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ARE OUR STRATEGIC MODELS FLAWED?

Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy

Jeffrey W. Meiser

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ABSTRACT: Within the US defense community, strategy making has become a narrow-minded exercise rooted in the concepts of ends, ways, and means and the whole-of-government approach. Strategic thinking can be improved by defining strategy as a theory of success and understanding that the purpose of strategy is to create advantage, generate new sources of power, and exploit weaknesses in the opponent. This analysis of the 2009 Afghanistan policy review and strategy-making process illustrates an approach to overcoming dysfunctional strategic practices.

Over the past two years, American military leaders have repeatedly highlighted the need to develop leaders with strong critical and creative thinking skills who will enable the United States to field a superior joint force over the next decade. These efforts imply the US defense community has failed to develop and utilize these skills over the past 15 years. General Martin E. Dempsey, the recently retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for “agile and adaptive leaders with the requisite values, strategic vision, and critical thinking skills to keep pace with the changing strategic environment.”¹ General Joseph Dunford, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently told National Defense University graduates: “There is no substitute for leadership that recognizes the implications of new ideas, new technologies and new approaches and actually anticipates and effects those adaptations.”²

These are praiseworthy goals; however, the challenge of achieving them is profound. The military leaders quoted above generally focus on the need to educate up-and-coming officers to be better strategic thinkers. They do not seem to grasp the reality of fundamental flaws in the dominant way of conceptualizing strategy in the US defense community. Far too often strategy is an exercise in means-based planning; it is inherently uncreative, noncritical, and limits new and adaptive thinking.

Our strategic problems have two main causes: a formulaic understanding of strategy and a simplistic understanding of means or

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1 Martin E. Dempsey, “Desired Leader Attributes for Joint Force 2020” (memorandum, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 28, 2013), 1. See also Martin E. Dempsey, “Joint Education” (white paper, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 16, 2012), 4–5.

2 Jim Garamone, “Dunford to NDU Grads: Embrace Change and Innovation,” US Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 9, 2016, <http://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/796366/dunford-to-ndu-grads-embrace-change-and-innovation/>.

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resources. First, the US defense community has a literal formula for strategy: ends + ways + means = strategy. There is some value to conceptualizing strategy in this manner; however, this model has become a crutch undermining creative and effective strategic thinking. Like any crutch, the supportive structure of the formula originally served an important purpose of avoiding an ends-means mismatch. This approach has become counterproductive because it has the effect of neutering the ways.

Second, the concept of a comprehensive or whole-of-government approach to solving strategic problems fosters an overemphasis on simplistically applying resources—the means. By this logic, whatever the problem is, simply apply all the elements of national power—diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL)—and the problem is solved. Under this approach, the strategist simply fills in each box or, better yet, creates a diagram showing each element of national power as a line of effort directed at an enemy center of gravity or critical vulnerability. This is the stuff of “PowerPoint nirvana” but encourages strategists to avoid thinking creatively and precisely about resources and power.

In sum, the ends + ways + means formula interacts with a simplistic notion of means to create a situation where strategy is reduced to a perfunctory exercise in allocating resources. This approach is an excellent way to foster policy stability, but it is not a recipe for critical and creative thinking. The remainder of this article elaborates on the main failings of the American way of strategy, suggests how a new definition of strategy can overcome those failings, and discusses US strategy in Afghanistan to illustrate these points.

The Lykke Model

In the decades following its publication in *Military Review*, the so-called Lykke model of military strategy has become widely influential among members of the US defense community, particularly those in the US Army. Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr. provides this description of his formula: “Strategy equals *ends* (objectives toward which one strives) plus *ways* (courses of action) plus *means* (instruments by which some end can be achieved).”³ This formula is deeply ingrained in the thinking of US military officers and analysts. One author notes, “It is no exaggeration to say that the simple elegance of his model . . . influenced generations of strategic thinkers.

The importance of the Lykke model became legendary among graduates in senior positions in the US armed forces, as well as with the AWC’s [US Army War College] distinguished International Fellows, many of whom went on to lead their nation’s military establishments.”⁴ Another commentator pithily remarks, “This formula is as recognizable to modern strategists as Einstein’s equation $E=mc^2$ is to physicists.”⁵ While it is difficult to determine exactly how influential the Lykke

3 Arthur F. Lykke Jr., “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (May 1989): 3.

4 Joseph R. Cerami, “Introduction,” in *US Army War College Guide to National Security Issues*, ed. Joseph R. Cerami and James F. Holcomb Jr. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute [SSI], 2001), 7.

