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Strategic Insights: A New Year's Resolution For Army Leaders

January 26, 2015 | Prof. William G. Braun, III

Americans love winners and deplore losers. The U.S. military's greatest challenge to proving its relevance stems from a general perception that it cannot deliver results when confronted by the nation's most pressing foreign policy problems. Barry Posen advocates that the United States abandon the post-Cold War strategy of engagement altogether, stating the:

undisciplined, expensive, and bloody strategy [of American activism] has done untold harm to U.S. national security. It makes enemies almost as fast as it slays them, discourages allies from paying for their own defense, and convinces powerful states to band together and oppose Washington's plans, further raising the costs of carrying out its foreign policy.¹

Employment of ground forces in pursuit of national objectives is also widely perceived as a faulty policy choice, because ground forces can drag the nation into a quagmire of ever-increasing commitments and costs which inevitably lead to indecisive outcomes.²

By design or default, the nation looks to the U.S. Army to carry the burden of engagement and stability operations. Being accountable for achieving policy objectives during these operations, the Army must accept responsibility when they fail. As the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan inexorably winds down, the Army must resist simply reverting to the comfort of what it does best—that is, training to fight a conventional fight against the regular army of another country. It is critical that the Army reflect on the tough missions: Missions that produce indecisive outcomes at great expense. Stability operations,³ not major combat operations, are the toughest missions facing the Army today.

The Army's New Year's resolution should be: Learn how to succeed in the space between war and peace. Success, in this case, is defined as achieving sustainable regional order through stability operations. These are the most likely operations the Army will be called on to execute until a peer rival emerges. The Army must take ownership of the full range of stability tasks and train Soldiers in the skills necessary to execute those tasks. Until the Army is capable of achieving policy objectives to advance national interests through stability operations, the Army will continue to be viewed as a last resort tool to be reconstituted when war is imminent.

The presence and engagement of American ground troops demonstrates resolve, contributes to a sustained peace, and postures the force for war. However, the American public and many political leaders do not share this vision. Americans are weary of the costs of achieving indecisive outcomes. The public and elected civilian leaders see "boots on the ground" as a recipe for overcommitment and escalation of hostilities.⁴ Hardships and losses suffered by ground forces place pressure on political leaders to abandon stability efforts prematurely, or escalate to actual combat operations in pursuit of success. Over the past 13 years, the military successfully toppled two regimes, disrupted terror networks, and prevented attacks on the homeland from foreign safe havens. However, marginal results during stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been realized at a heavy cost in lives and treasure. To overcome this disparity of perspectives, the Army must demonstrate that it is adapting to the current strategic reality. To get and keep public support, the Army must help host nations provide basic services, encourage justice under the rule-of-law, fight corruption, build capable security forces, and facilitate the development of legitimate local governmental institutions.

The U.S. joint force is the preeminent conventional combat force on the planet. As a key contributor to the joint force, the U.S. Army consistently wins against the conventional forces of its enemies. Arguably, the Army is equally successful at fighting in counterinsurgency and counterterror environments. Only slightly overstating the case, Daniel Davis asserts that "never since Vietnam has any enemy formation had any chance of inflicting a tactical defeat on U.S. forces."⁵ Despite these successes, Gian Gentile and others worry that the military's warfighting skills have degraded over the past 13 years of counterinsurgency operations.⁶ Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler said, "As an Army, we need to reset ourselves for high-intensity conflict, decisive action operations."⁷ Despite this legitimate desire to sharpen high-intensity combat warfighting skills, no one doubts the U.S. Soldier's ability to defeat the nation's enemies in combat on any battlefield.

The U.S. military has proven less capable of achieving strategic objectives and sustainable results when executing stability operations. This is not a new deficiency. Conducting stability operations, especially during combat, is an enormous challenge. Success in those operations have eluded the Army for decades. In his recent book, *Why*

We Lost, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Dan Bolger makes the case that senior military leaders failed the nation in the last decade because they did not know the enemy. Further, they “designed, manned, and equipped the Army for short, decisive, conventional conflict.”⁸ “As the United States military refocuses on its core strength—rapid, decisive conventional operations—it must come to grips with the war on terror fought since 2001. Good ideas and bad, lessons learned, relearned, and unlearned—all deserve thorough scrutiny and discussion.”⁹ The Army was called on by the nation to find a way to achieve success. Bolger acknowledges, “Sergeants and captains, not to mention our fellow citizens, count on generals to sort out such fundamental strategy. We didn’t.”¹⁰

The Army is not configured for large-scale long duration stability operations. However, policymakers have instructed the Army to conduct rotational and smaller footprint stability operations, like the ones being carried out in the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific today. The Army cannot expect to receive additional resources to develop the expertise to succeed in these operations. Nevertheless, the Army must do it,¹¹ because the most salient explanation for failure is the Army’s refusal to accept full ownership of stability tasks beyond the traditional core competencies of security and the ethical use of coercive force.¹²

