

Lessons from 13 Years of War Point to a Better U.S. Strategy

THE RISE OF IRREGULAR THREATS AND THE DECLINE OF NATIONAL BUDGETS have posed an acute dilemma for those crafting U.S. global strategy. More than ever, U.S. civilian and defense leaders are being called on to find ways to achieve satisfactory outcomes to multiple simultaneous conflicts at an acceptable cost.

In particular, U.S. land forces face the need to become more agile in adapting their strategy as circumstances warrant and more capable of working with all manner of partners. The growing role of special operations forces (SOF) represents an important potential advantage in this regard, but future threats call for a broader array of options for the application of joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational power. Future U.S. land operations will likely require not just a greater use of SOF but also improved interaction with conventional forces.

The performance of the past 13 years also suggests a need to remedy the nation's strategic deficiencies at the levels of policy and strategy. Moving forward, war and statecraft should be viewed along the same spectrum, with the exercise of national power understood as a marriage of force and diplomacy—a marriage that wields the various elements of national power in a coordinated, seamless manner.

Time to Reevaluate

As of 2014, there has been no government-wide effort to synthesize lessons at the strategy and policy level from the past 13 years. An initial study of the lessons from the first decade of war (2001–2011) was produced in June 2012 at the behest of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That study, *Decade of War*,¹ provided a starting point for this RAND Arroyo Center effort, which incorporates insights from military and civilian agencies alike. This study distills seven lessons from the recent conflicts and offers seven recommendations to improve the making and implementation of national security strategy.

The RAND team reviewed documents; conducted interviews; and convened a workshop in which former officials and experts in national security, civil-military relations, and strategy discussed

their research, insights, and experiences. The team used a two-stage Delphi poll to determine the areas of agreement among the workshop participants. The results were then applied to the expected future operating environment to identify critical requirements for civilian personnel, conventional forces, and SOF.

U.S. forces leave Iraq in 2011



Ever since World War II, land warfare has evolved away from conventional combat against state actors and their standing forces and toward irregular warfare fought by joint forces against non-state actors. This has led to an increasing reliance on SOF, which have recently participated in a wider range of operations than at any time in their history. These trends are expected to continue and might even accelerate.

While adaptation to these historical trends has occurred, with the U.S. military learning many tactical and operational lessons from the wars it has fought over the past several decades, it has often struggled to incorporate the broader strategic lessons. For example, both the Army and the rest of the joint force have been quick to adopt new technologies for improving the mobility, survivability, and situational awareness of ground forces; their ability to operate at night; and the lethality and precision of their weaponry. Yet the joint force and the U.S. government as a whole have displayed an ongoing ambivalence about, and a lack of proficiency in, the noncombat aspects of warfare against nonstate actors, despite the rising frequency of such conflicts.

Seven Lessons

Lesson 1 • The making of national security strategy has suffered from a lack of understanding and application of strategic art.

The U.S. Department of Defense defines strategy as “a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.” Essential to this concept of strategy is the alignment of ends, ways, and means. The U.S. government has displayed persistent deficits in achieving this alignment, as evidenced in the decision to go to war in Iraq, belated decisions to send surges of troops to Iraq and then Afghanistan, and the approach taken toward counterterrorism by both of the past two administrations. In all four cases, the ends, ways, and means did not align, whether because the ends were too ambitious, the ways of achieving them were ineffective, or the means applied were inadequate. Due to the inherent uncertainties of war and the lack of perfect knowledge, the making of strategy must be viewed as an adaptive art for coping with those variables. In the past 13 years, though, the review and adaptation of policy and strategy were painful, belated, and often incomplete. As a consequence, the United States found it difficult to achieve its objectives in a lasting or definitive manner.

Lesson 2 • An integrated civilian-military process is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of formulating an effective national security strategy.

Currently, there is no established, integrated civilian-military process for rigorously identifying assumptions, risks, possible outcomes, and likely effects through the solicitation of diverse inputs, red-teaming, and tabletop exercises. The lack of such a process is complicated by the fact that civilian policymakers and the military

have different views of strategy. Joint doctrine teaches the military to expect a linear process in which the civilian policymakers define objectives for which the military formulates options and then a strategy. In practice, however, civilian policymakers require a dynamic and iterative process that provides the needed information and analysis to determine feasible objectives. The National Security Council has become immersed in operational and tactical issues in recent years and has not functioned as an arbiter in the strategymaking process.

Lesson 3 • Because military operations take place in a political environment, military campaigns must be based on a political strategy.

