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ABSTRACT: In contemporary military operations, some problems are so complex they do not give way to linear solutions but require problem management instead. Combining the fundamentals of Dao De Jing philosophy with the US military design process offers a new perspective to analyze complex security problems, devise management strategies, and plan military operations. Applying this new approach to the complex security environment in Syria allows for a nonlinear mapping of long-term goals and a new perspective on relationships between key actors, environmental factors that restrict changes in the security environment, and where planners should focus their attention.

Keywords: design thinking, military planning, Dao, Syria, ISIS

The Dao De Jing philosophy provides a unique and useful worldview for analyzing complex security problems that do not have immediate or realistic solutions. Whereas Western thinking stresses linear progression with definitive conclusions, Daoism emphasizes the continuous, cyclical nature of being and a state of impermanence.¹ On the surface, Daoism does not naturally fit with the linear, objective-based US Joint Force Planning Process, which seeks decisive end-states—the epitome of which is prescribed through a strategy framework of ends, ways, and means. Some security challenges are so complex, however, that they do not give way to linear, objective-based solutions but instead require problem management.² In such cases, combining the fundamentals of Daoist philosophy with the US military design process can offer a new perspective for analyzing complex security problems, devising problem management strategies, and planning military operations.

Using Daoism and design thinking to analyze complex security environments contributes insights for planning that Daoism or design thinking alone cannot. Specifically, it provides five key insights: a nonlinear

1. Laozi, *Dao De Jing "Making This Life Significant": A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 1–54, 8; Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); and Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine, *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

2. Jacqueline Whitt, "In Defense of a Strategy of Not-losing," *Strategy Bridge* (website), July 23, 2020, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/7/23/in-defense-of-a-strategy-of-not-losing>.

mapping of long-term goals, more nuanced understandings of relationships between key actors, environmental factors that restrict changes in the security environment, what can be influenced and what cannot, and where planners should focus their attention.

Applying Daoism and design thinking to the complex security environment in Syria reveals constrictions on conditions for ending the civil war and stabilizing the country: Russian and Iranian external support sustaining the Assad regime, Iran's campaign to undermine the United States and its allies in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, and the inability of the Syrian Democratic Committee and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDC/SDF) and Türkiye to reach a settlement. Rather than forcing solutions to these problems, planners should focus on what they can affect, including preventing the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other extremist organizations from regrouping and staging attacks outside Syria. Within this immediate goal, planners should strengthen and support partners and alliances while fostering the conditions for future action when conditions are more favorable.

This article begins by presenting an approach that merges philosophical elements of the Dao De Jing with the US Army design process. It then uses this approach to “map the mess” in Syria and build a shared understanding of the problem by applying Daoism and design thinking to analyze the conflict in Syria.³ Ultimately, this article demonstrates how the alternative perspective provided by Dao thinking can help planners analyze and develop methods of managing complex, unsolvable, near-term problems.

Daoism and Design

The philosophy of the Dao De Jing offers an alternate perspective to the Western mindset, which generally sees life as linear, objective-based, and a realm of direct cause and effect.⁴ Daoism views life as a constant flow of events with some things in our control but most that are not. A simple summary of the Dao is that we should worry about things we can control and not worry about things we cannot. Put another way, when an obstacle gets in our path, we should not beat ourselves against it but instead flow around it. Ultimately, Daoism develops one's mind and being to leverage and manage the unique events that comprise life experience.⁵

3. Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity: A Platform for Designing Business Architecture?*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, Inc., 2011), 159–79.

4. Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 45–49.

5. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 9–13.

There are four fundamentals of the Dao: impermanence, emergence, subjectivity, and agency. Impermanence maintains that reality is a stream of interactive situations with no beginning or end. However, patterns of repetitious events occur within that flow. Emergence refers to the never-ending interactions of events resulting in new experiences and creating new context.⁶ “Every unique phenomenon is continuous with every other phenomenon within one’s field of experience.”⁷ Emergence limits the utility of linearity, cause and effect, and prediction.⁸ The Dao asserts fundamental subjectivity; in other words, “We see things not as they are but as we are.”⁹ There is no external or decontextualized view. We are the water flowing in the river, not the observer on the riverbank. The fourth fundamental, agency, describes how we fit into reality; our path is not predetermined, and our actions shape the future.¹⁰ We can influence our environment and manage some interactions. The Dao is clear, however, that to influence situations we must understand our immediate environment and the context.¹¹ Ultimately, Daoism directs us to recognize our agency and limitations, to understand the context of our situation, and to influence circumstances and create opportunities when and where we can.

