

# Redesigning Strategy for Irregular War

## Improving Strategic Design for Planners and Policymakers to Help Defeat Groups Like the Islamic State

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WR-1172-OSD

December 2016

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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# Redesigning Strategy

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This working paper derives from an ongoing research effort to improve U.S. strategic design to defeat the Islamic State (IS), a hybrid insurgent-terrorist group that currently holds territory in Iraq and Syria, and has affiliates across the world. The current strategy to degrade, defeat, and destroy the Islamic State, and American strategies to succeed in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, reveal serious flaws in the Western approach to strategic design: ends are unclear, yet it seems hard to envision clean and concise ending to such complex problems. Simple yet substantive modifications to terms and design processes can greatly improve the viability of long-term military campaigns targeting irregular, or hybrid adversaries.

In this working paper I argue that selection of strategy should derive immediately from a policymaker's broader vision for the world and then a region, and only then to defeat a specific group like IS. I offer a simple yet practical interpretation of terms to facilitate this selection. The central argument in this working paper is that the American "ends, ways, and means" approach to military strategy should be modified to address complex irregular warfare problems like the one posed by IS. It is unrealistic to imagine irregular wars ending on clear, finite terms, so American strategist should stop trying to shoehorn irregular war planning into an ill-fitting ends, ways, and means paradigm designed for conventional war. Once ends, ways, and means are modified for irregular war, the U.S. and its allies should consider similar modifications to the strategic design process writ large, with the intent of improving military and governmental effectiveness, reducing costs, and avoiding the kind of political backlash that often undermines long-term military operations.

To focus this argument, I offer changes within the context of the counter-IS strategy. Examples in this working paper center on IS and the Middle East. However, findings and recommendations are intended to have broader relevance.

## Counter-IS military strategy guided by greater considerations

Two aspects of the debate over strategy are relevant to the current discussion: 1) the oft-contested but unclear differences between policy, grand strategy, strategy, and military strategy; and 2) the applicability of ends, ways, and means to irregular war. Having and articulating a clear grand strategic vision is quite useful—arguably, necessary—to selecting an appropriate regional and military strategy that will not only prevent or win wars, but that will also contribute to lasting peace. Within this construct for grand strategic vision and military strategy it is necessary to modify ends, ways, and means to address the hybrid IS challenge.

## *Military strategy, grand strategy, policy, and vision*

The Islamic State is a hybrid insurgent-terrorist group that currently holds territory in Iraq and Syria with hierarchical, semi-conventional ground forces, and conducts networked, cell-based international terror attacks. As of early 2017, the U.S. seeks to *degrade, defeat, and destroy* IS. Yet none of these terms is clearly defined by either the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) or by the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. Several RAND analysts have argued that the current strategy is inadequate, or inappropriate to the task at hand.<sup>1</sup> This is fundamentally a problem of strategic design.

The first problem in selecting a strategy to defeat a group like IS is identifying what is meant by strategy. This is an essential yet elusive task that confounds both scholars and practitioners, and it is particularly challenging to American military officers who must negotiate strategy with civilian policymakers, each of whom views the problem through different personal, educational, and experiential lenses.<sup>2</sup> The world's foremost experts on strategy often present their definitions first by dismissing or challenging others; there is almost no authoritative concurrence. An assessment of many expert descriptions of strategy—including those of Carl Von Clausewitz, Helmuth Von Moltke, Alfred Thayer Mahan, B.H. Liddell Hart, Edward Meade Earle, Colin S. Gray, Hew Strachan, Sir Lawrence Freedman, and John Lewis Gaddis—reveals two broad interpretations of the distinction between grand strategy, strategy, and military strategy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Connable, *Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq*, CT-418, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2014; James Dobbins, “Does ISIL Represent a Threat to the United States?,” *The Hill*, 03 October 2014; Brian Michael Jenkins, “What Could U.S. Boots on the Ground Do in Iraq and Syria?,” *Defense One*, 15 October 2014; Brian Michael Jenkins, “Any review of Syria and Iraq strategy needs realistic reappraisal,” *The Hill*, 28 September 2015; Seth Jones, “Expanding the Caliphate: ISIS’s South Asia Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2015; Andrew Liepman and Phillip Mudd, “War with ISIS: What does victory look like?,” *CNN.com*, 25 September 2014; Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Even within the comparatively uniform U.S. military there are diverse and varying opinions on the meanings of strategy and grand strategy, and also widely varying levels of understanding and expertise.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these authors did not differentiate between strategy and grand strategy. Definitions of grand strategy appeared more often after World War Two than before. Sources for these definitions and explanations include, but are not limited to: J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., “A Survey of the Theory of Strategy,” in: J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., *The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues, Volume I: Theory of War and Strategy*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010, pp. 13-43; Fournoy, Michele A., and Shawn Brimley (eds.), *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2008; Cerami, Joseph R., and James F. Holcomb, Jr., (eds.), *U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2001; Clausewitz, Carl Von, and Michael Howard, Peter Paret (eds. and trs.), *On War*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976; Davis, William J., “The End of End State-Strategic Planning Process for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *InterAgency Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2015, pp. 16-23; Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to Hitler*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943; Freedman, Lawrence, *Strategy: A History*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015; Gaddis, John Lewis, “What is Grand Strategy?,” speech, Duke University, 26 February 2009; Gray, Colin S., *Modern Strategy*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999; Gray, Colin S., “Why Strategy is Difficult,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 1999, pp. 6-12; Gray, Colin S., *Schools for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conflict*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009; Gray, Colin S., “War—Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity,” *Parameters*, Summer 2010, pp. 5-13; Liddell Hart, B.H., *Strategy*, New York, NY: Meridian, 1991 (1967); Lykke,