A recent RAND study reported that the “joint force and the U.S. government as a whole have displayed an ongoing ambivalence about and lack of proficiency in the noncombat and unconventional aspects of war and conflict against non-state actors, despite their increasing frequency.”¹³ The ability of Army forces to advance legitimate governance and maintain a dynamic peace have become common requirements in modern operations. The Army must expand its knowledge and range of expertise to successfully conduct these operations. First, the Army must determine how to succeed at the tough missions of building legitimate governance and managing a sustainable peace. Fortunately for the Army, this primary challenge is an intellectual one—requiring few resources. Second, the Army must embrace the full range of stability tasks. Army leaders at all levels must be able to determine when to use coercive force or restraint to maintain order, improve their understanding of interagency partner contributions, be capable of coordinating integrated solutions with those partners, and appreciate cultural, historic, and political factors influencing the chance for success.

The Army must prepare for the most likely security challenges that the United States will face whether or not those are the ones it prefers. There is no question that the joint force must remain capable of fighting and winning the nations wars. However, this is insufficient. The Army must learn to achieve policy objectives in the ambiguous space between peace and war. The Army must study the lessons of modern operations to identify the tactics and strategies required to be successful. Then, the Army must train Soldiers in the skills required to execute those tactics.

Learning to succeed across the full range of joint stability and warfighting functions is not an either/or proposition, the Army can and must do both. The United States must pursue hedging strategies to prepare to fight a near-peer adversary on some future battlefield. In the meantime, the nation must ensure the force-in-being is capable of achieving strategic success in the world of security challenges that it contends with today.

Mastering the full range of stability tasks, beyond security and the ethical use of coercive force, is the most important post-Cold War lesson to be learned. U.S. political leaders may believe they will never call on ground forces to provide stability and manage a dynamic peace again. Other agencies may believe this is their area of expertise and resist the Army's desire to develop its complementary expertise. Yet Army leaders know that they will be called on again. Consequently, Army leaders must embrace this mission and learn to master it.

ENDNOTES

1. Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, December 10, 2013, available from www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138466/barry-r-posen/pull-back.
2. Examples come from opposite ends of the political spectrum such as those of Andrew Bacevich and Rachel Maddow and from various academic traditions such as John Mearsheimer and Francis Fukuyama.
3. For an overview of stability tasks, functions, and sectors see *Field Manual 3-07 Stability*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, 2014, p. x, Figure 1, available from armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm3_07.pdf.
4. President Obama said: "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria," available from www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria. "As your commander in chief, I will not commit you and the rest of our armed forces to fighting another ground war in Iraq," Obama told troops at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, on September 17, 2014, available from www.cnn.com/2014/09/17/politics/obama-isis/. At the other side of the political spectrum, Senator Rand Paul said, "interventions in foreign countries may well exacerbate this hatred," and, "The truth is, you can't solve a dignity problem with military force. It was Secretary Gates who warned that our foreign policy has become over-militarized," available from www.paul.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id;=1231.
5. Daniel L. Davis, "Seduced by success," *Armed Forces Journal*, February 10, 2014, available from www.armedforcesjournal.com/seduced-by-success/. Similarly, in his recent book, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Daniel Bolger acknowledges the battlefield success of the Soldier. "Placed in close contact with their adversaries, Americans almost always prevailed." Daniel Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, p. 428.
6. Gian P. Gentile, "Gian Gentile: The U.S. Army Must Remain Prepared for Battle," *The Washington Post*, Op-Ed, April 17, 2014, available from www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/gian-gentile-the-us-army-must-remain-prepared-for-battle/2014/04/17/78b2fc8c-b6c3-11e3-8cc3-d4bf596577eb_story.html.

7. Josh Smith, "Outgoing Sergeant Major of the Army Calls for a Return to Basics," *Stars and Stripes*, December 11, 2014, available from www.stripes.com/news/outgoing-sergeant-major-of-the-army-calls-for-return-to-basics-1.318406.

8. Daniel Bolger, "Why We Lost in Iraq and Afghanistan: A General's Account of the Military's Mistakes," *Harper's Magazine*, September 2014, p. 63, available from harpers.org/archive/2014/09/why-we-lost-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

10. *Ibid.*

11. A good starting point for the discussion of what the Army must do to succeed in these operations was laid out over a decade ago in Michael J. Meese and Sean M. Morgan, "Chapter 15: New Requirements for Army Expert Knowledge: Afghanistan and Iraq," Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2nd Ed., Project Director Don M. Snider, Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005.

12. For a discussion of the Army profession's traditional core competencies, see Richard Lacquement, "Chapter 9: Mapping Army Professional Expertise and Clarifying Jurisdictions of Practice," Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2nd Ed., Project Director Don M. Snider, Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002/2005.

13. Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND ARROYO, 2014, p. xi.

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