination of the issue can guide emerging military leaders to consider its complex dimensions. Exploring the concepts of

dissenting voice and the implied moral obligations of military leaders with input on strategic war decisions would allow emerging leaders to wrestle with the dilemmas they may encounter.<sup>61</sup>

### Operational Design, Planning, Execution, and Assessment

Integrating consideration of the desired future peace would strengthen operational design, planning, execution, and assessment. This would frame analysis of military and non-military factors, bringing greater coherence to joint force efforts.

In operational design and planning, joint doctrine should require analysis of the desired future peace and the factors that would support or promote its emergence. Planners could then determine where military action may affect these factors. As appropriate, planners could derive military tasks to protect these factors or to amplify their influence. Key questions would guide this analysis. What would the peace look like? How realistic is it? What variations on the desired peace would be acceptable? What are critical factors that would promote emergence this future peace? What local leaders, institutions, assets, and infrastructure would have critical roles in building this peace? How do these relate to potential military actions? How might they intersect?

To do this, planners and military intelligence would need greater political, economic, and sociocultural analysis capability. For operational design, planning, and assessment, J5-Strategy, Plans, and Policy personnel require a firm grounding in political, economic, and sociocultural analytic tools. This would help planners better understand operating environment dynamics. Further, planners need to be able to design and utilize political, economic, and sociocultural measures of effectiveness when campaigns entail such lines of effort. Finally, planners need to be able to track changes

in the political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions of the operating environment relevant to the campaign. Military intelligence officers need grounding in political, economic, and sociocultural analytic tools to understand J5 information requirements and to utilize them in intelligence analysis.

Including military tasks on protecting, or facilitating, critical factors for the desired peace for field commanders would help reduce the relative isolation of these soldiers from strategic intent. Having such tasks would help field commanders better situate their actions within the overall strategy. These tasks would also improve field commanders' ability to mitigate potential unanticipated negative impact on factors critical to a desirable peace. Finally, field commanders would be better equipped to monitor emerging situations relevant to the desired peace to inform battlefield decisions and campaign assessments.

Finally, the joint forces need to close its political, economic, and sociocultural analysis capability gap to improve multi-dimensional campaign assessments. The training for J5 staff and military intelligence recommended herein would close part of the gap. In addition, training for ORSA personnel must include qualitative, as well as quantitative, methodologies. ORSA personnel also need familiarity with political, economic, and sociocultural analytic frameworks to support these analyses.

These recommendations will not solve the problem of divergence from strategic intent. They have the potential, nonetheless, to improve joint force performance. As one officer said, there will always be friction and fog in war. If the joint forces could diminish that by even one percent, it would provide an edge over the adversary.<sup>62</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 1709, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/fools-rush-in-where-angels-fear-to-tread.html> (accessed March 14, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz asserted that the dominant tendencies of war make it a “paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity...; of the play of chance and probability...; and of its element of subordination as an instrument of policy...” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). 89, 85.

<sup>3</sup> The joint forces view strategy as the integration of the *ends* to be achieved, the *ways* in which the *ends* will be achieved, and the *means* required to execute those *ways*. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 25, 2013), [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1.pdf) (accessed March 30, 2017), I-8.

<sup>4</sup> Maj. Gen. William E. Rapp, U.S. Army, Commandant, U.S. Army War College, interview by author, Carlisle, PA, December 29, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Janine A. Davidson, Emerson T. Brooking, and Benjamin J. Fernandes, “Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making,” *Council on Foreign Relations online*, December 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/defense-and-security/mending-broken-dialogue-military-advice-presidential-decision-making/p38473> (accessed December 30, 2016), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Maj. Gen. William E. Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” *Parameters* 45, no.3 (Autumn 2015), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (New York: Penguin, 1991), 338.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington wrote the seminal U.S. book on relations between professional military officers and civilian leaders. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Lt. Gen. (Ret) James M. Dubik argues that senior civilian and military leaders bear the responsibilities to “figure out war aims, identify and promulgate war strategies and policies, ensure that military and nonmilitary campaigns are means toward the declared aims, and make both civil and military bureaucracies work well enough that they help achieve the aims set.” James M. Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” 14.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, Brooking, and Fernandes, “Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making,” 16.

<sup>12</sup> Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> The tenures of President Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense of Robert McNamara, during the Vietnam War, and Donald Rumsfeld, under President George W. Bush during the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, are widely acknowledged as periods in which civilian leaders prevented robust civilian-military dialogue. See Davidson, Brooking, and Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making," 25-26, 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee*, July 19, 2013, [http://thehill.com/images/stories/news/2013/07\\_july/22/dempsey.pdf](http://thehill.com/images/stories/news/2013/07_july/22/dempsey.pdf) (accessed August 29, 2016), 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, "Remarks on Syria," Washington, DC, December 15, 2016, available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/12/265696.htm> (accessed January 7, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," 14.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2016), 30, *online at* [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1200/RR1290/RAND\\_RR1290.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1290/RAND_RR1290.pdf) (accessed February 24, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Steven A. Cook, "Who Exactly Are 'the Kurds'?", *The Atlantic online*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/02/kurds-turkey-pkk-ypg/470991/> (accessed January 8, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Maj. Gen. William E. Rapp, U.S. Army, Commandant, U.S. Army War College, interview by author, Carlisle, PA, December 16, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Brigadier Timothy Lai, United Kingdom Army, Brigadier, U.S. Central Command, telephone interview by author, January 6, 2017; Steven A. Cook, "Who Exactly Are 'the Kurds'?"

