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Exit Strategy Delusions

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During the past decade of US military interventions in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Balkans, there has been a rising clamor on Capitol Hill and within the Pentagon for "clear exit strategies" before resorting to force overseas. It is believed that road maps for post-intervention military extrication can and must be crafted in advance of military action, and that such maps can and must be followed throughout the course of intervention. The United States remains stuck in the Balkans, and came close to being sucked into a Vietnam-like quagmire in Somalia, some argue, because the Clinton Administration allowed the missions there to expand without inquiring into the likely consequences. The Clinton Administration failed to follow the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine--the military's professional take on the lessons of the Vietnam War, which demands both clear objectives and the use of overwhelming force to achieve those objectives swiftly and conclusively.

Obviously, it is foolish to undertake military action without having clear ideas on political purpose and the connection between that purpose and the military means selected to achieve it. Strategy is a plan of military action to accomplish a political object. A resort to force motivated by simple frustration and without contemplation of the enemy's probable response does not pass for strategy, as the Clinton Administration did indeed learn when it launched its initially feeble air "war" against Serbia in the spring of 1999. Strategy requires formulation of a desired political end-state and the appropriate application of sufficient force to achieve that end-state. Getting into a war without a reasonable idea of how to get out of it--i.e., without a concept of success--doomed US military intervention in Vietnam.

That said, the idea of a sure-fire, pre-hostilities road map to post-hostilities military extrication is a delusion. Having a concept of success is always good, but having a healthy appreciation of the difficulties of maintaining it in the face of war's vicissitudes is even better.

The Unfortunate Intrusion of Reality

Obstacles to arriving at the intended destination abound. First of all, states that are the objects rather than the subjects of military intervention, and especially of surprise attack, can hardly be expected to devise exit strategies in advance. Did Franklin Roosevelt, on the night before Pearl Harbor, have an exit strategy for waging war against Japan? Was he not much more worried about the consequences of Nazi aggression in Europe than Japanese depredations in East Asia, and had he not already decided that, in the event of war with both Germany and Japan, the United States would pursue a Germany-first strategy?

Second, exit strategies are hostage to military performance. Defeat or stalemate on the battlefield forces reduction of political objectives, whereas military success encourages their expansion. Initial war aims, especially in long wars, rarely survive intact, and new war aims, unanticipated at the start of hostilities, emerge during the course of hostilities. Thus, the road map may remain the same, but the destination changes. The United States entered the Vietnam War in 1965 with the objective of preserving an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam, an objective which subsequent military stalemate reduced to extrication without humiliation.

In the case of democratic governments, war aims are subject to the influence of public opinion as well as events on the battlefield. The United States could not be militarily defeated in Vietnam, but its political will to continue fighting declined after the Tet Offensive. President Nixon clearly would have preferred a conclusive victory in Indochina, but he understood that the political traffic back home would not bear its costs. There are also cases where leaders are

driven by public opinion into expanded war aims and peace settlement terms they believe to be unwise. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George would have settled for a less punitive Treaty of Versailles had he not been imprisoned by British public and parliamentary opinion.

States fighting in alliance or coalition also may be compelled to restrict their war aims to whatever the common political traffic will bear, even at the expense of military effectiveness. This was certainly the case in NATO's war against Serbia. As with domestic political coalitions, international political coalitions involve compromise. A foreign policy of unilateralism appeals to many Americans today because it frees the United States from having to conciliate allies on matters of political objective and military strategy. Unfortunately for unilateralists, however, the United States rarely goes to war or into peace enforcement operations in the absence of allies. Robust allies have been a hallmark of American superpowerdom, and were perhaps the key strategic factor in the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War. Allies confer political legitimacy, provide bases and overflight rights, and can offer "boots on the ground" to an American political and military leadership that seems increasingly petrified by the risks of land warfare.