For some, strategy is almost solely a practical matter of determining objectives and assigning ways and means to obtain them; strategy is, in this interpretation, a wide-field view of practical and operational military art and science.<sup>4</sup> For these same experts, grand strategy is foremost a means of directly supporting practical military strategy with non-military assets like economic resources or strategic communication. It is constituted of broader political, economic, and military plans and efforts centered on immediate, localized, and practical matters of winning wars and obtaining peace. Liddell Hart describes *strategy* as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy,” while *grand strategy* should “calculate and develop the economic resources and manpower [to] sustain the fighting services,” and apply other elements of national power against the practical military challenge.<sup>5</sup> This is a dominant view in the historic literature derived mostly from conventional warfare cases like the Napoleonic and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s World Wars. For those who acknowledge grand strategy, it is often viewed as a regional or global context within which targeted military strategies can be applied; it is military strategy one level removed and then expanded.

For others, grand strategy is, or also consists of a vision of the world that is primarily political and not *necessarily* tied to a specific set of military strategies. It therefore serves as an articulation of a policymaker’s approach to dealing with *all* security problems. It is general rather than specific, and it serves as a lens through which all security problems are viewed, interpreted, and then addressed. Hew Strachan describes this as *policy*, distinct from any definition of the term strategy.<sup>6</sup> Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross describe grand strategy as an assessment of U.S. interests and objectives, responses to that assessment, and *principles* that should guide the development of U.S. policy and strategy.<sup>7</sup> In this definition, grand strategy sits above policy and strategy.

The U.S. Army has refined a model by strategist Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., to educate its students. In this model in Figure 1, some combination of “national interests”—policies—and “national security strategy”—a description of how policy will be achieved—might constitute a grand strategy:

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Arthur F., “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review*, vol. 69, no. 5, 1989, pp. 2-8; Posen, Barry R., and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1996, pp. 5-53; Liddell Hart, Don M., *The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 15 March 1995; Strachan, Hew, “The lost meaning of strategy,” *Survival*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2005, pp. 33-54; Strachan, Hew, “Making strategy: Civil-military relations after Iraq,” *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2006, pp. 59-82; Strachan, Hew, “Strategy and the Limitation of War,” *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2008, pp. 31-54; and Strachan, Hew, “Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War,” *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2010, pp. 157-182.

<sup>4</sup> This appears to be Colin S. Gray’s interpretation: “By strategy I mean the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy.” Gray, 1999, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Liddell Hart, 1991 (1967), pp. 320-322.

<sup>6</sup> Strachan, 2005, pp. 33-35.

<sup>7</sup> Posen and Ross, 1996, p. 3.

**Figure 1. The Arthur Lykke Model “Comprehensiveness of Strategy”**



Source: Yarger, 2010a, p. 48.

For the Army, this model generated three “grand strategic objectives,” or core American interests: 1) preserve American security; 2) bolster American economic prosperity; and 3) promote American values.<sup>8</sup> These broad interests are boiled down into specific objectives like preventing nuclear attacks, increasing gross domestic product (GDP), and strengthening global democratic institutions. Military strategies, like the one against IS, flow from and reside within grand strategy. Shawn Brimley and Michele A. Flournoy offer another summary of grand strategy as vision:<sup>9</sup>

Grand strategy is thus much closer to a vision statement...than a blueprint or action plan for short-term policy priorities...A real effort at developing a grand strategy requires thinking about the kind of world that is most conducive to American interests and how to set a course that, over several decades and multiple administrations, stands a good chance of helping to bring such a world about.

The idea of linking grand strategic vision to a more focused, practical military strategy is enshrined in U.S. law and, albeit inconsistently, in practice by the U.S. Government. U.S. Public Law 99-433 (*Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986*) requires the president to report annually to Congress, describing “The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to [national security],” and then, “The proposed

<sup>8</sup> Yarger, H. Richard, “Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the U.S. Army War College Strategy Model,” in: J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., *The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues, Volume I: Theory of War and Strategy*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 2010, pp. 45-51, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Flournoy and Brimley, 2008.



short-term and long-term uses of the political economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States [to achieve these objectives].”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) should describe and link a grand strategic vision to specific strategies designed to achieve objectives. David Thaler of RAND describes the “national goals” in the NSS—equated to grand strategy or vision—as “statements of the nation’s most fundamental values.”<sup>11</sup>

This working paper accepts the definition of grand strategy as a vision of global challenges and a broad, generalizable approach to solving those challenges. Policy derives from grand strategy, and guides regional strategy. Regional strategy is derived from grand strategy and policy, and serves to link broad concepts to practical challenges.<sup>12</sup> Military strategies sit within regional strategies: they are targeted against specific, local problems like IS and can be linked to transnational problems. Later I recommend changing the term *military strategy* to *situational strategy* to merge military and non-military activities into a unified effort.