There has often been a failure to incorporate the essential political element of war into U.S. national strategy. Military campaigns take place in the social, cultural, and political contexts of the states in which they are fought, and any intervention is unlikely to produce lasting results without a strategy that addresses the political factors driving the conflict and that also provides for enduring postwar stability. Yet the United States has often failed to recognize the centrality of the political element of war, incorporate it into the strategy, and ensure continued focus on the often difficult implementation. In Iraq, for example, after dismantling the old political order, the fundamental requirement was to strike a lasting agreement among Shia, Sunni, and Kurds (with Iranian acquiescence) for sharing political and economic power. In Afghanistan, the essential political requirement was to balance Pashtun, Tajik, and other tribal concerns while reaching out to Pashtun sympathizers of the Taliban. The tendency among both civilian policymakers and the military has been, instead, to focus on tactical issues, troop levels, and timelines, rather than the political factors that ultimately determine success. The U.S. military has also been inclined to believe that the political aspect of war is either not part of war or is entirely up to the civilians to address. Finally, the political element of war has been further obscured by a focus on governing capacity, which is a separate, long-term, institutional issue that is often secondary to resolving conflict.

Lesson 4 • Technology cannot substitute for sociocultural, political, and historical knowledge.

This knowledge is critical for understanding a conflict, formulating a strategy, and assessing its implementation. There has been a deficit of this knowledge, partly due to a continuing overreliance on technology and a belief that wars can be fought and won by reliance on technology alone. Without sociocultural, political, and historical knowledge, necessarily developed over time, the required adaptations in a strategy cannot be recognized and made. The need for assessments has been embraced—and even legislated—but the current approach to assessments may rely too heavily on systems analysis and other processes that track the execution of a strategy rather than its effects on the conflict. Metrics tend to characterize how programs and operations are doing (measures of performance), but not whether they are doing the right things (measures of effectiveness).

Lesson 5 • Interventions should not be conducted without a plan to conduct stability operations, capacity-building, transition, and, if necessary, counterinsurgency.

U.S. policymakers deliberately eschewed preparing for post-combat stabilization and capacity-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the U.S. military did not deploy enough troops to conduct stability operations until the need for them became dire and until after a wrenching and prolonged review process late in both campaigns. In Libya, the United States again chose to avoid undertaking a stabilization and capacity-building mission after removing the Gaddafi regime, opening the way for a climate of militia-dominated anarchy. Planning, preparing, and conducting stabilization and reconstruction operations, capacity-building missions, and transitions to civilian authority in a timely manner in Iraq and Afghanistan might have lessened or obviated the need for large-scale U.S.-led counterinsurgency operations.

Lesson 6 • Shaping, influence, and unconventional operations may be cost-effective ways of addressing conflict that obviate the need for larger, costlier interventions.

There has been a chronic lack of emphasis on shaping, influence, and unconventional activities that could avert the need for major U.S. combat operations, if deliberately designed as campaigns with those specified objectives. SOF have demonstrated the ability to provide alternatives to major combat operations through a sustained approach—and in conjunction with other joint, interagency, and multinational partners. One example is the small but effective U.S. intervention in the Philippines to help train and advise Philippine forces combating two terrorist groups with links to al Qaeda. Comparable opportunities exist in Yemen and North Africa. Yet the paradigm is not fully established, in large part because shaping, influence, capacity-building, and unconventional activities are often seen as a prelude to and preparation for major combat operations rather than a potential alternative to them. Additional research is needed on the conditions under which assistance to indigenous forces is likely to produce the desired results and on whether this approach affords reasonably good odds of success.

Lesson 7 • The joint force requires multinational and nonmilitary partners, as well as structures for coordinated implementation among agencies, allies, and international organizations.

Amid numerous rancorous debates about the lessons of the past 13 years, there appears to be wide agreement on the desirability and utility of multinational coalitions and the necessity of civilian expertise. Despite some successes in coordinated planning and implementation among joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational partners, the mechanisms for achieving the desired synergy are still inadequate, especially in circumstances that call for a civilian-led effort. There has been a chronic lack of civilian capacity, as well as obstacles to civilians operating in hostile environments.

Seven Recommendations

The changing character of warfare has become especially apparent over the past 13 years of conflict. The National Intelligence Council has projected that irregular and hybrid warfare—including terrorism, subversion, sabotage, insurgency, and criminal activities—will remain prominent features of the future threat environment. Distinctions between regular and irregular forms of warfare could fade as some state-based militaries adopt irregular tactics, as Russia has already done in Ukraine. Intrastate conflict could also become increasingly irregular, and the incidence of hybrid warfare could rise due to the diffusion of lethal weaponry and other factors. This changing character of warfare suggests the need for a theory of success that places greater emphasis on innovative ways to prevent conflicts, shape environments, and preemptively win without major combat operations. Such a theory would recognize the continuum of politics and war and the desirability of achieving sustainable, if not maximalist, outcomes. The following recommendations aim to improve national strategy and adapt the “American way of war” to prevail against future threats.

1 Integrate and educate

Enhance U.S. strategic competence by adopting an integrated civilian-military planning process and improving the strategic education of both the U.S. military and civilian policymakers.