In short, mission *change*--by creep, contraction, substitution, or dilution--is almost impossible to avoid in any prolonged military intervention, and not just because of changes in military fortunes. Aside from the influence of military performance and perceived domestic and coalition political imperatives, fundamental considerations of ideology, fear, and reputation can intrude nastily upon wartime decisionmaking, forcing states to fight harder and longer irrespective of the scope of their war aims. Sometimes fighting becomes an end in itself. From 1941 to 1945 Japanese war aims deflated from the conquest of East Asia to the retention of the Emperor in a post-surrender Japan. Yet the Japanese fought even more ferociously in 1945 than they did in 1941.

Exit strategists, like Jominians everywhere, tend to discount the degree to which non-scientific, especially irrational, factors continue to influence the conduct of war, including postulation of war aims. The very notion that the course of a military intervention can be crafted in advance--like drawing up blueprints for a construction project--betrays a conviction that war is, or can be, a science. Strategy is informed by more than reason; it is also informed by fear, honor, and ideology, and failure to grasp this fundamental fact impedes an understanding of war itself. Reason would have instructed Churchill, in the wake of Dunkirk, to cut a deal with Hitler (as Stalin had the year before); yet Churchill fought on out of hatred for Hitler and everything Nazi Germany stood for.

Third, there is no such thing as a politically immaculate use of force, especially for a superpower like the United States. A major military intervention imposes post-hostilities political responsibilities that often require continued military presence, or at least the credible threat of a military return. Precisely because war is a continuation of politics by other means, simply stopping the shooting does not permit immediate military evacuation. This is especially true of wars that do not resolve the underlying political conflict that occasioned hostilities in the first place. Thus US ground combat forces remain in Bosnia and Kosovo. Even in those rare cases of conclusive military victories that completely extirpate the enemy's government and capacity for armed resistance, a residual military presence is necessary to restore and maintain order and to provide a shield for political reconstruction. The demand for unconditional surrender implies an inescapable and open-ended military occupation and rule of the defeated side; this was as true of the Confederacy in 1865 as it was for Germany and Japan 80 years later. It is politically difficult--indeed, irresponsible--to walk away from a major use of force, and doing so suggests either insufficient grounds for using force in the first instance or an unwillingness to deal with sources as opposed to symptoms of enemy behavior (as was the case in the Gulf War and NATO's war against Serbia).

If military extrication becomes the paramount aim of a prospective military intervention, then the entire enterprise becomes suspect. As in the case of what has become a fetishism over force protection, once the safety of the military instrument becomes more important than the political objective on behalf of which it is being risked, then the military instrument should not be risked in the first place. And make no bones about it, the chatter about the need for clear exit strategies is loudest among those who believe that the military should not be exposed to the risks of peace enforcement operations and other small-scale contingencies.

The Example of Korea

The difficulties of crafting and sticking with exit strategies are exemplified by the Korean War. On 25 June 1950, the

day the North Koreans invaded South Korea, the Truman Administration had no exit strategy for Korea because it had never imagined that it would fight for South Korea. Indeed, both General Douglas MacArthur and Secretary of State Dean Acheson had publicly excluded South Korea from America's defense perimeter in Asia. Truman's decision to fight was abrupt and unexpected, and at the time it was made there was no exit strategy other than resistance to North Korean aggression. There was certainly no timetable for a conclusion of hostilities of the kind that present-day exit strategists like to attach to their intervention blueprints.

The quick establishment of the restoration of South Korea's territorial integrity as the US war aim (and that of the United Nations, which authorized resistance) flowed directly from the Administration's decision to fight. Even that objective, however, appeared to be in grave jeopardy as rapidly advancing North Korean forces began corralling US and South Korean forces into the Pusan perimeter. The immediate objective became avoidance of being forcibly ejected from the Korean Peninsula altogether.