While there are no uncontested interpretations of these definitions, they are grounded in current practice through a layered range of official documents: the NSS provides something akin to a grand strategy (with elements of regional and military strategies); the Department of Defense (DoD) provides a National Military Strategy, the DoD and the Department of State (DoS) provide regional strategies, and combatant commands like the U.S. Central Command provide theater (regional) plans and specific military strategies in the form of campaign plans to help achieve military objectives.<sup>13</sup> In the simple model in Figure 1, an effective military strategy stems from clear and logical regional strategy, which stems from clear and logical grand strategy, which in turn accurately reflects policymakers’ assessment of global challenges, risks, and desired conditions. Therefore, grand strategic considerations are essential to selecting an appropriate and effective military strategy to defeat IS.

Within this three-part hierarchy the U.S. Government *seeks to employ* the concept of ends, ways, and means to articulate and execute strategies. I cannot say it employs this concept, since in practice—particularly in irregular wars—it is often alluded to but not explicitly or effectively used. Nonetheless, examining the ends, ways, and means approach is necessary since it is the de facto standard for U.S. policy.

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Congress, *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986*, Public Law 99-433, 01 October 1986, Section 104, 2-b-1 through 2-b-3.

<sup>11</sup> Thaler, David E., *Strategies to Tasks: A Framework for Linking Means and Ends*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> This would also include practical trans-regional challenges like international crime, weapons of mass destruction, or refugees.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 5-0, 2011, p. xii, describes the NSS as “purposefully general in content.” The U.S. Central Command campaign plan to defeat IS is classified. U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC: 2011.

## *American military strategic planning: ends, ways, and means*

Current American government approaches to developing military strategies are broadly derived from the writings of Prussian military expert Carl Von Clausewitz.<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz addresses irregular war, or wars in which at least one side does not officially represent a state, but he focuses on the strategy of conventional wars fought between nation-states.<sup>15</sup> The conduct of conventional wars varies considerably, but in the modern era they most often consist of uniformed military personnel killing each other with a broad array of weapons systems from airplanes to tanks to machine guns. Conventional war is complex, often involving all elements of national power: military, diplomatic, economic, and informational. While Clausewitz envisions a clear connection between military action and finite political ends in his concept of absolute, or ideal war, most conventional wars do not end in finite political solutions. They more closely represent Clausewitz's real war, where neat theories are shattered by the friction and fog of war.

The violence and timelines of conventional wars are deceptively finite: the physical combat at the center of both World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War had fairly clear beginnings and endings, but the military role in each conflict continued long after the fighting. In each of these conflicts the political solutions were messy and attenuated.<sup>16</sup> Conventional wars might or might not be amenable to the Clausewitzian ends, ways, and means approach that is now endemic to American strategic theory and planning; I argue below that they most likely are not.<sup>17</sup> Whether they are or are not, understanding the logical clarity of ends, ways, and means approach for conventional war is necessary to understanding why it is not useful for defeating a group like IS without modification.

Ends, or end states, refers to the ultimate objectives of the war. In a broad interpretation of Clausewitzian theory, ends are typically political in nature: they are the objectives of the policymakers who decided to attack or who were forced to defend.<sup>18</sup> Ways are the methods or

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<sup>14</sup> Any discussion of Clausewitz runs the risk of spiraling into endless theoretical or semantic debate; military officers are immersed in his writings and often disagree over fine points or application. This section is neither a criticism nor an endorsement of Clausewitzian theory. The purpose here is simply to describe the Americanized concepts of strategy, and specifically ends, ways, and means, in order to suggest a practical modification to defeat IS.

<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz, Howard, and Paret, 1976.

<sup>16</sup> It is true that the failure of political compromise at the ends of World War One contributed to the start of World War Two (WWII), just as the treaties that ended WWII led to the Cold War, and the political denouement of the 1967 war fed the 1973 war and subsequent violence, and the muddled end to the Persian Gulf War contributed to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, all of these wars ended with the physical and moral defeat of one side, the end of overt violence between the competing states, the redistribution of territory, and (in various forms) more or less genuine declarations of the end of hostilities.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that the ends, ways, and means approach was explicitly used for any or all of these wars. Instead, these wars provide examples within which the ends, ways, and means approach might be practical.