5 Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Op-Ed: Is Strategy Really a Lost Art?,” SSI, September 13, 2013, <http://strategicstudiesinstitute.Army.mil/index.cfm/articles//Is-Strategy-Really-A-Lost-Art/2013/09/13>.

model is, many similar formulations of strategy permeate the broader intellectual milieu of American strategic thinking.⁶

In theory, the equation seems to be a simple, logical, and practical way to conceptualize strategy; however, there are several problems in practice. First, the ways part of the equation tends to be relegated to a supporting role as the undefined thing linking ends and means. Lykke's model purposely highlights the connection between ends and means because his approach to strategy was highly influenced by the perception that Vietnam-era strategists overextended the United States by not aligning goals with resources.⁷

As he explains, we should imagine a three-legged stool with ends, ways, and means each represented by one of the legs. Legs with different sizes cause the stool to tilt: "If military resources are not compatible with strategic concepts, or commitments are not matched by military capabilities, we may be in trouble. The angle of tilt represents risk, further defined as the possibility of loss, or damage, or of not achieving an objective."⁸ Thus, risk is generated primarily by a deficiency in military resources. From this perspective, Lykke's model is useful and sensible; it keeps us from ignoring the constraint of resources, which in theory, should prevent us from implementing unrealistic strategies.

There are significant costs, however, to highlighting the means and the ends while sidelining the ways. Viewing strategy as a problem of ends-means congruence is a seductive simplification. This kind of thinking leads to infinitely repeating the question of how many boots should be on the ground. A casual observer of American strategic discourse over the past decade and a half could be excused for thinking strategy is simply a debate about how many troops should be deployed for combat operations. This approach misses the core function of strategy, which is to figure out what to do with those boots on the ground, or even better, what are the alternatives to boots on the ground. The result of this analysis is what Lykke calls ways.

In practice, the ways element of the formula is much more difficult to conceptualize than goals (the ends) and resources (the means). Most discussions of ways treat it as a synonym for plan of action. In this manner of thinking, ways are simply the actions to be taken using the resources available to achieve a goal. For military strategists, falling back on tactics and operational art is all too easy; if given an easy way out, we will take it. If we can turn strategy into planning, we will.

The second problem is the overinclusiveness of Lykke's suggested definition of strategy—ends, ways, and means. In practice, a specific strategy will have a goal and it will use resources, but aligning resources with goals is part of the strategic planning process, not the strategy itself. Strategy is strategy, goals are goals, and resources are resources. Ends and means do not belong in a definition of strategy. By conflating ends, ways, and means with strategy, Lykke's approach makes it more difficult to identify and understand the distinctive meaning of strategy. In terms of the Lykke model, ways comes closest to capturing the true meaning of

⁶ Simply typing the words "ends, ways, means, strategy" into an Internet search engine returns thousands of hits.

⁷ Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy," 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

strategy; however, defining it as a course of action minimizes the intellectual burden of strategy and puts strategists in the position of applying doctrine rather than the creative and critical thinking mind-set required for effective strategic thinking.

In sum, under Lykke's formulation, strategy becomes simply a planning exercise whereby goals and means are aligned. Military strategists receive the political goal and are tasked to align the relevant existing resources, and combatant commanders use the resources according to established doctrine.⁹ One element of our current strategy in Iraq and Syria, for example, uses airstrikes to destroy command and control targets, supply depots, and troop concentrations in order to degrade the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). At the same time, US troops are training and supporting various Sunni Arab and Kurdish factions, hoping to get weapons in the hands of groups willing to fight ISIL.

The ways simply designates where the means should be allocated. Approaches other than directing fires at ISIL targets do not seem to receive much attention from Department of Defense strategists or policymakers. Alternatively, the United States could use a political approach to undermine the governing ability of ISIL in the territory it controls.¹⁰ But instead of debating strategy, we debate the number of sorties, the types of targets, and who to give weapons to. These are important issues, but they miss the more fundamental issues of strategy.