The structureless philosophical nature of Dao thinking makes its real-world application difficult. Merging Daoism with the more structured methodology of design thinking can produce a more practical approach. Design thinking helps us realize a vision, understand the factors in a given problem, and recognize how to achieve a desired outcome.¹² Design thinking also helps us cope with the challenges of complexity and interdependence by employing holistic understanding, iteration, and problem solving to produce a strategy and a method of action.¹³

The US Army defines *design* as “a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe unfamiliar problems and approaches to solving them.”¹⁴ The Army’s design method has four dynamic framing processes. The first is framing the operational environment, including the present and the desired future. Second, planners frame the problem. Third, planners must also frame solutions, or develop the operational approach to contend with the problems preventing them

6. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, 45–47.

7. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 17.

8. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 15–18.

9. Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachmani, Talmudic tractate Berakhot (55b.).

10. Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 57.

11. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 21–24.

12. Brian Lawson, *How Designers Think Fourth Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3–16.

13. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, xi–23.

14. US Department of the Army (DA), *Army Design Methodology*, Army Training Publication (ATP) 5-0.1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015), 1–3.

from achieving their desired future. Fourth, the method calls for assessing and reframing.¹⁵ The steps of design thinking are intended to be conducted in a continuous and iterative method. However, in reality, they are often done once and sequentially.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Joint and Army methods frequently produce linear operational approaches with lines of operation and effort, specific objectives, a definitive definition of victory, and an express military end-state, all of which are problematic for understanding complex security problems.

Dao thinking, when applied throughout the military design process, offers useful insights for addressing complex security problems with no clear solutions or end states. First, Daoism and the military design process both emphasize the importance of planners understanding the strategic environment by “mapping the mess,” as organizational theorist Jamshid Gharajedaghi describes it, to understand both present conditions and desired future conditions.¹⁷ The Dao suggests, however, that we must continuously seek an understanding of our environment because time is ceaseless and context constantly shifts. In the Dao, this is called form *wu-hua*, the concept of constant change, that we cannot pursue any permanent status.¹⁸

The merging of Daoism and design thinking emphasizes how planners should balance the requirement to understand the present and desired future with the reality of our limited perspective on the environment. It is impossible to know everything; Dao form *wu-zhi* is no-knowledge of properties, particularly values and virtue. Yet, we can still create certain properties, even if we do not exactly understand what created them.¹⁹ Due to the nature of time, which has no beginning or end, timelines and timeframes should be lesser concerns. Planners must play the long game, have patience, and wait for the right conditions to manifest. The ideas and theories related to protracted war apply to this mindset.²⁰ On the flipside of the time factor, our adversaries will try to waste our time, energy, and concern on things we cannot control. This is a strategy of erosion, often linked to asymmetric strategies and irregular warfare.²¹

15. DA, *Army Design Methodology*, 1-3-1-5.

16. US Department of Defense (DoD), *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), 4-3-4-4, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf.

17. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, 159-79.

18. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 42-43.

19. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 40-42.

20. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 41.

21. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75-93.

In the Dao, because time has no beginning and no end, policy should not seek objective-based end-states in complex security problems. Similarly, military planners should avoid specific military end-state traps.²² Instead, they should seek to manifest success by setting conditions that foster the emergence of our desired future. It is not necessary to coerce your goal into being if you can manifest it by managing other interactions instead. Form *wu-yu* is objectless desire, not to seek certain objectives but instead to flow through reality as it comes.²³ Additionally, Daoism emphasizes that when thinking about the problem, planners should work to recognize what is in their control and what is not. Planners should be realistic about where, what, and when they can or cannot influence a situation.²⁴ We have limited influence, and we need to spend it where it may improve our condition.