This integrated civilian-military process would provide the expertise needed across the national security community to diagnose conflict situations and to formulate objectives and strategies. Several antecedents are instructive. The Eisenhower-era National Security Council included a board of outside experts. Presidential Decision Directive 56 of 1997 mandated integrated civilian-military planning for complex contingencies. Military doctrine on strategy and planning should be revised to reflect actual practices and, in particular, the dynamic and iterative nature of the process of formulating policy and strategy. Civilians appointed to policy and strategy positions should receive an education in the fundamentals of national security strategy. Finally, national security strategy would benefit from routine practices of identifying assumptions, risks, and costs; testing policy options through interagency gaming and tabletop exercises; and conducting regular assessments and red team reviews.

2 Build tailored organizations

Examine ways for the U.S. military to build effective, tailored organizations that are smaller than brigades yet are equipped with all the needed enablers to respond to a range of contingencies.

The U.S. Army is still fundamentally based on the brigade combat team, while many missions require smaller units that are sufficiently empowered by intelligence and communications technology, airlift, and other enablers. U.S. SOF deploy most often in very small formations that are highly distributed and operate with high degrees of autonomy. U.S. marines are task organizing in small units as well. Further development of such tailored units would increase the adaptability of the U.S. military. Organizational changes along these lines could entail significant institutional reforms, particularly for the U.S. Army.

3 Expand interoperability

Expand the ability of SOF and conventional forces to operate together seamlessly in an environment of irregular and hybrid threats. The recent intensive use of SOF in combination with conventional forces represents a potentially potent new form of land power that could address threats without resorting to large-scale interventions. But several additional steps are needed. New command structures could facilitate SOF-centric and hybrid SOF-conventional operations. Habitual SOF-conventional teaming would deepen the interdependence and familiarity gained in the past decade. Reopening the Military Adviser Training Academy at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, could be a powerful mechanism for (1) developing common procedures for operating in small, distributed, blended formations and (2) building a cadre of trained advisers able to fulfill a national security strategy that places a growing emphasis on partnered operations.

4 Adjust personnel incentives

Create systemic incentives to reward personnel for creativity, risk-taking, and acquisition of multiple specialties. Innovative and multifunctional personnel can make a smaller force more effective. While a shrinking force may not be able to accommodate large numbers of personnel trained in only one specialty, several models exist for multifunctional personnel with more than one specialty. The Foreign Area Officer specialty is one, and the Marine Corps Foreign Security Force Adviser is another. The joint force could adopt the SOF practice of cross-training soldiers in various specialties. Finally, the principle of mission command can be deepened to permit further decentralization and delegation of initiative to improve the ability to respond to rapidly evolving adversary networks.

5 Refine special skills

Preserve and refine joint and service regional expertise, advisory capabilities, and other special skills for irregular warfare and stability operations. Many of the innovations and areas of expertise developed over the past 13 years are being eliminated, raising the prospect of insufficient veteran “seed corn” to regenerate the cadre and knowledge needed in the event of multiple or large-scale stability operations or counterinsurgencies. The same skills are also valuable for shaping and influencing operations, so this cadre will likely be in high demand. To accurately assess the demand, military plans should be surveyed to ensure

development and retention of the needed competencies and specialized force structure.

6 Leverage civilian expertise

Retain civilian expertise as essential for placing due emphasis on the political dimension of war. The most valuable contribution that civilians can make may lie in crafting a political strategy and a unified approach that employs all elements of national power. Civilians may also have greatest impact advising the senior levels of host governments. The emphasis should be on ensuring that the relevant civilian experts are collocated at the key commands and country teams and, when necessary, embedded in tactical formations that can protect them and enable them to perform their duties. Provincial reconstruction teams and SOF teams could both provide such protection.

7 Deepen partnerships

Improve the preparation of U.S. personnel to serve in coalitions and to employ non-U.S. expertise. This preparation should begin by systematically identifying U.S. gaps in knowledge and the potential external resources to fill them. Britain’s long experience in Northern Ireland proved useful to reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Italy’s national police were useful in training Afghan police forces. Australia’s federal police have conducted stability and peacekeeping operations in over a half-dozen countries. The internal transformations now being pursued by the British and Australian forces to help them address contemporary threats can provide valuable lessons for U.S. forces. U.S. personnel should be incentivized to seek immersive educational and operational experiences in non-U.S. environments.

Conclusion

A deliberate effort should be undertaken to remedy the deficits in the “American way of war,” to improve the ability of U.S. personnel to integrate the political dimension of war into military strategy, and to explore new combinations of SOF and conventional forces to meet the security challenges of the future. The executive branch and the U.S. Congress could also consider educational and policy reforms designed to raise civilian competence and capability in national security strategy, the benefits of which would more than compensate for the relatively modest costs. ●

¹ Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA), *Decade of War, Vol. 1: Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations*, June 15, 2012. That analysis relied on 46 studies conducted by the JCOA and a working group convened by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

This brief describes work done in the RAND Arroyo Center documented in *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* by Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwillie, and Raphael S. Cohen, RR-816-A (available at www.rand.org/t/RR816), 2014. To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9814. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2014

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