The Whole-of-Government Approach

The concept of a comprehensive or whole-of-government approach further encourages the transformation of strategy into means-based planning. The whole-of-government concept is defined as using all the elements or instruments of national power, typically expressed as DIMEFIL for diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement, to respond to a strategic challenge.¹¹ The reason for introducing the whole-of-government concept was to reflect the reality that military power alone cannot solve our national security problems. In essence, the Department of Defense is asking other government agencies for help handling complex problems like postconflict stabilization and development. The types of missions given to the US Armed Forces since 2001 have shown convincingly that military power alone is not enough to meet contemporary national security challenges.

Unfortunately, the whole-of-government approach fosters bad strategy. In practice, applying the instruments of national power works as a replacement for strategic thinking. A strategist does not have to think about what should be done to solve a national security problem, the answer is already there, no matter what the problem. The comprehensive approach is a solution waiting to be applied to every problem. Far too

9 The US Army designated an official functional area for strategists: FA59. The other services are not quite so bold.

10 Maciej Bartkowski, "Can Political Struggle Against ISIL Succeed Where Violence Cannot?" *War on the Rocks*, December 20, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/can-political-struggle-against-isil-succeed-where-violence-cannot/>.

11 For reporting on the introduction of the term into the national security lexicon see, Walter Pincus, "Pentagon Recommends 'Whole-of-Government' National Security Plans," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2009.

often strategists using the whole-of-government approach simply fill in the seven boxes corresponding to each element of national power to demonstrate their strategy is comprehensive. In truth, not every problem actually requires all elements of national power. By trying to do too much, we can end up unfocused and confused, a great recipe for bad strategy.¹²

Ironically, specifying exactly seven types of power works against the initial justification of a whole-of-government approach, which is to broaden our understanding of the resources that can be applied to strategic problems. As part of the process of analyzing strengths and weaknesses, surveying how different elements of national power can be utilized, indeed, thinking carefully about DIMEFIL makes sense and can certainly generate insights into the types of solutions available to solve national security problems. But, starting with the notion of seven and only seven forms of national power and all of them should always be utilized to implement a whole-of-government solution is infantile. In fact, General Dempsey recently seems to have added another element of national power to the list: energy.¹³ So now we have DIMEFILE? The point is there is no set number of tools a government can use to solve a problem, to think otherwise is foolhardy.

Rethinking Strategy

How can we do better? The first step is defining strategy in a manner that captures its distinctiveness as a concept. There are a number of possible definitions to choose from, but most of them suffer from significant weaknesses. First, several prominent strategic thinkers define strategy too narrowly in military terms. Colin Gray, for example, defines strategy as “the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy.”¹⁴ This definition is insufficient even in the realm of pure military strategy. In warfighting, a broad range of tools should be considered beyond military force. Irregular conflicts, in particular, highlight the need for a broader definition of strategy. Furthermore, Gray’s definition does not give us any idea of what strategy actually is: what does it mean to say that strategy is the use that is made of force for the ends of policy?

A second common mistake is to be overly inclusive, and in so doing, lose a clear sense of what is distinctive about strategy. As noted above, this is the core problem with Lykke’s definition of strategy. Others also make this mistake. Business school professor Richard P. Rumelt defines strategy as “a coherent set of analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that respond to a high-stakes challenge.”¹⁵ Analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions are all potentially important parts of

12 See Charles Dunlap, “A Whole Lot of Substance or a Whole Lot of Rhetoric? A Perspective on a Whole of Government Approach to Security Challenges,” in *Conflict Management and Whole of Government: Useful Tools for US National Security Strategy*, ed. Volker C. Franke and Robert H. Dorff (Carlisle, PA: SSI, 2012), 185–216, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.Army.mil/pdf/files/pub1102.pdf>.

13 Jim Garamone, “Dempsey Talks Caution, Whole-of-Government Approach,” US Department of Defense, September 22, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/618120/dempsey-talks-caution-whole-of-government-approach>.

14 Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

15 Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011), 6.

formulating, communicating, and implementing strategy, but they are not strategy. By including too many elements in a definition of strategy, we risk obfuscating the meaning so much that the concept loses any coherent meaning.