Finally, some problems are so great or complicated they are unsolvable, at least in their current time or state. These cases require problem management, not problem solving. This mindset should also play into framing the solution and developing the operational approach. Action must be balanced with Dao form *wu-wei*, non-action. Sometimes non-action is the best approach.²⁵ Within this observation, a strategic approach should manage multiple distinctive strategies into an integrated holistic strategy that works in concert with national power applied through statecraft.²⁶ If concepts of control are an illusion, then agility and flexibility are required. Planners should pursue the creation of opportunities and be prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they arise.²⁷

Ultimately, planners cannot predict the future. They must be prepared to deal with events as they occur. Furthermore, strategy must account for unpredictability. As Sun Tzu notes, “The able commander does not resist the rhythm of change, but, finding its pulse, translates defining conditions into correlative terms as a means of controlling the situation.”²⁸

Mapping the Mess in Syria

The civil war in Syria is a complex geopolitical conflict. It is a deeply intertwined problem of politics, culture, economics, information, geography, religion, and time. It includes proxy irregular warfare, civil war,

22. Whitt, “Strategy of Not Losing.”

23. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 42.

24. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, 29–33.

25. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 39.

26. Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska/Potomac Press, 2015), 275–91.

27. Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 80–81.

28. Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 81.

periods of conventional war of movement, and competition below the level of war between global nuclear powers. It involves state actors, non-state actors, and actors that lie somewhere in between, such as private military companies. The conflict fluctuates between dynamic, fluid periods and stagnant, morass ones.

Under the Biden-Harris administration, Brett H. McGurk, the US national security council coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, has stated three broad US policy goals in Syria. First, the United States must pursue cease-fires and reduce violence.²⁹ This objective implies a US commitment to the 2015 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which encourages an inclusive and Syrian-led political process to reach a negotiated settlement and end the conflict.³⁰ Second, the United States aims to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria.³¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates there are approximately 6.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, with an additional 6.6 million Syrian refugees worldwide. These roughly 13 million people have often been directly affected by violence and are food- and water-insecure.³² Addressing the crisis means finding ways to provide critical access to safe and secure shelter, food, water, and medicine. As the environment stabilizes, the international community must facilitate the return, reintegration, or resettlement of Syrian refugees.³³ The third US goal is to “[maintain] pressure on the ISIS and al-Qaeda networks with a sustained US military commitment in eastern Syria.”³⁴ This goal mutually contributes to the regional stability of Iraq, Jordan, and Israel. Within these three broad goals, the United States must also contend with US and Russian competition in Syria and with Iran. Preventing ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other violent extremists from regrouping and using Syria as a base of operations to plan and execute attacks is perhaps the most important and immediate goal and requires, at least in part, a military response.

Devising strategies for realizing these policy goals in Syria first requires “mapping the mess.” In Syria, all major actors share the principal goal

29. Brett McGurk, “Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, National Security Council, United States Remarks,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies 17th IISS Manama Dialogue*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/events/manama-dialogue/manama-dialogue-2021#:~:text=Brett%20McGurk%2C%20Coordinator%20for%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa%2C%20National%20Security%20Council%2C%20United%20States>.

30. United Nations Security Council. Resolution 2254 (2015). S/RES/2254. New York: UN, December 18, 2015. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf.

31. McGurk, “United States Remarks.”

32. “United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,” UN Refugee Agency (website), n.d., accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

33. Boris Cheshirkov, “Eleven Years On, Mounting Challenges Push Many Displaced Syrians to the Brink,” UN Refugee Agency (website), March 15, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/3/623055174/eleven-years-mounting-challenges-push-displaced-syrians-brink.html>.

34. McGurk, “United States Remarks.”

of *security control*, defined here as having power and influence over the security environment.³⁵ Security control protects social communities, tribes, ethnic groups, political parties, and religious groups against violence, provides food and water security, drives economics, and is a fundamental consideration for all social development. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad needs control for survival, Russia needs control for regional operations and global influence, the United States needs control to protect Iraq's stability, ISIS needs control to build the caliphate, Iran needs it for its influence and access, and Türkiye needs control for domestic stability and protection against terrorism. This competition for security control creates interdependence between all the actors. Thus, their relationships with one another can be categorized as acting in either conflict, cooperation, or a mixture of the two.