Then came MacArthur's Inchon landing and the swift and almost complete reversal of North Korea's military fortunes. The defeat of the communists and the victorious advance of UN forces into North Korea opened the door for a dramatically inflated war aim: the reunification of the entire peninsula under Western auspices. Then, of course, came China's massive counter-intervention, which produced almost three years of military stalemate and a consequent reduction of the US/UN war aim to the status quo ante. On this basis, and once Beijing realized that it could not defeat US forces in Korea, a settlement of the war should have been possible no later than the spring of 1952.

But by then, a new war aim had arisen that no one could have anticipated back in 1950: the voluntary repatriation of communist prisoners of war. Both China and the United States, if not their respective Korean clients, were prepared to enter an armistice that left Korea divided with minor adjustments to the pre-war line of the 38th Parallel. China insisted, however, that all of its soldiers in UN hands be repatriated, including those who had no wish to return to life in communist China. This the Truman Administration refused to do, and thus the war continued on until mid-1953, when China dropped its insistence on forcible repatriation.

Nor was there any chance of US military extrication from Korea once the shooting had stopped. What was signed at Panmunjom in 1953 was an armistice, not a peace treaty. As such, the Korean War failed to resolve the political struggle which occasioned it, and it was this failure that in turn mandated a residual US military presence in South Korea that continues to this day. Far from offering an exit from Korea, the Truman Administration's decision to fight imposed political obligations toward South Korea that the United States has not been able to satisfy without threatened force on the ground in Korea.

The Korean War exhibits the difficulties in anticipating when and how a war will start, how it will unfold, and how it will end. Having an exit strategy on the shelf at the beginning of hostilities and sticking to it until the end assumes away the potent influence of military performance on war aims as well as the law of unintended political consequences that attends any major military intervention. Even if possessed of overwhelming force, military action may still fail to achieve its intended political consequences because of self-imposed restraint, the demands of coalition politics, and unexpected enemy responses. The Clinton Administration thought that NATO could bully Serbia out of Kosovo with the mere threat of a token air campaign, only to discover, to the alliance's great embarrassment, that Milosevic was not only prepared to fight--for 78 days--but also to accelerate the very ethnic cleansing of Kosovo that NATO sought to halt.

World War II also shows that political responsibilities do not end when the shooting stops. US military forces remain in Germany and Japan almost 60 years after the war that brought them there ended. Though they accomplished their mission of defeating and occupying the two countries, they could not be withdrawn because the resulting vacuum of power would have been filled by that of another totalitarian state. Even after the Soviet Union's disappearance, those forces continue to provide stability and reassurance in Europe and Northeast Asia. Indeed, it was America's political and military exit from Europe after World War I that made it necessary to fight another world war and to stick around after it was over. Similarly, US (and other UN-authorized forces) remain in Bosnia six years after the Dayton Accords, and they remain in Kosovo two years after the conclusion of Operation Allied Force.

Mission Creep in Today's Environment

Mission escalation is well-nigh irresistible in military interventions aimed at countering the humanitarian consequences of foreign civil wars. Stopping the fighting in Bosnia and Kosovo mandated a post-hostilities military presence that would permit attempted political reconstruction that ultimately in turn would permit military withdrawal. It was impossible to impose arbitrary departure deadlines without undercutting the rationale for intervention in the first place and inviting a resumption of hostilities. Does anyone doubt that the absence of war in Bosnia and Kosovo would persist in the absence of external peace enforcement? The point is not that intervention in the former Yugoslavia was wise or unwise; rather, it is that, as in Korea, the employment of force inevitably saddled the United States with post-hostilities political obligations that required a continuing military presence.

Mission creep was no less inevitable in Somalia. Especially for an administration so skilled in foreign policy as that of the first President Bush, it was naïve to believe that the United States could simply dart into the Somali anarchy, pass out some food, and then leave without at least attempting to deal with the primary source of hunger--which was political, not meteorological or logistical. Withdrawal without some attempt at political reconstruction would simply have invited the return of mass starvation and exposed military intervention as a sham. In Somalia, the Clinton Administration inherited a military intervention that was intended to be politically immaculate but in the end could never be so.