A third major problem with definitions of strategy is the propensity to describe good strategy or to list the things that strategy should do rather than to actually define what strategy is. Lawrence Freedman defines strategy as “the art of creating power.”¹⁶ This is an excellent definition of what strategy should do, but again does not help us understand what a strategy actually is beyond telling us it is an art. Another description of strategy by prominent defense community intellectuals suffers from a similar problem: “Strategy is fundamentally about identifying or creating asymmetric advantages that can be exploited to help achieve one’s ultimate objectives despite resource and other constraints, most importantly the opposing efforts of adversaries or competitors and the inherent unpredictability of strategic outcomes.”¹⁷ Krepinevich and Watts tell us what strategy should do, but not what it is.

The two definitions that come closest to articulating a distinctive meaning for strategy are offered by Barry Posen and Eliot Cohen. Posen defines grand strategy as “a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself.”¹⁸ Cohen defines strategy as a “theory of victory.”¹⁹ The key insight by Posen and Cohen is the inclusion of the term theory. If we define theories as “statements predicting which actions will lead to what results—and why,” we can move toward a better definition of strategy that is general, but not too inclusive, and captures the essence of the concept.²⁰

If we use the Posen-Cohen approach with a more general definition of purpose, we arrive at a sufficient working definition: strategy is a theory of success. This creates the expectation that anything called a strategy will be a causal explanation of how a given action or set of actions will cause success. Most strategies will include multiple intervening variables and conditions.²¹ Defining strategy as a theory of success encourages creative thinking while keeping the strategist rooted in the process of causal analysis; it brings assumptions to light and forces strategists to clarify exactly how they plan to cause the desired end state to occur.

Does the new definition of strategy improve upon the Lykke model? Does it take us away from means-based planning? Yes, in two main ways. First, defining strategy as a theory of success requires us to make a claim about how our proposed actions will actually cause success to happen. If the emphasis switches from applying means to an end, to figuring out how to cause our preferred outcome, then the conversation

16 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

17 Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts, *Regaining Strategic Competence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009), 19.

18 Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 13.

19 Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 33.

20 Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor, “Why Hard-Nosed Executives Should Care about Management Theory,” *Harvard Business Review* 81, no. 9 (September 2003): 3.

21 For examples, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 9–12.

is less about what resources we have available and more about what actions will lead to success and how. This shift will inevitably lead to the development of several rival theories of success, which is a crucial part of the strategy-making process. This approach may seem overly scientific or intellectual, but military commanders already have experience in the area of developing and choosing from multiple proposals. The campaign planning method is based on developing and evaluating alternative courses of action.²² This is also the basic logic behind the scientific method and a form of intelligence analysis called “hypothesis generation and testing.”²³ The process can be applied at the levels of military strategy and national strategy to clearly articulate and evaluate alternative theories of success.

The second benefit of defining strategy as a theory of success encourages us to think more effectively about power. A key principle of the Lykke model is to work with the resources or power that you currently have; however, more nuanced thinking about power suggests power is not a set value and instead is determined by the strategy. Freedman makes this point rather emphatically: strategy “is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.”²⁴ Like Freedman, Rumelt argues part of the purpose of strategy is the discovery of power. The broader principle is that good strategy is “an insight that, when acted upon, provide[s] a much more effective way to compete—the discovery of hidden power in the situation.”²⁵ To think of means only as existing resources dramatically underplays the actual sources of power. Since one of the purposes of strategy is to generate power, it does not make much sense to define sources of power before developing a strategy.

Implications

Judging an abstract argument without an empirical example is difficult; therefore, this section applies the Posen-Cohen model to the Obama administration’s strategy-making process for Afghanistan in 2009. The process was deficient in three ways: it was almost entirely means based, there was only one real option presented, and the result was bad strategy. This brief example suggests there are high costs to our present approach and potentially significant benefits to a new approach to strategy.

What emerges from journalistic accounts of the 2009 Obama administration strategy-making process is the observation that the entire discussion by civilian officials and military officers was about the number of troops, not strategy. In August 2009, International Security and Assistance Force Commander General Stanley McChrystal presented President Barack Obama with two strategies and three levels of troop deployment: 10,000 troops for a ramped up training mission or 40,000 or 85,000 troops for counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. The appearance of choice was a facade; there was “only one genuine

22 See Jack D. Kem, *Planning for Action: Campaign Concepts and Tools* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Command and General Staff College / Army Combined Arms Center, 2012), 129–52.