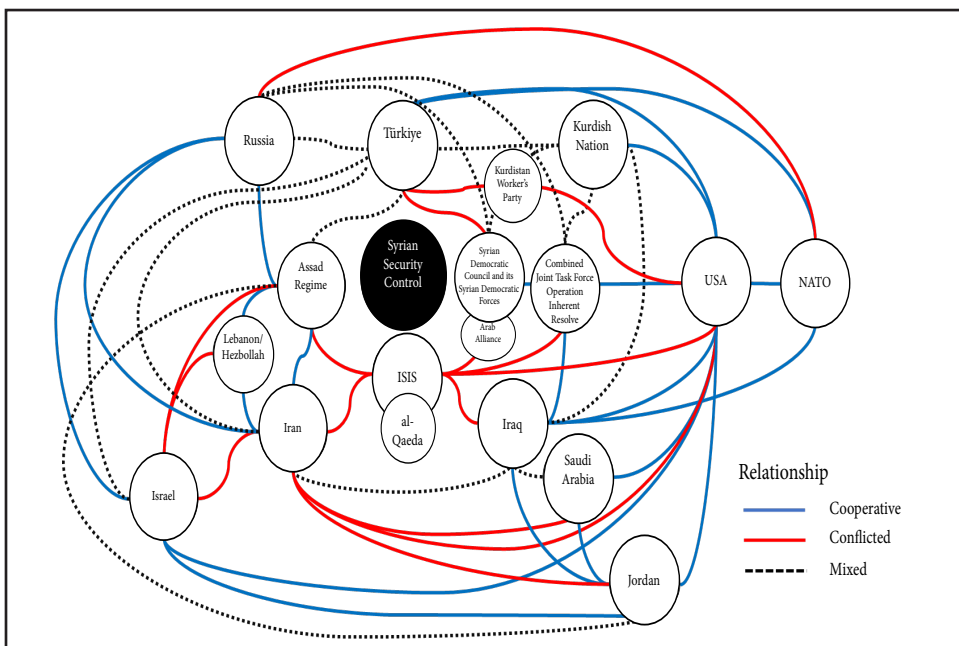


Figure 1. Mapping the Syrian security environment mess
(Figure created by Ned Beechinor Marsh)

Beyond displaying the high number of interrelated actors, mapping the mess identifies other factors in the security environment. First, it reveals a clear set of core actors seeking security control, in this case, the Assad regime, ISIS, and the Syrian Democratic Council and its Syrian Democratic Forces. The core group connects to strong second and third layers of actors, including Türkiye, Russia, the United States and Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) coalition nations,

35. DA, *Army Design Methodology*, 5-5.

Iran, Iraq, and other geographic neighbors. These second- and third-layer actors and their connections to the core ensure that the Syrian civil war cannot be separated from the context of greater geopolitics. Finally, the map depicts the isolation of ISIS, which has no overt geopolitical supporters beyond its relationship with other terrorist organizations, franchises, followers, individual donors, and social media platforms.

The three actors comprising the core of the Syrian conflict—ISIS, the Assad regime, and the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces—require further delineation to understand the security environment. For the Islamic State, Syria was intrinsically linked to the realization of its three broad goals as a transnational Islamist organization: the creation of an Islamic superstate defined by religion rather than race or nationality, perpetual offensive jihad and the replacement of al-Qaeda as the flagship for global jihad, and the foundation of a state ruled by perfect and complete sharia and Prophetic methodology, which requires both a physical caliphate and a caliph governing it. Furthermore, the Islamic State aimed to drive the United States out of the Middle East, followed by dividing Iraq, undermining Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and destroying Israel.³⁶

Defeat of the Islamic State has thrown ISIS's narrative and organizational objectives into question, but ISIS remains capable of waging an insurgency, despite severe disruption of its leadership.³⁷ The February 2022 battle to release ISIS prisoners held by the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces in Hasakah demonstrates that ISIS maintains the ability to manifest coordinated and sophisticated operations.³⁸ Furthermore, ISIS continues to grow the next generation, namely, the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate,” inside Syrian IDP camps.³⁹ Finally, ISIS maintains global jihad as an organizational objective, and it seeks to recruit for, expand, franchise, and sell the ISIS brand. Thus, the facilitation and execution of external attack operations

36. Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 149–76. See also Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *Atlantic* (website), March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

37. Colin Clarke, “How ISIS Is Transforming,” RAND (blog), September 25, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/09/how-isis-is-transforming.html>; and US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, April 2021), 23.

