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Strategy – From Theory to Practice: Strategic Thought and Strategic Thinking

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Strategy from a Tactical View

Strategy is the most optimal correlation between ends, means and ways while taking into account the moves of your opponents. This implies two calculating entities which are rational (conduct cost/benefit analysis). The ultimate goal of these entities is to impose your will on the other party and get them to bend to it. While working inside Iraq over the last 13 years, I have had a front row seat to at the tactical level within a Special Operations Battalion and operationally at a Corps level headquarters. From these two seats and across more than a decade I have been able to observe the United States National Security Strategy unfolding through our tactical and operational actions whose ultimate aim was to achieve strategic objectives and secure vital national level interests. These direct observations will be used to pull out the ten concepts from the “Strategy – From Theory to Practice: Strategic Thought and Strategic Thinking” course.

The war in Iraq has evolved over the years. I personally witnessed it when deployed with both the Corps level, II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), and at the tactical level while training Iraqi military forces on a Military Transition Team (MiTT) in 2005. I later had direct observations of many changes that occurred between 2005 on my first deployment and 2018-19 on my second deployment to Iraq, when deployed as the Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) Commander. These two deployments across more than 13 years’ time helped me to see how difficult the employment of strategy can be. I will begin by talking from a perspective of observations looking back on my time as a Captain with approximately six years of experience within the Intelligence community. This period in my timeline will cover Intelligence aspects of strategy, analytical bias, and military innovation. The second portion of this paper will cover aspects from my time as a Battalion Commander discussing interactions at the operational level, the importance of design and planning, relevancy gap/ strategic offset, and the strategic culture. Service during the second deployment to Iraq is after 20 years of experience with ten years in Special Operations.

In 2005, most of our equipment and techniques were still very antiquated to fight an unconventional war. Our equipment like the High Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) were thin skinned material with no armor to protect against Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), nor body armor to stop any ballistics. There were no early threat warning devices for mortars or artillery, no sniper fire triangulation capability and technical Intelligence collection capabilities were barely capable of Very High Frequency (VHF) direction finding. Smart munitions and drones were limited in capability, available at only the top-level organizations and didn’t combine these strengths. Obviously, this will lead you down a road where I will finish talking technology in the next section, but we will begin discussing the evolution of the anticipatory technology vs. the adaptive technology I will describe below.

“Slick” HMMWV’s, which is to say without armor and most time doors, were all the rage, until they weren’t. The first IED strike would send every unit mechanic scrambling to find any armor plates that he could bolt onto the vehicles. We aren’t talking a **Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)** which is to say a fundamental change in the character and conduct of armed conflicts. It typically consists of three elements: technological change, innovative operational concept, and organizational adaptation but rather evolutionary or improvement changes which were made instantly and modified daily to ensure survival. Performance improvements which signal tactical revolutions very rarely justify revolution at the operational or strategic level. “A truly revolutionary strategic development alters perceptions of the relationship of means to ends and, most importantly, dictates a reformulation of warfighting doctrine—the codified precepts that govern military operations.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As injury and death tolls mounted, the U.S. public began to get involved. The mothers of America were pissed, and better solutions would be needed to ensure congressional members were re-elected. The armored HMMWV and future Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles would be on the way. Body armor was also a part of this discussion. Vietnam era “flak vests” built to stop small shrapnel penetrations would be updated to more expensive vest with ballistic stopping materials. The military went from almost no coverage to the knights of old. Each soldier would eventually carry upwards of 30 Kilos of protective equipment in the deserts of Iraq for protection. Within a few short years, combat losses and casualties would begin to drop, and benefits can still be seen today from increased (but lighter weight) armor. Combat survival rates began to rise as 90.4% of all wounded troops survived their injuries[[2]](#footnote-2) as compared to the 86.4% in Vietnam.[[3]](#footnote-3) Much of these drastic improvements can be attributed to technological improvements made during the early part of the new millennium.

These are examples of technology adaptation to the environment that troops were facing. The innovation came from those who were desiring to survive and accomplish the mission vs. a proactive approach of anticipatory military innovation that would be seen with air superiority and dominant command and control systems 10 years into the future.

As an Intelligence professional at the Corps level in 2005, **Operational level** planning and execution were daily duties. The Operational level of war as defined by Joint Publication-3 (JP-3) “The operational level of warfare links the tactical employment of forces to national strategic objectives.” Interpreting national level guidance and building an operational plan in an unconventional fight against Al Qaida is a monumental task for any staff. Months of preparation time to interpret National Security Strategy (NSS), guidance from Theater Combatant Commanders (i.e. U.S. Central Command / CENTCOM), and secure video teleconferences (SVTC) to shape the plan was a heavy load for our team. Operational objectives built into a campaign plan incorporated long-range objectives that were measurable and would be achieved over time phases. The intelligence portion of the planning included threat predictions and forecast that were mostly inaccurate in the beginning. Later there would be lengthy after-action reports and reviews that would identify **analytical bias** by experienced and inexperienced analysts. One common bias trend was called “mirror imaging” which is “the analysts' assumption that the people being studied think like the analysts themselves.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Analytical bias such as mirror imaging lead to miscalculations and are often the biggest contributor to intelligence failures which open commanders up to surprise and ultimately failure if left without correction.

Once deployed into Theater, all the things we learned in school and during preparation were practically played out on the ground. The importance of the six-step **intelligence cycle** from: collection of intelligence to planning and direction, through collection, processing, exploitation, analysis and dissemination to subordinates, was the lifeblood which brought about slow change toward our objectives. Combining the intel cycle with a robust Command, Control, Communications Computers and Intelligence (C4I) infrastructure, the intelligence cycle was a tool which could quickly turn and kept the offensive tempo high, creating advantages for our units on the ground. The continual intelligence process also helped senior commanders from facing **intelligence surprise** also known as an intelligence failure. In McDermott ad Uri’s book on Intelligence Success and Failures they write,

“Intelligence Success and Failure presents a new theory in the study of strategic surprise that claims the key explanation for warning failure is not unintentional action, but rather, motivated biases in key intelligence and central leaders that null any sense of doubt prior to surprise attacks.”[[5]](#footnote-5) With a process for meticulously focusing limited collection capabilities against only the Commander’s highest priorities, we greatly reduced Intelligence Surprise.”

As we faced failures, realistic assessments and corrective actions helped to ensure that intelligence surprise did not flow up to the Strategic level and allowed commanders to continue to successfully move toward their objectives.

In 2018, we were tasked with providing command and control for all Special Operations in Northern Iraq. The battlespace was huge, and the guidance was limited. The **strategic environment** and **national security policy** were changing drastically as we arrived into theater and during our short deployment. The strategic environment which was visible (like the tip of the iceberg) was the completion of the destruction of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syrian (ISIS) network and the strengthening of our partnered forces who would take the lead in the fight against ISIS. The ontology of the problem was much easier to see and deal with than the epistemology which became known as we moved into theater. The friendly operational units of Shia Militia Groups (SMGs) began to become more of a factor and growing internal Iraqi rifts or gaps were being created down secular lines. Further complicating issues was funding and support that SMGs were receiving from external nation states. The biggest change which our unit faced in Theater was dealing with Kurdish areas and the withdraw from Syria. The strategic environment and policy shifted toward Turkey abruptly during the deployment and these shifts pushed the limits of our relationship we established with the Kurds while simultaneously creating additional threats flowing across Syria into Iraq. Fortunately, the order for immediate withdraw from Syria was rescinded and a critical factor of time was added which ensured proper reworking of the planning and analysis to ensure a highly likelihood of success of national future objectives and completion of current required operational objectives. The throttle of time is something commanders in Theaters of war are continually fighting for and against to ensure success because of the environment and an enemy which almost never cooperates.

As we adjusted to our deployment environment, that “stomachache” feeling was almost immediately felt. There was a Strategic offset was occurring before our eyes and the **relevancy gap** was upon us, Shia Militia Groups and their ties to other nation states. The tactical defeat of ISIS was obvious, and the larger obstacle was being exasperated with the continued decimation of Sunni extremists. The Iraqi national government began to unwittingly and wittingly give significant support and control over major Iraqi national interests to SMGs, many of whom were not a part of the official government. This relevance gap continues, and it will take new guidance to allow commanders abilities to navigate this **opposition/difficulty** that they face. This gap between the historic and emerging systems has been identified by many tactical and operational commanders but no solution or change in direction has been taken. An appropriate quote from the book *Changes Ahead*, “Today's problems stem from yesterday's solutions”[[6]](#footnote-6) couldn’t be a more appropriate quote for this difficulty faced.

Closing comments from deployment time in Iraq will focus on **Strategic Culture.** Strategic Culture is often defined as “a set of values, beliefs, assumptions, narratives, and traditions which influences and sometimes determines an approach (ends, means and ways) of a given strategic community to the questions of peace and war.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Our culture can be a major asset but better we understand the culture so we can constantly be checking our bias and make wise future decisions. Our culture often drives things like innovation. With the U.S. continual air superiority in major theaters of war since the initial Gulf War in 1990, also came the desire to further exploit this success. Technological leaps were also being made in camera resolution, signals intelligence collection capabilities, precision strike and C4I. This all combined in an anticipatory innovation with unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) platforms. This all-in-one standoff platform that performs with nearly god-like precision and accuracy has become a massive force multiplier. Training and organization have seen significant shifts just based on this one platform. If, however an air defense threat, strong weather pattern change or mechanical failure occur, forces are left uncovered and commanders are not willing to send troops forward in combat which creates a possible weakness for threat forces to take advantage. This is merely one example of the impacts of our culture on innovation and military success.

Through two lengthy deployments in the same Area of Operation against the unconventional threats of Al Qaida and ISIS, I am thankful to have gained a broader perspective for the tactical, operational and strategic impacts that affect our national security interests.

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