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, Howard, and Paret, 1976, p. 88.



courses of action to be taken to achieve the ends. Means are the tools that will be used to undertake the ways. Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., poses this as a stylized (non-mathematical) equation:<sup>19</sup>

$$\textit{Strategy}=\textit{Ends}+\textit{Ways}+\textit{Means}$$

For each major joint operation like the one to defeat IS, U.S. doctrine seeks to negotiate with the president and the Secretary of Defense a *national strategic end state*, a *military end state*, and *termination criteria* that clearly describe what end is desired and what achieving that end requires.<sup>20</sup> Here the DoD explains these terms and their relevance to strategic planning, italicized emphasis added.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the President’s strategic objectives that compose a desired *national strategic end state*, the supported [combatant commander] can develop and propose *termination criteria*—the specified conditions approved by the President or [Secretary of Defense] that must be met before a joint operation can be concluded. These *termination criteria* help define the desired *military end state*, which normally represents a period in time or set of conditions beyond which the President does not require the military instrument of national power as the primary means to achieve remaining national objectives.

In American strategic planning, derived from Clausewitz’s ideal war, a successful strategy requires: 1) establishing a national strategic end state; then 2) selecting termination criteria; then 3) using these criteria to define the military end state that allows for distinct military operations; then 4) selecting the ways to achieve that end state; and then 4) assigning means to be applied in a neat, linear path. Strategy is most effective when the people employing the means understand the ends, and least effective when they cannot see a clear linkage between their actions and a strategic purpose.<sup>22</sup> In the ideal case, a military strategy designed to apply ways and means to achieve clear ends is nested within rhetorically and logically consistent regional and grand strategies, and both of these help to contextualize the campaign and feed it with critical non-military support.

In order to compartmentalize and refine this complex process, the U.S. military designs and applies *campaigns*. DoD describes a campaign as, “a series of related military operations aimed at accomplishing a military strategic or operational objective within a given time and space.” Campaign plans are typically lengthy, classified documents packed with acronyms and military

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<sup>19</sup> Lykke, 1989, p. 2. Lykke’s interpretation matters since the U.S. Army War College predicates its strategy-oriented educational instruction on his writings. The War College educates many of the flag officers from all services who go on to serve as senior leaders in combatant commands and the Department of Defense.

<sup>20</sup> These are all described in U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operation Planning*, 2011, but not clearly.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0, Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011, p. I-8.

<sup>22</sup> This is a central contention of U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operation Planning*, 2011. Many case examples support this argument. For example, in *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2006), Robert K. Brigham provides evidence that the lack of a clear national Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) strategy undermined the morale and fighting power of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

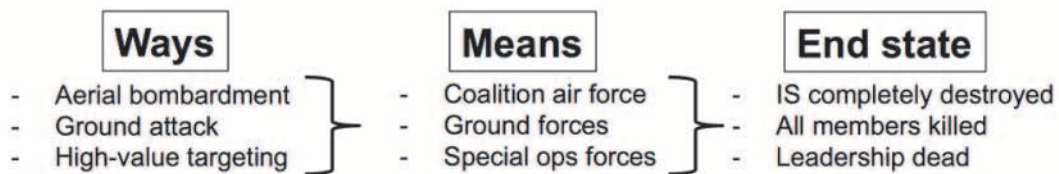
minutia. They often contain several operational objectives—sometimes called *intermediate objectives*—that help to sequence military operations towards a military strategic end; it is very rare for a campaign to seek immediate strategic success. In essence, campaigns are the military parts of wars.

To achieve the military strategic end state, the U.S. combatant command (in the case of IS, USCENTCOM) would develop a military operational campaign designed to apply the ways and means in sequence, through a series of operational objectives, to achieve terminating criteria. If defeating IS were simply a matter of physical destruction and killing—*it is not*—then a counter-IS military strategy *might* look like:<sup>23</sup>

**Termination Criteria:** *all equipment destroyed, all members are killed, all leadership dead*  
**Ways:** *aerial bombing, ground attack, targeting of high-value individuals*  
**Means:** *coalition air force, Iraqi and moderate Syrian ground forces, special operations forces*

Figure 2 depicts this in a simple flow chart, with ways applying means to achieve a clearly defined and described end state with termination criteria.

**Figure 2. Simplified ends, ways, and means of a notional counter-IS military strategy**



Source: RAND PR-2574-OSD

Designing a campaign plan to apply these ways and means in sequence to get to an end state might involve achieving the operational objectives of piecemeal destruction of IS forces. In Figure 3, the military campaign sets three of these intermediate points, designed to help guide tactical commanders, assign resources, and give opportunities for reassessment along the path to end state.

<sup>23</sup> This is a notional, highly simplified, and inapplicable example used solely for the purpose of explaining the concept of ends, ways, and means.

Figure 3. Notional counter-IS military campaign with operational objectives



Unfortunately, the simplicity of the military strategy in Figure 3 is illusory. While this does represent the basic approach to achieving military end states, no national security challenge offers such clear, linear solutions. In practice military campaigns are incredibly complex, often incorporating many lines of effort to achieve a range of intermediate objectives. Clausewitz argues that in real war, friction, uncertainty, and complexity make this kind of neat and concise ideal war planning unrealistic. Clausewitzian ideal war should not serve as a basis for planning in the real world.<sup>24</sup> This linear, self-contained approach is particularly inadequate to address the local, regional, and global complexities inherent in the counter-IS problem. Moreover, every military campaign must be nested within some kind of broader regional or global strategy, which in turn adds layers of resources but also layers of complexity. Devising any kind of military strategy is challenging, but devising a military strategy against a hybrid organization like IS is particularly so.

Defeating IS presents what the U.S. Army calls an “ill-structured” problem. As the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) argues in its official examination of campaign design, end states for ill-structured problems are rarely if ever so clearly defined and achievable. Borrowing from Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber’s proposition for *wicked problems*, TRADOC argues that when seeking to develop a strategy against groups like IS, “professionals will disagree about how to solve [the problem], what should be the end state, and whether the desired end state is even achievable.”<sup>25</sup> This has proven true in the majority of irregular campaigns the U.S. has undertaken, including Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Choosing ways and means to succeed in these campaigns proved exceptionally difficult in great part because the

<sup>24</sup> There are many competing interpretations of the functional differences Clausewitz intended between ideal war, or absolute war, and real war (amongst other terms). Yet real war is self-defining: it is war in all its messy complexity, as it exists in the real world. Therefore, realistic strategy should stem from an appreciation for real war, not ideal war. Some may argue that Clausewitz acknowledged real war while prescribing strategies for ideal war; I neither claim nor intend to solve Clausewitzian debate in this working paper. Instead, this stands as my interpretation and argument, derived from a reading of *On War* and many interpretations of *On War*. For an expert analysis of these terms, see Christopher Bassford, “Clausewitz’s Categories of War and the Supersession of ‘Absolute War’,” *Clausewitz.com*, August 2016. For a simpler yet compelling interpretation, see Iris Malone, “‘Clause-whaaaaa:’ A Cheat Sheet to Clausewitz’s ‘On War’,” frequently asked questions list, Stanford University. As of 03 January 2016: <http://web.stanford.edu/~imalone/Teaching/pols114/ClausewitzOnWarCheatSheet.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Army, *Commander’s Appreciation and Campaign Design*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: Army Capabilities Integration Center, 28 January 2008, p. 9. Also see: Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, 1973, pp. 155-169.

desired ends were diffuse, shifting, and often hotly contested across and within the allied coalitions engaged in the fight. Countering IS is Clausewitz's ideal war brought to reality.

This report contends that IS presents an ill-structured problem that has stymied current planning. It contends that the official statements about the counter-IS campaign (see the following section) are inadequate to achieve success. This in turn suggests a modification to the way the U.S. military both plans for and publicly represents the generalized military strategy and campaign approach depicted in Figure 3. Shortcomings in the current counter-IS approach provide suitable jumping off point for these recommendations.

## Ending end states and elevating the intermediate objective

This section builds from the above analysis to recommend four changes to the standard U.S. strategic design model. These changes are intended to help align a new counter-IS strategy to the practical realities inherent in combatting a large, hybrid insurgent-terrorist organization. These four recommendations are interrelated and complementary. First, termination criteria should be changed to *transition criteria*. Second, end states should be changed to *envisioned state*. Third, regional strategy—or as appropriate, regionally focused national strategy—should employ conditions-based, phased intermediate objectives to help manage political expectations, adapt to changing conditions, and to achieve genuine conditions-based strategic plans. And fourth, *national strategy* and *military strategy* should be combined and changed to *situational strategy*, or simply *strategy*, to acknowledge the joint, combined, and interagency planning requirements for, and the inherent political nature of all military operations.

### *Terminating, transitioning, ending, and envisioning*

If war is a continuation of politics by other means, and if political engagement is a constant condition that extends well beyond the termination of specific military actions, and if real war is not amenable to the neat constructs of ideal war, then the term *end state* is not appropriate for strategic design. This assertion seeks to realign the interpretation of Clausewitzian theory to reality, rather than to propose a heretical counter-Clausewitzian paradigm shift. Experts on strategy have made similar assertions. For example, in June 2016 Eliot A. Cohen stated that end states are not practical constructs in war.<sup>26</sup> William J. Davis sought a reexamination of the term in his 2015 article, “The End of End State: Strategic Planning for the 21st Century.”<sup>27</sup> Davis argues, “if war is merely the continuation of policy, then should not it and its execution also be equally susceptible to the ever changing and ambiguous character of a political environment?...Joint doctrine must embrace the ambiguity inherent in the strategic and

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<sup>26</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, statement at the Royal United Services Institute Land Warfare Conference, London, UK, 28 June 2016. These on the record remarks were recorded by the lead author of the present report, who was in attendance.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, 2015.

operational levels of war...<sup>28</sup> This problem is compounded in irregular wars like the one designed to counter IS, which are inherently ill-structured and not amenable to clear, near-term, or even finite ends. Here former French Army Captain Jean Pouget recalls his effort to help General Henri E. Navarre describe end states in the war to preserve French control of what was then Indochina:<sup>29</sup>

When General Navarre arrived [in 1953], he opened a file right away, and on that file I wrote “war goals.” We looked for what to tell the troops. Well, until the end this file remained practically empty. We never had expressed concretely our war goal.

This inability to successfully design, explain, and achieve end states in irregular war is endemic and universal. Failure to adequately design, explain, and sustain a planned end state in the Vietnam War contributed to Caspar W. Weinberger’s six influential recommendations for the use of military force.<sup>30</sup> Weinberger stated that before committing force “we should have clearly defined political and military objectives...” and that “the need for well-defined objectives and a consistent strategy is still essential.”<sup>31</sup> This was a logical reaction to the miasma of Vietnam, but it fails to address situations in which U.S. national interests are at stake (a prerequisite for the use of military force under the Weinberger doctrine) *and* the situation defies clear end state valuation, demanding a dynamic rather than consistent strategy. Arguably this is true of end states in most, if not all irregular wars, and *also* for conventional war.

Weinberger’s points have great merit in theory: *end state* can have a practical value for the military. In theory, it provides a stopping point for military involvement and a signaling point for withdrawal. But, as I argued above, in practice the ends of wars do not signal the end of the military’s role. For example, the U.S. retained a sizeable military presence in the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Japan, Germany, South Korea, Kosovo, Kuwait, and other places long after the end of the hostilities that first caused the military to deploy.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. military often seeks what Gideon Rose calls a “clear-division-of-labor” approach to war, in which the military’s role ends when the last shot is fired on the field of battle. But Rose warns that this

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<sup>28</sup> Davis, 2015, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Pouget, Jean, interview statement, in “Vietnam: A Television History, Episode 1,” Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS), 1983. As of 30 June 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqKi-SyRA7I&list=PL3H6z037pboEnYaw4zTtJAKg3nGXL6yQa>

<sup>30</sup> Weinberger delivered these points in a speech at the National Press Club in 1984, generating the informal Weinberger Doctrine. Later, Colin L. Powell re-articulated these points, which became the more well-known but also informally named Powell Doctrine. See Weinberger, 1984. For a contextual examination of the “Weinberger-Powell Doctrine” see: Kenneth J. Campbell, “Once Burned, Twice Cautious: Explaining the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine,” *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1998, pp. 357-374.

<sup>31</sup> Weinberger, Caspar W., “The Uses of Military Power,” speech delivered at the National Press Club, Washington DC, 28 November 1984.

<sup>32</sup> These continuing deployments resulted from, in order: WWII; the Korean War; the intervention in Kosovo; and the Persian Gulf War.

approach is inherently flawed, and that “Americans have fared on average no better than others in these situations, and sometimes worse. The country’s leaders have rarely if ever closed out military conflicts smoothly and effectively.”<sup>33</sup> War prosecution is always a hybrid of political and military activities, and war endings are typically messy, drawn out, and often as uncertain as war prosecution.<sup>34</sup>

Davis offers a minor but important modification to current ends, ways, and means model to address this reality. Instead of “termination criteria” he suggests “changeover criteria,” indicating the transition from one phase of a military operation to another (e.g. combat to long-term advising), or a handover from the military to police or civilian authorities who will almost certainly continue operations of some kind in the wake of the fighting.<sup>35</sup> This paper recommends the use of *transition criteria*, which synchronizes with current use of the term *transition* in U.S. counterinsurgency literature.<sup>36</sup> Realistic military planning would account for several phased transition points to set expectations for, and to help design a campaign that matches the tailing nature of most wars.<sup>37</sup>

In a further nod to the ambiguous nature of war termination, Davis suggests, “enduring state” instead of “strategic end state.”<sup>38</sup> The use of *longer term* in the 2005 National Strategy for Victory in Iraq is generally analogous.<sup>39</sup> I recommend replacing end state with *envisioned state*. An envisioned state offers a distant goal that provides a basis for planning, but that might not be reached for years, or decades, or perhaps ever. It is the ideal condition sought within the regional strategy, not a fixed point tied to a finite military campaign. This may appear to be a radical suggestion. Modifying the term end state would seem to upend, or perhaps even obviate the U.S. model for strategic design. But the recommended change in terminology is necessary, and particularly so for ill-structured problems. This simple change can have real, positive impact on counter-IS strategic design by allowing for the development of more thoughtful and realistic military campaigns.

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<sup>33</sup> Rose, Gideon, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010, pp. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> See: Ikle, Fred Charles, *Every War Must End*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1971 (2005); Connable, Ben, and Martin Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, MG-965, Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2010; and Rose, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, 2015, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Transition is most commonly used to describe the final phase of a counterinsurgency campaign. There are many variations of the U.S. counterinsurgency model, but they general proceed in order from shape, to clear, hold, build, and then transition. Typically transition refers to the transfer of control and authority from U.S. and coalition forces to the host nation’s security forces.

<sup>37</sup> For an examination of the tailing nature of war termination, see Connable and Libicki, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, 2015, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, Washington, DC: The White House, November 2005.



Next, I recommend replacing national strategy and military strategy with a combined term like *situational strategy*, or just *strategy*. This term would acknowledge that a single, unified joint and interagency strategy is necessary to address specific problems like IS, or stability in Iraq and Syria. Flattening the strategic planning paradigm both acknowledges the practical inability to separate military from non-military strategic activity, and it suggests a forcing function to encourage what is often referred to as a whole of government approach to international security challenges. Table 1 presents the existing terms alongside the recommended new terms.

**Table 1. Recommended changes in strategic planning terminology**

Existing term	Recommended term
Termination criteria	Transition criteria
End state	Enduring state
National & Military Strategy	Situational Strategy (or just <i>Strategy</i> )

Iraq is perhaps the best case to explain and reinforce these recommendations, and specifically the use of enduring state instead of end state. Iraq is the focal point for the current fight against IS, and U.S. has twice attempted to end the war in Iraq and failed in both attempts. Two RAND reports—*Operation Iraqi Freedom: Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, and *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*—describe how the pressure to achieve finite end states and withdraw U.S. military forces led to hurried planning, untimely withdrawals, and a failure to accurately assess or report the social, security, and political conditions that might require continued U.S. military presence.<sup>40</sup> As President George W. Bush presented a “mission accomplished” sign and declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq in 2003, the military was already in the process of withdrawing its forces. It reversed this withdrawal when the insurgency exploded in early 2004, and then again in 2006 after a planned late 2005 withdrawal went awry.<sup>41</sup> In 2011 President Obama stated, “[T]he rest of our troops in Iraq will come home by the end of the year... That is how America’s military efforts in Iraq will end.”<sup>42</sup> Yet two years later, the U.S. began redeploying thousands of

<sup>40</sup> Walter L. Perry, Richard E. Darilek, Laurinda L. Rohn, Jerry M. Sollinger (eds.), *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015; and Rick Brennan, Jr., Charles P. Ries, Larry Hanauer, Ben Connable, Terrence K. Kelly, Michael J. McNerney, Stephanie Young, Jason H. Campbell, and K. Scott McMahon, *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of the United States Forces-Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> See: CNN, “Defense official: Rumsfeld given Iraq withdrawal plan,” *CNN.com*, 18 November 2005; and McWilliams, Timothy S., and Kurtis P. Wheeler, eds., *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume I, American Perspectives: U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009*, Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Obama, Barack H., “Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq,” transcript, The White House, 21 October 2011.

military personnel to Iraq to stabilize what remained of the crumbling state, and to defeat, degrade, or destroy IS.

In Iraq from 2003-2011, and many other cases, the use of the term end state, and the pressure to design and declare end states, has exacerbated the inherent difficulties western, democratic policymakers have in planning and managing expectations for irregular wars.<sup>43</sup> Previous RAND research showed that insurgencies last approximately ten years, and that full success often takes another six years to achieve. Complex insurgencies last even longer, and conditions in insurgent warfare are highly dynamic.<sup>44</sup> IS is one of the most complex and dynamic insurgencies the U.S. has ever faced. While these analyses are not predictive, they do suggest the kind of timelines for the IS campaign already envisioned by some U.S. military leaders: at least 10-20 years.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it would be more useful to *envision* a long-term state rather than to declare a fixed path towards an end that most likely cannot and will not be achieved.

One does not have to look far for a suitable example of an envisioned state for the counter-IS strategy. In early 2016, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry issued *Section 1222 Report: Strategy for the Middle East and to Counter Violent Extremism*.<sup>46</sup> Paragraph two of this report provides an almost perfect example of an *envisioned state*. An envisioned state provides a guiding concept for military strategy that derives immediately from grand strategy and regional strategy. All efforts—military, economic, diplomatic, and informational—seek to move the situation closer to the envisioned state, but without declaring a fixed end condition or timeline. The focus of military and national effort will be on achieving more modest, phased, and flexible intermediate objectives that will reduce the kinds of political pressures that so often undermine irregular warfare campaigns. At some point the U.S. might withdraw if it moves the situation sufficiently close to the envisioned state, or, as it has in so many previous campaigns, it might remain indefinitely to ensure the steep costs of military action are not lost in a hasty withdrawal made under intense political pressure. Removing the burdens imposed by Weinberger, and Powell will allow policymakers to consider these decisions more thoughtfully and methodically than allowable in the current paradigm.

### *Elevating intermediate objectives and integrating with envisioned states*

Building and maintaining popular support for the counter-IS campaign requires clearly articulating this shift in focus from end states to intermediate objectives and an enduring state. The military uses intermediate objectives to help phase campaigns towards end states. While this

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<sup>43</sup> Examples of these challenges are described in Connable and Libicki, 2010, and Connable, Ben, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Connable and Libicki, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Mehta, Aaron, “Odierno: ISIS Fight Will Last ‘10 to 20 Years,’” *Defense News*, 17 July 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Carter, Ashton B., and John F. Kerry, *Section 1222 Report: Strategy for the Middle East and to Counter Violent Extremism*, report to the U.S. Congress, issued in 2016 (undated).

may give the military a good understanding of the progressive challenges and timelines of a counterinsurgent, counterterror campaign, these intermediate steps are invisible to most of the policy community and to the public. This lack of intermediate phasing in strategic language draws the end state inexorably towards the public's near-term vision. It is both the first and last thing to be accomplished, so failure to achieve end state quickly and neatly generates confusion and frustration. As a result, campaigns become unglued, political will falters, and ill-considered withdrawals are undertaken in undesirable circumstances. Describing military, regional, and national strategy in terms of phases will help alleviate this confusion and better align ways and means with the envisioned state.

Figure 3, above, showed how military campaigns use intermediate objectives to help phase operations towards ends. Figures 4 and 5, below, show how an envisioned state might be established, and how elevating intermediate phasing into the realm of strategy can help set reasonable expectations, allow for adaptability in execution, and to realize the value of an *envisioned state*. In Figure 4, policymakers design a regional strategy derived from grand strategic understanding of the global situation, risks, and desired global conditions. Political-military strategies for specific situation, like the counter-IS fight, are then derived from the grand and regional strategies. The term *situational strategy* replaces *military strategy* to force the planning conditions that the military describes in its own doctrine: it should be a joint and interagency effort tightly interwoven with political objectives. From there, the military works with the interagency to design intermediate objectives. In Figure 5, policymakers articulate the strategy in terms of near- and mid-term objectives and an envisioned state, and the political-military team (DoD, DoS, etc.) designs a flexible ways and means driven campaign focused on the intermediate objectives but with the envisioned state guiding its planning.

Figure 4. Notional strategic design process

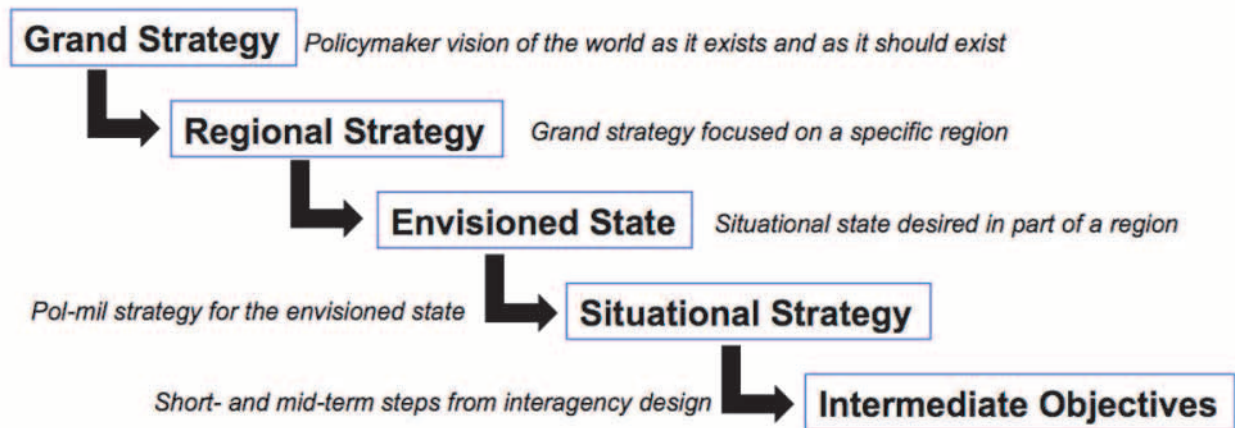


Figure 5. Notional counter-IS situational strategy with intermediate steps and envisioned state



Near- and mid-term objectives would look something like those in the 2005 Iraq strategy, but with more finite, conditions-based clarity. They would provide phased, concrete objectives that would help the political-military team transition the campaign from combat to non-combat, and then hopefully to something akin to the envisioned state. If conditions improve the campaign can advance, but if conditions regress the campaign phases and objectives can be reset. Any tinkering with promised objectives will alienate some parts of the public, but probably no more so than under the current end state approach.

## Summary

This working paper was completed in early January 2017, approximately two weeks before the changeover in U.S. presidential administrations. The new administration will have an opportunity to conduct a bottom-up review of the counter-IS campaign, and to design a new strategy. This new strategy will be most effective if it acknowledges the complexities of real war without succumbing to them: much can be accomplished with a thoughtful long-term strategy anchored in a grand strategic vision. Past failures to accomplish unrealistic, or inappropriately assigned military campaign objectives masquerading as strategy should not deter future administrations from seeking to stabilize critical regions like the Middle East. Ideally the U.S. policy community will reconsider the legacy of the Weinberger-Powell doctrines, align strategic

design with reality, and improve U.S. performance in war and in the inevitable, unending aftermaths it will sew.

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