23 Richards J. Heuer Jr. and Randolph H. Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), 147–76.

24 Freedman, *Strategy*, xii.

25 Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*, 31.

option,” the middle one—40,000 troops for comprehensive COIN.²⁶ Obama quickly understood the reality and was not happy; he wanted more options. After months of discussion and debate, his refined options were: 20,000 more troops for counterterrorism plus other initiatives; 30,000–35,000 more troops for COIN; 40,000 more troops for COIN; or 85,000 more troops for COIN.²⁷ After repeated presidential requests for at least three distinct options, all Obama ever got was slight variations of the original ones. All options were based on the amount of resources being thrown at the problem.

The only possibility of a truly distinct option arose when former Vice President Joe Biden attempted to challenge the proposed counterinsurgency approach with what he called “counterterrorism plus.”²⁸ This approach was pitched to Obama as the 20,000-troop option, but when Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, Central Command Commander General David Petraeus, and McChrystal insisted it was unrealistic, Obama dismissed the option without question.²⁹ Thus, in reality Obama was presented two realistic options, both included COIN and at least a 30,000 troop increase. All of the leaders agreed increasing troop strength by 85,000 was unrealistic. Even if the counterterrorism plus option was considered viable, it was just as means-based as the counterinsurgency options. Biden did not start with a concept and then figure out it would require less troops, he decided less troops would be better and then developed a possible concept.

How can you determine what is the best option when you have only one option? How can you judge the strengths and weaknesses of an approach when you have nothing to compare it to? All strategies have tradeoffs; different strategies have different tradeoffs. Comparing tradeoffs is impossible with only one option. Political science research suggests people will not discard a policy idea unless there is a plausible alternative.³⁰ The point of the strategy-making process is to choose the best alternative, which means insisting on multiple plausible options that are presented equally and without bias.

What about the merits of the strategy proposed by McChrystal and vigorously supported by Mullen, Petraeus, and Gates as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton? From the perspective of the Posen-Cohen model, McChrystal’s strategy is deficient due to its lack of clear causal thinking.³¹ Instead of a clearly stated theory of success, there are pillars, principles, and priorities including “protect the people,” “understand the people’s choices and needs,” improve governance, improve the Afghan National Security Forces, change the operational culture of the International Security and Assistance Force, “improve unity of effort

26 Jack Fairweather, *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 287.

27 Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 273. The other initiatives or actions to be added to the basic counterterrorism approach were never exactly clear.

28 *Ibid.*, 159, 232–36, 273.

29 *Ibid.*, 275.

30 Jeffrey Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 24–48.

31 This analysis is based on McChrystal’s official assessment. See Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commander's Initial Assessment* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Headquarters International Security Assistance Force, 2009).

and command,” “gain the initiative,” “signal unwavering commitment,” address grievances, and gain the support of the Afghan people.³² The elements identify many difficult objectives but no sense of the crucial factors or likely causes and effects. These objectives are fine as ways, defined as lines of effort, but they do not provide causal linkages between actions and results.

Perhaps the most important flaw of McChrystal’s strategy is the unspecified relationship between providing security, gaining support of the population, and establishing governance good enough to earn the trust of the people. If security could be established separate from governance, as Petraeus later argued, then the capabilities of the government of Afghanistan did not matter and the surge was a sensible option.³³ If security was in any way contingent on governance, however, then the surge would be a waste of time without steep improvement in the capacity of national and local governance in Afghanistan.

Perhaps if McChrystal would have spent more time elaborating the causal linkages in his strategy, the principal decision-makers would have understood the United States cannot gain the support of the Afghan people without good governance nor provide security without the support of the population—this is COIN 101. As Stephen Biddle observes, “combat and security alone will have difficulty sustaining control if all they do is allow a predatory government to exploit the population for the benefit of unrepresentative elites.”³⁴ This problem materialized in the early days of McChrystal’s counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan. McChrystal found that when his “government in a box” did not show up in Marjah after Operation Moshtarak (2010), security rapidly deteriorated.³⁵

The above analysis raises the question, “Was the McChrystal strategy successful?” A comprehensive analysis requires more than the allotted space, but the state of Afghanistan today bears a striking resemblance to presurge Afghanistan; so one must ask, “What was gained from the additional blood and treasure?” The Taliban is again resurgent, controlling significant portions of almost every province in Afghanistan.³⁶ Taliban attacks continue to take a large toll on Afghan National Security Forces, local police, and Afghan civilians. ISIL is now active in eastern Afghanistan. While the government of Afghanistan seems somewhat stable, Afghan National Security Forces have barely been able to stem the tide even with ever-increasing American assistance. At the very least, the surge did not result in the durable disruption to the Taliban that it was supposed to cause.³⁷ If the effort opened up space for good governance to develop, we are still waiting for it to arrive.