38. Jane Arraf and Sangar Khaleel, “U.S. Allies Retake Control of Prison in Syria, Subduing ISIS Fighters,” *New York Times* (website), January 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/world/middleeast/isis-prison-syria.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

39. Bethan McKernan, “Inside al-Hawl Camp: The Incubator for Islamic State’s Resurgence,” *Guardian* (website), August 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/inside-al-hawl-camp-the-incubator-for-islamic-states-resurgence>.

inside Western nations' homelands remains an important goal that demonstrates the organization's credibility and resiliency.⁴⁰

The Syrian regime in Damascus, led by Bashar al-Assad, has relatively straightforward reasons why security control is central to its interests. Assad's objectives first include the survival of the regime. Second, the regime seeks to recapture Syria's lost sovereign territory, including the contested northwest, the northeast held by the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces, and the northern border area occupied by Türkiye.⁴¹ Third, Assad wants to normalize international relations regionally and globally, including building economic ties with neighbors and gaining international legitimacy, which would create the conditions necessary for international sanctions to be lifted and for reconstruction to begin.⁴² Finally, Assad wants to nurture and maintain his internal patronage network and the external lifelines that have sustained his regime throughout the conflict. For his external supporters, primarily Russia and Iran, Assad provides economic and security privileges in return for their assistance, including government contracts for oil and military basing, access, and control for logistical and operational purposes.⁴³

The last core actor is the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated confederation of multiethnic political parties; it is the political leadership of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and it maintains control and security with the Syrian Democratic Forces. The Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces balances between and hedges against the agendas of the Assad regime, Russia, Türkiye, and the United States and maintains a complicated agenda, including preparedness to negotiate a resolution to the conflict.⁴⁴ Its survival is contingent upon external support, including international recognition and legitimacy.⁴⁵

The Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces has communicated five goals: peace and security; a constitutional democracy and ethnic plurality in government; a pluralistic society that empowers local autonomy; security from all foreign fighters, including Turkish military

40. ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment*, 23.

41. Lina Khatib, "Bashar al-Assad's Hollow Victory," *Foreign Affairs* (website), January 17, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2020-01-17/bashar-al-assads-hollow-victory>.

42. Mona Yacoubian, "Assad Is Here to Stay," *Foreign Affairs* (website), January 25, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-01-25/assad-here-stay>; and Khatib, "Hollow Victory."

43. Khatib, "Hollow Victory."

44. Aaron Stein and Emily Burchfield, "The Future of Northeast Syria," Atlantic Council (website), August 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Future-of-Northeast-Syria.pdf>.

45. Stein and Burchfield, "Future of Northeast Syria."

forces, and extremists; and the ability to receive humanitarian assistance from international aid organizations and for internally displaced persons and refugees to return safely.⁴⁶

Türkiye, Iran, and Russia make up the next ring in the conflict. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has tethered Türkiye's policy on Syria to Türkiye's domestic policy.⁴⁷ Türkiye's actions in Syria are part of a broader conflict against Kurdish militants, with the goals of destroying the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and reducing Türkiye's internal instability from Kurdish ethnic separatists and terrorists.⁴⁸ Along the northern Syrian border, Türkiye aims to maintain a 300-mile-long, 20-mile-deep buffer under Turkish military control, free from Kurdish forces, where Erdoğan seeks to deport roughly 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring, which coincided with the US withdrawal from the Manbij, Kobani, and Raqqa areas in October 2019, began to secure this buffer zone. Türkiye is working with the Assad regime and Russia and has directed its Islamic Turkish-supported opposition groups against Kurdish forces in Syria.⁴⁹

The Turkish-Kurdish relationship is one of the most intractable issues in the Syrian conflict. Türkiye, a NATO ally, views the Syrian Democratic Forces as synonymous with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, an internationally recognized terrorist organization. Türkiye claims the organization is an existential threat, and the government conducts daily operations in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria in a war against Kurdish militants, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party.⁵⁰ Therefore, Türkiye is unlikely to negotiate with the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces.

Iran's goals in Syria directly support its regime objectives of "anti-imperialism, Shiite sectarianism, and Iranian nationalism." These objectives underlie its strategy to: establish regional hegemony under Shia leadership; expel the United States and Western influence from the region; and turn Israel into a Palestinian state. Iran's strategy

46. "The Syrian Democratic Council, U.S. Mission," US Mission of the Syrian Democratic Council (website), n.d., accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/>.

47. "President Erdogan's Alliance with the Far Right Pays Off," *Economist* (website), July 21, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/07/19/president-erdogans-alliance-with-the-far-right-pays-off>.

48. "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer," International Crisis Group (website), January 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>.

49. Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Endgame in Syria," *Foreign Affairs* (website), October 9, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-10-09/turkeys-endgame-syria>; and Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Evolving Syria Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* (website), February 9, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-02-09/turkeys-evolving-syria-strategy>.