The Gulf War is cited by exit-strategy proponents as proof that control of a war's purpose and duration is possible. US objectives, some argue, were clear, feasible, and sustained without alteration throughout the Gulf crisis of 1990-91. The US exit strategy was a model of simplicity: (1) mass sufficient force in Saudi Arabia; (2) kick the Iraqis out of Kuwait; (3) go home. Yet the declared objective of "restoring peace and stability to the Gulf" was sufficiently vague to raise the question of whether it was code for overthrowing Saddam Hussein. It obviously meant something more than simply liberating Kuwait, which was a separately declared objective. Certainly it encompassed the intended destruction of Iraq's nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons capacity and offensive conventional military power--especially the Republican Guard. But did "restoring peace and stability to the Gulf" also mean getting rid of Saddam? President Bush publicly compared the Iraqi dictator to Hitler on several occasions, authorized air attacks on his known residences and workplaces, and broadcast appeals for the Iraqi people to get rid of their leader. General Schwarzkopf was directed to pay special attention to wiping out the Republican Guard, a key prop of Saddam's regime. Thus, if Saddam's removal was not a declared objective, it was certainly an undeclared one whose lack of fulfillment clearly disappointed President Bush.

Saddam Hussein remains in power because the United States was not prepared to assume any responsibility for Iraq's postwar political reconstruction. The Bush Administration was so intent on wrapping up its easy, albeit dramatic, military win in Kuwait and vacating the premises that it even declared a unilateral cease-fire in the absence of any Iraqi request for terms. To be sure, America militarily exited the war in the Gulf, but it was a politically inconclusive departure.

Moreover, once US forces had been assembled in Saudi Arabia, Iraq was in no position to significantly influence the course of hostilities. This guaranteed a successful American military performance, which in turn guaranteed the stability of US war aims. Because Iraq and its military remained virtually inert in the face of Coalition attacks (the Scud missile strikes were of no military significance, although an Israeli response to them could have damaged the Coalition), the Gulf War was not a large-scale duel as Clausewitz likened war to be but rather more of a shooting gallery for the reformed and re-equipped post-Vietnam War US military. It was essentially the administration of massive firepower against a large but helpless foe whose defeat was certain from the beginning of hostilities. In no other major war before or since has the United States faced so inanimate an enemy. There was never any possibility of Iraqi military performance adversely affecting declared US war aims. Thus a pre-hostilities exit strategy was sustainable.

The Gulf War was exceptional. Against qualified adversaries--those capable of sustaining resistance and even inflicting considerable damage--the maintenance of war aims becomes problematical. Even in its war against Serbia, NATO was compelled by unexpectedly prolonged Serbian resistance and the need for Russian diplomatic support to weaken the original terms it offered the Serbs at Rambouillet before Operation Allied Force was launched. There, it insisted on an exclusively NATO occupation force for Kosovo, NATO military access on demand to the rest of Serbia, and an eventual plebiscite to determine Kosovo's political future. These demands were dropped in the end in order to facilitate

termination of a war whose duration came as a surprise to NATO and for which levels of enthusiasm varied widely within the alliance. Though Serbia lost the war, NATO only tangentially engaged Serbian military forces because it was unwilling to engage in ground combat or low-altitude air combat and because Serbia's fielded forces were well concealed. Thus Serbia retained a latent military threat that permitted it to hold out for war settlement terms significantly less harsh than it might otherwise have been compelled to accept.

In sum, the United States is free to choose most of its overseas military interventions, but it is not free to select their duration and outcome. Once the shooting begins, war's innate dynamism takes center stage, and policy becomes hostage to military performance and changing domestic and international political circumstances. In the dangerous and unpredictable arena of using force, an exit strategy, like any other plan, may not be sustainable. This means that having an exit strategy in mind is not the same thing as being able to stick to it. A preconceived exit strategy is sustainable only if it can be militarily forced down the enemy's throat and remains politically acceptable at home.

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Reviewed 19 November 2001. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil