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## Comments

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U.S. Army soldiers discuss the plan of movement for a patrol through Petawa Village, Parwan Province, Afghanistan, 13 June 2014.

(U.S. Army photo by Cpl. George Huley)

# War as Political Work

## Using Social Science for Strategic Success

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*This article is based on a report originally written for the Army Research Institute's 2011 Strategic Thinking Initiative Conference.*

War is not just about defeating the enemy. War is about creating social and political order when past systems of order have disintegrated or been broken down intentionally by the use of military force. Good military strategy demands that the role of enemy forces be considered within the context of the larger social and political order, and its failure. Sound operational planning depends on this.

Defeating an enemy force is not the strategic aim of any war. The strategic aim should be to recreate a stable order that can be sustained without major ongoing military participation from the battlefield victor. Defeating enemies militarily is merely the prerequisite to strategic victory, not its conclusion. Real war, of course, is complicated because the end of a war is not the end of the strategic task. The way in which battlefield "victories" are achieved can quickly doom the probabilities for strategic success. Vietnam and Iraq are only two examples of this; military history is littered with others.

Military victory merely sets the conditions for the transformative social and political order that come after the guns go quiet. For better or worse, the job of winning the victory always falls to the military. There are not, nor have there ever been, State Department divisions parachuting in to do the “political” work of securing the victory. This is a false dichotomy. War is political work. Militaries—armies especially—are tools used to do the fundamental work of politics. They use force to determine which side gets to decide the key questions of social and political order when the normal structures for determining order have ceased to work.

War demands a qualitative mindset because war is a social phenomenon. Military commanders need to understand politics in a deep and systematic way if they are to ensure military force is a successful strategic tool. They need to think strategically about the ultimate aims the force under their control will support. The way to do this is to begin to think in context, to put the role of force in context with the other variables on the battlefield. To think in context systematically, commanders need to buttress their ability to think qualitatively and use the methods of social science to approach military questions.

Strategic thinking involves evaluating “political, economic, psychological, and military forces [i.e., influences]” to ensure military operations support national policies.<sup>1</sup> These types of “forces” have a common characteristic: they do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis. Army professionals who wish to practice strategic thinking will need to adopt a qualitative approach to evaluating such factors. This is more easily said than done because qualitative analysis is unnatural to Army culture.

The study of political science, economics, psychology, and military science requires grounding in qualitative social science methodology. While this methodology is essential to effective strategic thinking, it is contrary to the Army’s dominant professional culture. Army culture prefers a techno-scientific, quantitative, and predictive approach based on mathematical-type analysis; that approach cannot provide an accurate understanding of strategic issues, let alone predict outcomes of military operations with anything close to certainty.

Contemporary social science studies social phenomena in terms of interdependent—rather than independent and dependent—variables. For phenomena that

are made up of interdependent variables—phenomena such as war—establishing clear cause-and-effect theories is frustrating even for social scientists accustomed to that type of research. In fact, interdependent variables make predictions of the hard-science type impossible. This does not mean, however, that qualitative approaches should be dismissed. Rather, understanding the value and limitations of qualitative methods is crucial for a profession tasked with using force to create qualitative sociopolitical end states.

## What is the Problem?

Quantitative approaches work best when researchers can isolate individual problems and when relationships are hierarchical. A complex military problem, such as “how do we invade Region X and establish security?” provides a simplified example. The problem-solving process typically used is quantitative and predictive. It starts with a defined highest-order problem (invading Region X and establishing security) and breaks it down into smaller problems such as—

- ◆ How would we get there?
- ◆ How long would a trip by boat or plane take?
- ◆ How many weapons and supplies would we need?
- ◆ What kind of weapons and supplies would we need?

A reductive approach is then used along with the analytical tools of mathematics and statistics in a repeating process until a series of answers can be summed together to solve the original problem.

Strategic problems, on the other hand, are not really “problems” at all; they are *metaproblems*. Strategic questions ask about intent and values; they are questions about choosing an explanatory framework to use when addressing problems of application. Strategic problems have only qualitative answers. Rather than ask, “How do we invade Region X,” a strategic question seeks to understand why or whether invading Region X would indeed help achieve larger goals and whether its negative ripple effects over time might outweigh its short-term benefits. Strategic questions are first-order questions:

- ◆ Should we invade Region X, considering all the potential consequences?
- ◆ What would we expect an invasion to achieve?
- ◆ In what other ways could we achieve our goals (e.g., such as by bombing alone)?
- ◆ Should we also seek the dissolution of the region’s monarchy or ruling system?<sup>2</sup>



These are not the types of questions any military organization encourages commanders and staffs to ask (publically, at least). Instead, most military organizations proceed on the assumption that civilian policymakers already will have connected the dots between strategic intent and military capability. History shows repeatedly how wrong such assumptions can be. Still, such questions are fundamental to planning because they probe strategic aim: What change in the military and political context would a series of military operations ultimately achieve? Put another way, strategic questions look for answers to similar metaquestions: What is the qualitative change in conditions (e.g., destruction of the war-making capability of Region X) that war plans should achieve, and how well would those changed conditions support national strategic goals? This is especially important for military leaders to ask when national goals seem unclear or clearly in excess of what military force can do at acceptable cost in time, blood, and money.

## What is a Qualitative Approach?

Qualitative approaches can be understood by their function and their form. First, the function of qualitative research is to interpret *context*—the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs.<sup>3</sup> To interpret context means to understand conditions within a cohesive whole. Any categorization of conditions—including any statistical analysis, if appropriate—would be based on their relationship to the whole. Second, the basic form of all qualitative research is the gathering or developing of what could be called “texts”—referring to spoken and written language—because reading and conducting interviews are the primary means of obtaining data and information. Qualitative researchers gather existing texts from archives, memoirs, and other sources, or they generate texts through interviews and interrogations or derivative methods such as focus groups or surveys.<sup>4</sup> To interpret a subject’s utterances during an interview or understand an archived memorandum, the researcher would need sufficient training in the appropriate language and culture.

During a 2012 lecture at Duke University, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, discussing his experience in strategic decision making, emphasized the significance of context:

When I go into a meeting to discuss policy, discuss strategy, discuss operations, plans, whatever it happens to be, he who has the best context generally prevails in the argument, not necessarily who’s got the best facts. There’s a difference. It’s who has the best context in which those facts exist.<sup>5</sup>

Context differentiates a qualitative from quantitative way of seeing the world. By thinking in context—using qualitative approaches—commanders will be better able to set the on-the-ground conditions they are asked to establish. Not being an adept partner in strategic discussions that include context is a guarantee of military misfortune.

## Why is a Qualitative Approach Needed Now?

The modern American military tradition is techno-scientific to the extreme. In practice, this means the American tradition is defined chiefly by what Antoine Bousquet calls “systemic application of science and technology,” as a way to gain “complete predictability and centralized control over armed conflict...”<sup>6</sup> In the Army, this pattern became exaggerated after the Vietnam War. Gen. William DePuy, founder of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), sought to refocus the new all-volunteer force toward what he saw as a future war dominated by technologically skilled teams operating advanced weapons systems as efficiently as they would a lawn mower.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, the debate over what was known as the “revolution in military affairs” trod similar ground.<sup>8</sup>

DePuy sought tactical superiority through systematized training and the development of generalized, quasi-scientific rules and methods for battle. These rules and methods would maximize the chance of success in any engagement by minimizing the risk of not maintaining control of the situation. This approach would reduce tactical engagements to predictable events in which basic variables (on-fire rates, weapons performance, mobility, and so on) could be controlled reasonably well. Crucially, the guiding tactical principles were regarded as valid in a predictive, hard-scientific sense. Mission accomplishment surely would follow their application. This was only possible, though, because the nature of the imagined war against the

Soviets was apolitical—it was a fantasy war at the end of history. The winner would survive; the loser's society would be annihilated. All the annoying questions of sociopolitical context were excluded from the scenario.

Therefore, during operations, neither tactical principles nor tactical aims would be questioned even though tactical principles left room for applying judgment. The relatively consistent tactical successes of U.S. forces, especially since the 1970s, provided proof. Consistent application of position, cover, fires, communication, and so on, led to successful operations. The sum of all this experience reinforced the idea that a quantitative approach produced tactical success. Tactical success became an end in itself, separate from the uncomfortable complexities of war as politics *in extremis*. Military science increasingly came to be seen, erroneously, as a scientific branch of the hard sciences. It had become no more than quasi-scientific at best, pseudoscientific at worst.

The problems of war and warfare, in reality, are not quantifiable problems of the hard sciences because they involve the behavior of human beings. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg noted, “It has been an essential element in the success of science to distinguish those problems that are and are not illuminated by taking human beings into account.”<sup>9</sup> Social scientists seek to understand and explain why people do things. Students of warfare using a qualitative approach would seek to understand why people started wars, ended wars, and prosecuted wars in certain ways and at certain times. Answering any of these questions would involve getting at the subjective motivations of kings, generals, soldiers, and civilians. The ongoing difficulty is creating a reasonably objective science of fundamentally subjective phenomena. Military commanders need to see their lifelong professional role as active participants in the effort to build the discipline of war studies as a social science.

## What is the Function of Time?

All social science questions involve time as an interdependent variable. L.P. Hartley's now aphoristic line, “The past is a foreign country,” is but one illustration of why time makes cause and effect questions so complicated and difficult to answer.<sup>10</sup> Explaining complex events such as warfare in the kind of out-of-time rules used in hard science is impossible. In hard science, rules are rules because they nearly always explain and predict things that happen. On the other hand, answering why the Hundred Years War happened is not the same as explaining why Vietnam happened. Whatever the broad similarities, the differences from one case to another tend to be greater.

The United States surged 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in 2008 based largely on military arguments that a successful surge into Iraq in 2006 would predict a successful surge in Afghanistan. One problem with this way of thinking was that it assumed similar conditions in each state. In reality, the differences between the societies in Iraq and Afghanistan were considerable according to analysts Rick Nelson, Nathan Freier, and Maren Leed.<sup>11</sup> Neither the problems nor



Afghan National Army special forces and commandos, 6th Special Operations Kandak, prepare to clear a series of compounds during an operation in the Nejrab District, Kapisa Province, Afghanistan, 27 May 2014. ANASF, assisted by USSF, conducted the operation to disrupt insurgent freedom of maneuver in the area.

U.S. Army photo by Spc. Connor Mendez



the strategic aims were similar across these states. Another problem was that researchers would need at least 10 years to develop a qualitative analysis of the surge in Iraq—to identify the critical variables and understand the cause-and-effect relationships and interactions. However, action in Afghanistan in 2008 had to be taken quickly.

In 2008, the surge in Iraq had not been analyzed sufficiently to establish generalizations—quantitative or qualitative—about why it worked or why a similar action might work elsewhere. What about that surge might have caused a drop in violence? Was it the number of troops, the population density of the key neighborhoods, or any of the hundreds of techniques individual commands used? Military operational researchers have the statistical background to run complex regression analyses to attack such questions. They mostly lack the grounding in theory needed to put those analyses into a historically validated framework that could provide contextual input to a commander's decision-making process. In other words, military operational research specialists will struggle to see subsurface historical and social differences when comparing societies with which they are unfamiliar.

Frustration with a qualitative approach is understandable because of the time it can take. A desire for predictability is understandable as well. However, the idea that quantitative analysis, even when it does take less time, will predict the outcomes of military actions is an illusion—especially if outcomes are to be considered beyond a given mission or operation. Moreover, a quantitative analysis is faster only when it is limited to analyzing the accomplishment of a given mission at a given time—which is not the same as strategic thinking.

One common English definition of strategy is “a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal usually over a long period of time.”<sup>12</sup> Any definition of strategy is based on aligning present decisions with an idea about a desired future. Strategic thinking is about “thinking in time,” and thinking in time is about thinking in terms of the interrelated nature of variables across time—about context.

## What is the Real Question?

Decision makers who think strategically will try to understand qualitative changes in complex political, economic, psychological, and military contexts. A qualitative approach to strategic thought is concerned with describing the values and interests of legitimate social groups and ensuring those values and interests are represented in public decision-making processes. According to Bent Flyvbjerg, this helps ensure “due diligence” in the public realm.<sup>13</sup> Flyvbjerg argues that understanding values and interests is at the core of the qualitative approach to science. Furthermore, in this sense there is no static state called *victory* against which progress can be quantitatively measured. Rather, strategic thinkers must continually make judgments about the qualitative changes they are charged with affecting.<sup>14</sup> Those changes, of course, reflect the values and interests of people and institutions in the public realm. As people and institutions change



U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Whitney C. Houston

First Lt. Timothy Robberstad, platoon leader for 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Inf. Division, receives guidance from local elders and leaders from the Afghan National Defense Service outside a polling site in the Dand District of Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 11 June 2014.

or the rank order of values and interests changes, the strategic proposition itself changes. *Victory* is a changeling mirroring the shifts in values and interests of those who have the power to define it.

Moreover, because the nature of strategic thought requires thinking about systemic (interrelated) conditions over time, quantitative measures are of limited use. Most important, strategic thinking is less a discrete activity than a habit. Developing the habit of thinking strategically after assimilating a professional culture focused on quantitative measures of tactical proficiency is extraordinarily difficult.

This is not to say that quantitative measurement does not have its place in military science. There are good reasons quantitative measures are preferred in the military. Skills such as hitting a target with a bullet decisively and repeatedly are properly assessed with quantitative measures. As soldiers advance in their Army careers, the dominant evaluation method they are exposed to is quantitative. The issue for leaders and planners is knowing which approaches to evaluation suit each situation. Each approach represents a different way of knowing about the world; neither is perfect or foolproof. The quantitative approach supports strategic thought but is not sufficient to ignite or sustain it.

When making decisions, commanders frame questions as *problems* to be solved. This is the language of quantitative algebra. Let us suppose that to counter a certain threat, U.S. forces were considering invading Country Y. Strategic thinking would ask about metaproblems, such as—

- ◆ What would an invasion gain for us?
- ◆ How long would this gain last?
- ◆ Would it be worth the cost to invade Country Y?
- ◆ Is there a better alternative such as bombing or letting a partner take action?
- ◆ What might be the unintended consequences of invading?
- ◆ What would happen after the invasion?
- ◆ How would invading qualitatively change our situation?

Quantitative analysis can inform this decision-making process, but quantitative analysis still depends on making subjective judgments about what constitutes success. Every measure of effectiveness requires a standard to be established against which actions will be measured. Do you measure if a military

action is *worth the cost* in terms of causalities, money, or both? Does *worth the cost* mean achieving territorial or political gains? Could the action in question simply be a moral imperative and thus be outside the standard cost-benefit discourse? That is, even when strategists use quantitative methods, they must be aware that they reflect a value judgment from a subjective perspective—that of their bosses, themselves, the enemy command, the enemy population, and so on. In military planning, even the standards used in quantitative analysis need to be framed from the perspective of the key actors in the conflict.

## What is the Context?

Every measure, quantitative or qualitative, should be interpreted in context. By their nature, qualitative measurements presuppose the kind of theoretical frameworks essential for strategic thought (a theory must exist to justify the measure). Though qualitative methods certainly can be used to generate quantitative-looking measures of effectiveness, categorizing focus-group information into numerical scores, for instance, would require an explicit causal framework as a basis for the categorization. Since there would be many different contexts for causal frameworks—national culture, the professional cultures of the military services or the government, or the view from partner nations—no single result would be definitive. Moreover, time as a variable would complicate the articulation of context. Thinking in terms of the interrelated nature of variables across time is thinking about context.

One of the biggest challenges to implementing the strategic landpower concept will be embracing qualitative analysis. The culture of the U.S. Army still tends to discount its value. Army commanders' institutional norms enable a *can do* attitude based on an institution-wide overconfidence in the ability of analytical methods to provide understanding of cause and effect. However, the idea that the quantitative scientific methods with which Army professionals are comfortable will be adequate for strategic landpower undermines real strategic thought by upholding the false objectivity of quantitative measures.

Operations are, and always have been, too complex to reduce to supposed scientific analyses. Even if politics and warfare were hard sciences, the reliable

quantitative basis for military decisions, strategic or tactical, would be very limited. Politics and warfare are not hard sciences: Afghanistan is a prime example.

## Why Does Qualitative Analysis Matter?

The qualitative approach is central to understanding how people are the same and how they differ. Differences are not easy to understand. People, and the formal and informal institutions in which they aggregate, project what they know into assumed *equations* about how the world works. In this way, they form generalized causal theories about international relations and the political views that other people and countries hold.<sup>15</sup> In other words, one group of people assumes certain values guide the behavior of another group. In strategic thought, we must recognize that such projections are just that—projections.

In one sense, the qualitative approach differs from the quantitative because it asks *framing* questions—the holistic “why” and “what does it mean” questions leading to understanding the big picture, such as “How has the security ecosystem changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union?” or “What will the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan mean to the incumbent government?” In another sense, the qualitative approach differs because the data-gathering methods cannot escape the problem of subjective interpretation. Any textual data obtained requires a human researcher to categorize it using subjective criteria.

Strategic thinking should not be imagined simply as a way to solve problems. Strategic thinking is a way to search for answers to big-picture questions. These answers can help guide activities at almost any level of the organization. A study of the potential effects of a major change in Afghanistan, such as the drawdown of U.S. forces, needs a qualitative approach. Strategic thinkers will develop questions that include context. A decontextualized question would have narrow boundaries: What will a U.S. drawdown of forces in Afghanistan mean to U.S. security? Questions that account for context would include the key people:

- ◆ What will a drawdown mean to the Karzai government?

- ◆ What does Karzai himself think about this?
- ◆ What words does he use to describe his feelings about this event?
- ◆ Does his language show he fears for his job or his life, or does he see a drawdown as an opportunity to consolidate or expand his power?

In other words, what does the objective description of Karzai’s subjective response reveal?

Qualitative study develops a collected and collated description of these kinds of subjective experiences—of one man, of select branches in the government, or of swaths of the population. Categorizing opinion surveys, interviews, speeches, or economic data will help researchers construct a tentative picture of the strategic implications of the drawdown. The point is to estimate the range of possible futures and then to examine which policies and which actions most likely would leave the United States in the best position. To return to Gen. Dempsey, the facts mean little without context.

The qualitative approach puts the facts into context. That this requires subjective choices on the part of qualitative or strategic thinkers is not a weakness. The significance of a qualitative approach is not necessarily in its predictive capability but in how it helps decision makers ask and study the right questions in the right way. Thinking strategically is thinking through questions of context over time. The number of armored vehicles in the Afghan National Army or even the number of soldiers who passed basic training will not tell us much about what we really want to know: is the Afghan National Army now of high enough quality—in many different senses of the word—to do its job effectively?

Policy makers and military professionals need to understand why people behave as they do because the strategic goals that military operations support involve changing human behavior. Human behavior is a product of what people think and feel and believe. Numerical measurements can indicate *how many* people feel or think or believe certain ways, but they cannot explain why. Strategic thinking is about answering those *why* questions. Ideally, we need to find answers not based on our worldview about Islam or Vladimir Putin or even about democracy. What matters is to understand how our enemies see their own actions as rational, and a qualitative approach is the only means of study to achieve that.



## What is the Solution?

The Army must learn how to adopt genuine strategic thought. It will need to figure out how to apply strategic thinking in institutional and operational settings and at different echelons. It will need to determine ways to use strategic thinking to enhance time-constrained decision making during operations as well as to develop strategic policy guidance as part of the professional requirement to give advice to civilian leaders. Army senior leaders will apply strategic thinking differently than mid-level commanders, staffs, or soldiers on the ground.

The Army already has a good start on some initiatives that will improve its ability to use qualitative analysis. One example is improving cultural awareness through regionally aligned forces. The Army can further improve its use of qualitative analysis in three broad ways:

- ◆ Encouraging deep familiarity with the social science theories and debates that drive policy making by sending more officers to top-rated university doctoral programs,
- ◆ Increasing the emphasis on teaching the Army design methodology in professional military education, and
- ◆ Encouraging questioning during educational experiences and during staff planning.

The future is filled with complex political-military conflicts. Only an Army culture steeped in the ethos of strategic thinking and the qualitative approach that supports it will succeed in connecting military victory to long-term strategic success. This was the tradition of the Army at its finest, under Washington, Grant, Marshall, and Eisenhower—who were among the finest strategic and qualitative thinkers of their time. The conflicts of the 21st century will demand the same of today's Army. There is no reason that challenge cannot be met and every reason it must be. ■

## NOTES

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