32 Ibid.

33 Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 220.

34 Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan’s Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 75, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210.

35 Ben Anderson, *The Battle for Marjah*, directed by Anthony Wonke (New York: HBO Documentary Films, 2011).

36 Caitlin Forrest, “Afghanistan Partial Threat Assessment: June 30, 2016,” Institute for the Study of War, July 14, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/afghanistan-partial-threat-assessment-june-30-2016>.

37 Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 270–71, 300, 312–14.

There is no direct evidence that any of the players in the 2009 debate acted or spoke in terms of ends, ways, and means, although there was mention of a whole-of-governments approach and McChrystal later coined the term government in a box. The obsession with means to the detriment of strategy of all participants in the strategy-making process is, however, abundantly clear. There was no debate about rival theories of success. The uniformed military and Gates pushed one option and Obama failed to compel anyone to provide multiple distinct options. McChrystal provided lines of effort but not a theory of success. Biden pushed a counterterrorism plus option, but never made a convincing argument about how it would be implemented or how the goal of durably disrupting the Taliban would be achieved. This outcome can only be considered a massive failure of the strategy-making process.

Conclusion

The American way of strategy is the practice of means-based planning: avoid critical and creative thinking and instead focus on aligning resources with goals. Common definitions of strategy, including the ever-present Lykke model, foster this way of thinking because they do not clearly describe what makes strategy a distinct concept. Too often definitions are overly inclusive and smuggle in concepts unrelated to strategy. Other definitions tell us what good strategy should do rather than telling us what it is. These weaknesses make strategy hard to define and complicate the strategy-making process.

The problems with our current understanding of strategy are exacerbated by the whole-of-government approach encouraging us to define national power as a discrete set of instruments that form a convenient acronym. In practice, the whole-of-government approach is often used as a substitute for, rather than an enabler of, strategy. The elements of national power are presented as lines of effort directed toward a goal without any clear sense of how exactly these efforts are related or how exactly they will cause the goals to be achieved.

The US defense community needs a new definition of strategy. Strategy is a theory of success, a solution to a problem, an explanation of how obstacles can be overcome. A good strategy creates opportunities, magnifies existing resources, or creates new resources. A good strategy must have a clear goal and must be mindful of constraints, but must not allow creativity to be crushed by overemphasizing available resources and existing doctrine. True creative thinking is profoundly difficult but worth the trouble because it wins wars, saves lives, and preserves nations.

Defining strategy as a theory of success gives a clear sense of how strategy is distinct from means-based planning and facilitates a superior strategy-making process. Without a clearly stated theory of success, assumptions remain hidden and logic fuzzy. A strategy must describe how and why proposed actions will cause the achievement of a goal. The strategy-making process must be driven by the evaluation of rival theories of success.

It is impossible to know how good a strategy is unless it is compared to other strategies. The costs and benefits of one strategy will be different than the costs and benefits of other strategies. The tradeoffs, level of risk, and probability of success will be different. Rival

strategies should be evaluated based on current knowledge of the specific situation, historical evidence of similar cases, well-supported theory, and relevant experience. Comparative analysis has long been a part of the military campaign planning process and is fundamental to intelligence analysis and the scientific method.

A nation-state with a significant power advantage over all competitors can do without strategy and can perhaps even afford bad strategy. To a certain extent this position describes the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period of time, “problems could be solved with massive funding or expensive solutions.” We no longer can assume such an envious position. Our resources are overstretched and our economic base precarious. Our problems are complex and multifarious. Now, and in the future, we “will have to seek creative and relevant solutions with fewer resources.”³⁸ In other words, we need good strategy.

38 F. G. Hoffman, “Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations,” *Orbis* 58, no. 4 (September 2014): 476–7, doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2014.08.002.