50. Center for Preventative Action, "Global Conflict Tracker: Conflict between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups," Council on Foreign Relations (website), updated March 16, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups>.

involves spreading its influence through proxies and cultivating armed groups, such as Iranian-aligned Shia militia groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Houthi rebels in Yemen. In Syria, Iran pursues the survival of Assad's regime in Damascus and uses that partnership to maintain influence in and a regional connection with Hezbollah in Lebanon, its proxy force for conflicts with Israel and Saudi Arabia, and through Shia militias in Iraq. It also uses the partnership in Syria to pressure the United States, despite having ISIS and al-Qaeda as mutual enemies.⁵¹

In 2015, Russia intervened in Syria and saved the Assad regime from collapse, its first post-Cold War military expedition outside former Soviet territory.⁵² Russia has three broad goals in Syria. First, it wants to demonstrate its influence and gain global recognition as a great power capable of competing with the United States. Second, the Russian military presence in Syria intends to establish a permanent foothold in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, including seaports and airfields, to put pressure on NATO's southern flank and support Russia's Black Sea, Crimean, Ukrainian and Libyan operations.⁵³ Third, Russia wants to use Syria to improve its expeditionary operations and create a "battle lab" where the Russian military can train personnel and leaders, gain experience, and test equipment, systems, and doctrine. Russia will most likely continue to pursue these goals in Syria moving forward.

Applying Daoism and Design to Syria

With this shared context from mapping the mess, strategist can apply principles of Daoism and design thinking to the Syrian problem. Long-term, it is logical to assume the United States would like the Syrian civil war to end, for a constitutional democracy to govern Syria, and for its government to be aligned with the United States and its partners and eschew US adversaries, particularly Russia and Iran. These conditions would support the United States' broader regional strategy by reducing instability exported from Syria.

51. Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Hollow Victory," *Foreign Affairs* (website), March/April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2022-02-16/irans-hollow-victory>; and International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: IISS Publications, 2019), 11–33, 85–114.

52. Anna Borshchevskaya, "Shifting Landscape: Russia's Military Role in the Middle East," *Policy Notes* no. 68 (September 2019): <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-middle-east>.

53. Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy," *Lawfare* (blog), January 23, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy>.

Based on mapping the mess, at least three interdependent problems hinder movement toward this long-term goal. First, the Assad regime will likely continue to survive on external support from Russia, given Russia's interests. Second, Iranian support for Assad in Syria, combined with Iran's campaign to undermine the United States and its allies in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, constricts US action. Finally, the United States has been unable to help the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces establish a dominant position that would force a negotiated settlement with Türkiye because Türkiye is a NATO ally with steadfastly anti-SDC/SDF interests.

According to the Dao, planners should recognize what they can control or influence and what they cannot. The United States cannot solve the Turkish-Kurdish dilemma. Thus, it should not waste energy or time trying to solve this problem but should rather try to influence it through its alliance with Türkiye and its partnership with the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Overall, these challenges require a mindset of problem management rather than problem solving.

The United States also cannot solve its adversarial relationship with Russia in Syria, nor can it coerce Russia out of Syria. Again, Daoist principles require a mindset of problem management rather than problem solving with respect to Russia's presence in Syria and could include an approach that focuses on containment and coercion rather than the expectation of Russia's complete withdrawal.⁵⁴ Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 may provide emergent opportunities for change in Syria, including changes to Russia's military footprint in Syria and a possible reduction in commitment to the Assad regime. For now, the US military could use Russia's presence in Syria as an opportunity to collect intelligence, observe Russian military forces in operation, learn from Russia's actions, and when the timing is right, use this information to put pressure on Russia's presence in Syria and possibly elsewhere. Overall, the United States could use a balanced strategy of action and non-action (*wu-wei*), practice patience, and should remember Russia is only one actor in a complex environment.

Finally, the United States will not solve the problem of Iran's presence and influence in Syria. There is room, however, to influence and manage the problem as part of a broader regional strategy, including countering Iranian influence in the US-occupied Eastern Syria Security Area through its SDC/SDF security partnership.

54. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 1–34.