<sup>24</sup> Joseph J. Collins, "Initial Planning and Execution in Afghanistan and Iraq," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 60-63; Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 56-57, 153; Roula Khalaf, "America is doing the right things in Iraq, two years too late," *Financial Times*, October 28, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, "Initial Planning and Execution in Afghanistan and Iraq," 61, 63-64.

<sup>26</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 338.

<sup>27</sup> Maj. Gen. Steven W. Busby, U.S. Marine Corps, Deputy Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, telephone interview by author, January 10, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Department of Defense Press Briefing, October 17, 2014, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606948/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-austin-in-the-pentagon-briefing> (accessed January 22, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Busby, telephone interview by author.

<sup>30</sup> Anatol Lieven, "Our War Against the Pashtuns," *New York Review Daily online*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/04/03/afghanistan-war-against-pashtuns/> (accessed January 25, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Maj. Gen. Michael T Flynn, Capt. Matthew Pottinger, and Paul D Batchelor, "Fixing Intel in Afghanistan," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 2010, 62.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, 155-156, 151.

<sup>34</sup> Col. Adam Strickland, U.S. Marine Corps, Strategy Branch Chief, Strategy and Plans Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, telephone interview by author, January 12, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Khalaf, "America is doing the right things in Iraq, two years too late."

<sup>36</sup> Strickland, telephone interview by author.

<sup>37</sup> LTC (Ret) Patrick Kevin Dixon, U.S. Army, Deputy Director of Outreach and Advancement, U.S. Army War College, interview by author, December 16, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 104.

<sup>39</sup> Michele Rosenthal, "The Science Behind PTSD Symptoms: How Trauma Changes The Brain," *World of Psychology*, blog entry posted September 16, 2015, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/09/16/the-science-behind-ptsd-symptoms-how-trauma-changes-the-brain/> (accessed February 19, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Laura L. Hayes, "How to Stop Violence: Mentally ill people aren't killers. Angry people are." *Slate online*, April 9, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2014/04/anger\\_causes\\_violence\\_treat\\_it\\_rather\\_than\\_mental\\_illness\\_to\\_stop\\_mass\\_murder.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2014/04/anger_causes_violence_treat_it_rather_than_mental_illness_to_stop_mass_murder.html) (accessed February 20, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Rosenthal, "The Science Behind PTSD Symptoms: How Trauma Changes The Brain."

<sup>42</sup> Doriana Chialant, Judith Edersheim, Bruce H. Price, "The Dialectic Between Empathy and Violence: An Opportunity for Intervention?" *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 28, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 273, published online February 22, 2016, <http://neuro.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/appi.neuropsych.15080207?journalCode=jnp&> (accessed February 20, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Paul Bloom, "The Dark Side of Empathy: How caring for one person can foster baseless aggression towards another," *The Atlantic online*, September 25, 2015,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/09/the-violence-of-empathy/407155/> (accessed February 20, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> COL Christopher M. Bado, U.S. Army, Chairman, Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, U.S. Army War College, interview by author, December 8, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory*, 11, 165-166.

<sup>46</sup> Strickland, telephone interview by author.

<sup>47</sup> David S. Cloud, "Pentagon finds soldiers who burned Korans ignored Afghan warnings," *Los Angeles Times online*, August 27, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/27/world/la-fg-pentagon-koran-20120828> (accessed February 21, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Al Jazeera and wire services, "US soldier sentenced to life in prison for shooting 16 Afghans," *Al Jazeera online*, August 23, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/23/bales-sentenced-tolifeinprison.html> (accessed February 21, 2017).

<sup>49</sup> Lieven, "Our War Against the Pashtuns."

<sup>50</sup> Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," 15.

<sup>51</sup> Busby, telephone interview by author.

<sup>52</sup> As quoted by Frank G. Hoffman and G. Alexander Crowther, "Strategic Assessment and Adaptation: The Surges in Iraq and Afghanistan," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Hooker and Collins, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Ben Connable, Walter L. Perry, Abby Doll, Natasha Lander, Dan Madden, "Modeling, Simulation, and Operations Analysis in Afghanistan and Iraq: Operational Vignettes, Lessons Learned, and a Survey of Selected Efforts," RAND Corporation, 2014, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR382.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR382.html) (accessed February 22, 2017), 71.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>55</sup> MAJ James R. Henry, U.S. Army, and MAJ William T. Smith, U.S. Army, "An Introduction to Uniformed Operations Research," *Army Sustainment* (January-February 2015): 34.

<sup>56</sup> Connable et al, "Modeling, Simulation, and Operations Analysis in Afghanistan and Iraq: Operational Vignettes, Lessons Learned, and a Survey of Selected Efforts," 80.

<sup>57</sup> Davidson, Brooking, and Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making," 34.

<sup>58</sup> Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory*, 159-160.

<sup>59</sup> Davidson, et al, discuss the assertion made by H.R. McMaster in his book, *Dereliction of Duty*. Davidson, Brooking, and Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making," 33.

<sup>60</sup> Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory*, 161.

<sup>61</sup> On voice, Dubik draws on the work of Albert O. Hirschman. He describes voice as “the option for a consumer, an executive, a government official, or some watchdog organization to complain about or attempt to improve things by pointing out the decline and need for change.” Dubik’s thesis is that decision-making on war aims, strategy, and the conduct of war carry unique moral obligations for civilian and military leaders. He calls this the “war-waging” dimension of war and argues that it constitutes a missing piece in just war theory. Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory*, 158, Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>62</sup> COL Daniel E. Mouton, U.S. Army, Senior Development Officer/Defense Attaché nominee for Lebanon, U.S. Central Command, telephone interview by author, December 29, 2016.