

4-1-2008

## The Strategy Deficit

Nathan P. Freier Mr.  
*CSIS/PKSOI*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles\\_editorials](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials)

---

### Recommended Citation

Freier, Nathan P. Mr., "The Strategy Deficit" (2008). *Articles & Editorials*. 242.  
[https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles\\_editorials/242](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/242)

This Op Ed is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Editorials by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.



March 20, 2008

## THE STRATEGY DEFICIT

**Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Freier**  
**Strategic Studies Institute**

An honest survey of post-Cold War national security policy exhibits a dangerous strategy deficit. The word “strategy” is overused. The concept, too, is poorly applied. It is many things to contemporary policymakers except, well—strategy. In the current environment, strategic communications and strategy have become synonymous. Strategic communications is the carefully crafted but overly general and widely consumable articulation of key political messages—“assure, deter, dissuade, defeat”; “as they stand up, we’ll stand down”; “clear, hold, build”; “phased strategic redeployment”; etc, etc, etc. It is strategy by façade versus strategy through effective, deliberate investment of intellectual, temporal, material, and human capital in pursuit of well-defined outcomes. Real strategy is the reasoned determination of specific, minimum essential objectives, rationalized with suitable ways to achieve them and the necessary means for success. No careful observer of executive decisionmaking since the end of the Cold War believes the latter high bar to be the norm.

A fundamental component of strategy development is rational risk assessment. Risk—viewed as the likelihood of hazard in pursuit of objectives or the likelihood and consequences of failure—injects realism into strategy. Risk calculation offers decisionmakers the opportunity to see that both action and inaction engender costs—lives, money, time, freedom of action, political flexibility, loss of opportunities, etc. Costs accumulate. When unaccounted for in decisionmaking, costs quickly and unexpectedly become excessive. Rational risk assessment also allows for the judicious consideration of the prospects and price of failure. Clearly, accounting for both the possibility of failure and the certainty of real cost forces decisionmakers to deliberately consider alternative courses of action. The contemporary temptation to mistake strategic communications for strategy short-circuits the aforementioned process. Rhetoric vice realism defines strategic outcomes. Once embedded in the public narrative of presidents, cabinet secretaries, and sympathetic pundits, these outcomes are not only absolute and nonnegotiable, but also, at the same time, excessively imprecise and unachievable.

Identifying risks doesn't prohibit specific policy choices. Rather, it frames them in an appropriate context. Without prudent evaluation of risk, the nation hazards embarking down blind alleys with little thoughtful consideration for "Plan B." The conduct of the Iraq War has been a clinic in this regard. The Iraq War proceeded in the absence of a governing grand strategy and persistently fails to live up to expectations as a result. This is sadly unexceptional in recent American history. It is no accident that American activism in the post-Cold War era has demonstrated limited enduring success. Intervention in Somalia, peacekeeping in the Balkans, "Dual Containment," the domestic response to September 11, 2001 (9/11), the War on Terrorism, confronting the "Axis of Evil," stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, and even Gulf Coast reconstruction all exhibit one common feature. Each is marked by some significant disappointment or indeterminacy. The form of each originated less from holistic strategic net and risk assessment than from political instinct or impulse; and all—though individually either essential or noble—proceeded without rational consideration of strategic context, course, and risk.

The United States has pursued "strategy by exception" for 17 years. Seemingly awash in confidence and resources, American politicians persistently mistake raw capacity for infallibility. Yet, the secure maintenance of American position often benefits more from careful calculation and premeditation than brashness. The latter, however, is far more common. Today, there is no real strategy in effect befitting the security of a singular superpower in an "all-hazards" environment. There is only the façade of strategy—strategic communications without substance.

To be sure, presidents fulfill their legal obligation to articulate the National Security Strategy on a semi-regular basis. Likewise, the president and individual executive departments make periodic vision statements in functional areas of responsibility like National Defense, the War in Iraq, Terrorism, Cyber Security, etc. All, however, are heavy on themes and messages and light on detail. None can purport to involve the detailed articulation of achievable, minimum essential ends, the balanced adjudication of ways and means, and a thorough analysis of the risks associated with action and/or inaction. Yet, meeting this high standard is critical to securing the national interest in an era of extreme peril, enormous opportunity, and finite resources.

When their party is in power, partisan gadflies will argue there is more to national strategy than meets the public eye—strategic communications is simply the icing on a larger, more carefully prepared national security cake. They should know better. There is a saying in government—"policy isn't made, it accumulates." The same is true for strategy. To the extent more substance exists, it is buried under a blizzard of memoranda and PowerPoint presentations across dozens of government agencies. None of it exists with the benefit of high-level integration. Today, national strategy is not the product of reason and grand deliberation. Rather, it results from the incremental, issue-specific accumulation of small decisions. Few of these decisions can claim origins in a detailed, risk-informed strategic design. Thus, the second- and third-order implications of each individual decision lie unconsidered and the prospects of failure or excessive cost are consistently unaddressed.

We are where we are in the world. Blame the strategy deficit. As America's ambitious and influential gather for another cycle of national debate and political renewal, it would serve them well to rebalance the relationship between what is truly strategy and what is rhetoric without substance. The former is elemental to securing the nation's position and interests. The latter is a clear path to unmet expectations, excessive cost, and failure.

\*\*\*\*

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This colloquium brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

\*\*\*\*\*

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI opinion pieces should contact the Publications Department via e-mail at *SSI\_Publishing@conus.army.mil*. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, U.S. Army War College."