A realistic vision for a near-future Syria is a state that has limited ability to export instability to neighboring countries. In developing this vision, planners should keep the framing aspects of the Dao in mind. First is the concept of constant change (*wu-hua*), that nothing is permanent. The United States should recognize “. . . success [is] not a one-time proposition; it has to be reproduced continuously.”⁵⁵ Whatever policies the US government enacts in Syria will have to be managed and resourced continuously. Next, planners should keep in mind the concept of no-knowledge (*wu-zhi*), our ability to manifest success despite limited understanding.⁵⁶ This idea balances understanding and risk management with the reality that control is an illusion.⁵⁷ Crisis points and challenges in Syria will continue to manifest despite the United States’ best efforts. To deal with these challenges requires a mindset of flexibility and agility. Planners should seek to create opportunities and take advantage of them as they arise.

The nature of time as an endless, continuous stream of interactive moments intertwines with these two concepts. Planners should consciously avoid time-sensitive, military end-state traps and view the lack of a foreseeable or time-sensitive end state in Syria as an opportunity because there is less pressure to force an unrealistic solution. American planners should play the long game; through a mindset of patience, planners will create an opportunity that makes time available to develop a strategy that fosters success based on emergence, or the favorable changes in circumstances. The stable stalemate recognized by the US government will provide the time necessary for the development of a long-term problem-management strategy. By avoiding a linear, objective military end-state, planners will be free to accept the realities of where the US government can balance action with non-action (*wu-wei*).

In Daoism, problems and context are inseparable. The US problem in Syria is interdependent with the problems associated with the greater Middle East, Europe, and global geopolitics. Due to this interdependence, the US government can foster emergence in Syria by managing the interaction among the elements of an integrated strategy in the Middle East. Specifically, McGurk advocates for getting back to the basics of partnerships, alliances, patience, and aligning ends and means. This approach includes managing hard and soft US power, presence, and resources across time and throughout the Middle East to reinforce mutual goals. McGurk stresses

55. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, 46.

56. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 40–42.

57. Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking*, 34–35.

that the US government should operate within the ideals of humility, introspection, commitment, and understanding while avoiding grandiose maximalist aims.⁵⁸ Critically, the US government must use its strategic position to manifest success in strengthening relationships with partners and allies around the region. Given that regional allies are best situated to understand what to do, the United States should endeavor to enable them to lead the removal of restrictions, provision of resources, and facilitation of allied and partner operations that seek mutual goals when addressing the Syria problem.

The US government should also continue to maintain significant support to the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS through Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve. Enabling the Syrian Democratic Council/Syrian Democratic Forces, however, would require balancing support to Türkiye. The United States could assist both actors where and when it is possible and otherwise “flow” around the problem.

For Iran, the US government could support counter-Iranian operations led by allies and partners to isolate its activities from Syria. Any US strategy to counter Iran in Syria should be developed within the context of a broader Middle East strategy. Possible options in Syria include greater integration with a regional irregular warfare campaign below the threshold of war to degrade Iranian capacity and capability. The United States should weigh these options, however, against the risks of escalation, increased instability, and human suffering.

Finally, within the complex security environment in Syria and the Middle East, the United States must consider how other strategic competitors are exploiting the war. In January 2022, China and Syria signed a memorandum of understanding that included increased trade between the two countries and China’s promise for humanitarian assistance, effectively bringing Syria into China’s Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁹ China’s increased presence and influence in Syria may present another layer of complexity not only to the Syrian civil war, but also to how China’s increased involvement affects the region and to what actions the United States should take. As with all developments, planners should keep in mind the framing concept of constant change (*wu-hua*).

58. McGurk, “United States Remarks.”

59. “China in Syria: Aid and Trade Now, Influence and Industry Later?,” Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (website), July 11, 2022, <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/11/china-in-syria-aid-and-trade-now-influence-and-industry-later/>.

Conclusion

Merging the philosophical elements of the Dao with design thinking offers an alternative perspective for considering options in a complex security environment that does not give way to linear, objective-based solutions. Specifically, this approach provides five key insights for planners. First, it permits nonlinear mapping of long-term goals, which allows for a greater visualization and inclusion of complexity and a better understanding of the factors inhibiting solutions. Second, it facilitates more nuanced comprehension of relationships between key actors, which, in turn, reveals how actors may be restricting pathways to solutions. Third, it better reveals environmental factors that restrict changes in the security environment and recognizes which ones can be changed and which cannot and their relationships to one another. Fourth, Daoism and design thinking more clearly delineates what can be influenced and what cannot, by providing a different mindset toward relationships and environmental factors. Finally, it helps direct planners' attention by better identifying what can be changed and what cannot.

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