

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT AND ADAPTATION

Reassessing the Afghanistan Surge Decision

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As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once noted, we go to war with the Army (and Navy) we have. However, we do not necessarily win wars with the same armed forces or strategy with which we began them. Often, these forces initially are not optimized for the particular conflict in which they become engaged, and even when they are, adaptive adversaries present unanticipated challenges. Often throughout history, leaders have needed to recognize that their initial plans were not successful and that adaptation (organizationally, doctrinally, or in weapons and equipment) was needed.¹

Because of war's inherently interactive nature, victory often depends on which side most quickly can recognize problems or gaps in performance and implement changes. Despite this well-grounded observation, interest has arisen only recently in how military organizations adapt during war.² Moreover, what literature does exist focuses heavily on operational and tactical forms of change, overlooking strategic adaptation.

This article explores that gap, beginning with an overview of the literature on assessment and adaptation. Next it establishes an analytical framework for both strategic assessment and adaptation that will serve as the basis for a subsequent analysis of a particular strategic reassessment: the Obama administration's surge decision in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.³ The article concludes by offering insights relevant to senior policy makers and the joint community.

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ASSESSMENT AS ART AND SCIENCE

In studying military adaptation over the course of the twentieth century, one historian concluded

that “[a]daptation in one form or another has been a characteristic of successful military institutions and human societies under the pressures of war.”⁴ Yet education and doctrine often overlook this strategic assessment and adaptation function.

While strategic assessment represents a crucial element of a state’s ability to adapt strategy to changing wartime conditions, it is not a regular field for scholarly study. This is odd, since it plays a critical role in determining the outcome and cost of wars.⁵ A major shortfall in the conduct of our national security system has been the lack of appreciation for a continuous assessment of strategy implementation. Our national security mechanisms should not stop when the president issues a decision. Instead, an “end-to-end” approach must encompass policy formulation, strategy development, planning guidance, resource allocation and alignment, implementation oversight, and performance assessment based on feedback loops.⁶

Research by a number of experienced policy makers and scholars underscores how important it is for the National Security Council (NSC) system to incorporate effective mechanisms for oversight and performance assessment—yet how hard some agencies resist the same.⁷ The NSC remains a valuable mechanism for ensuring that presidents entertain a full set of feasible options, i.e., that options and positions are vetted and aired; and that large governmental bureaucracies get the strategic direction they need.⁸ The NSC must also remain in oversight mode to ensure that strategic direction is implemented as intended.

The importance of campaign and operational assessment is well known to the American military community. Critical issues involved in assessment include evaluation of intelligence; likely international consequences of proposed actions; the operational plans proposed to obtain defined political objectives; and a state’s relative capabilities, including how well they relate to the requirements the strategy proposed is likely to entail.⁹ The role of metrics in operational assessments and their complexity in accurately measuring progress in counterinsurgency campaigns is also recognized. So too is the potential danger of politicization of metrics to satisfy bureaucratic or institutional politics.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. military operations were assessed using new techniques derived from systems analysis and operations research. Derived from the physical sciences, these proved less valuable in capturing the more political and socioeconomic aspects of the Vietnam War. The assessment of progress at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was oversimplified in one sense by concentration on body counts and kill ratios, then later overcomplicated by consideration of an abundance of metrics.¹⁰ When critics challenged MACV’s strategy, there was strong pressure to generate favorable indicators to buttress the appearance of progress.¹¹

American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan faced similarly daunting requirements for data collection.¹² The challenges involved in selecting, collecting, and analyzing the right metrics in combat theaters are significant. There are myriad political, sociocultural, and economic factors relevant to combating insurgencies and civil wars. At the operational level, participants can operate under a biased view of how well they are doing but overlook disquieting indicators. At the strategic level, the national command authority needs to establish sources and consider the resultant feedback to monitor progress and adapt as necessary.

American experience in and official doctrine for assessment are limited, resulting in “inventive but ad hoc solutions” at the operational level, as Ben Connable puts it in *Embracing the Fog of War*.¹³ The analytical community crafted measures to promote an understanding of the operational effectiveness of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Assessing progress was recognized as important because the perception of progress has an effect on the sustainability of the war effort.¹⁴ Joint doctrine evolved to capture these lessons.

Although operational-level metrics and campaign assessments are necessary, they are not sufficient at the national level. An operational assessment provides insights into the progress of a strategy or campaign plan, but it should not be confused with a national strategic-level assessment, which must incorporate a much larger perspective involving international risks, opportunity costs, coalition dynamics, and national resources. A strategic assessment often will take a regional if not a global perspective, and will factor in political elements. A strategic assessment also must account for domestic political constraints, resourcing, and opportunity costs. The experience of the last fifteen years reveals more ad hoc solutions applied to this higher and less-quantitative form of strategic review.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To explore this challenge, I used Risa Brooks’s attributes of strategic assessment as an analytical framework.¹⁵ To evaluate the strategic logic and the appropriateness of the strategic adaptation decision, I added a fifth element. The five factors are defined as follows:

- *Performance-assessment mechanisms* capture the quality of institutional structures and processes devoted to evaluations of our intelligence concerning enemy capabilities and capacities, as well as the evaluation of our own political and military activities and progress. Such mechanisms also must include a capacity to assess the interdependent political, diplomatic, and developmental activities consistent with effective counterinsurgency.

- *Collaborative information-sharing environment* describes the routines and conventions of dialogue associated with exchanging information at the apex of decision making. Key to information sharing is the degree of openness and how forthcoming participants are about options and assessments not favorable to their preferred policy outcomes. “Collaborative” means a climate in which parties are free to explore options, test assumptions, and debate the merits of those options. A collaborative context is not consensus driven, but instead searches for good options and viable compromises.
- *Strategic coordination* captures the overall governmental structure and mechanisms used to develop and make policy decisions. These influence how well policy is defined, how strategies are developed, and how well military aspects are coordinated with diplomatic activities and other aspects of the state. These measures should identify disconnects among the respective elements of a strategy, questionable assumptions, unintended consequences, and inconsistent objectives.¹⁶
- *Decision-making authorization clarity* captures how state leaders articulate and promulgate decisions and the degree to which those decisions are communicated unambiguously. Within this dimension, decision-making flexibility, subordinates’ prerogatives, and accountability for constituent pieces of a larger strategy are allocated and defined.
- *Strategic coherence* evaluates the inherent logic of the proposed adaptation and its linkage of ends, ways, and means. A coherent strategy matches a selected approach to the diagnosed problem and allocates commensurate responsibility and resources.¹⁷ Coherence integrates the use of all instruments and tools of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. The purpose of a strategy is to establish and preserve the alignment of ends, ways, and means.¹⁸ That alignment is the essence of coherence.

As Richard Betts has noted, “Strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends. This can happen because the wrong means are chosen or because the ends are too ambitious or slippery.”¹⁹ To that we should add, “. . . or because the wrong way is selected.” All three—ends, ways, and means—have to be tied together coherently.

This set of factors is crucial to creating a foundation for understanding adaptation at the strategic level. One cannot understand strategic-level adaptation without considering the mechanisms and institutional capacity for strategic assessment. The criteria employed in our evaluation of the strategic adaptations in this case study are presented in the table below.

Assessment and Adaptation Factors	Criteria
1. Performance-assessment mechanisms	Did the NSC have a process to monitor independently data collected on progress and costs, and other relevant metrics?
2. Collaborative environment	Did the process allow perspectives and intelligence to be completely shared in a climate in which parties were free to explore policy aims, assumptions, and options openly?
3. Strategic coordination	Did the coordination process produce both strategic positions and options? Were they integrated and coordinated?
4. Decision-making authorization clarity	Was a clear presidential decision issued, in writing, with timely guidance?
5. Strategic coherence	Did the selected strategy adaptation resolve the diagnosed problem and align ends, ways, and means?

ASSESSING THE OBAMA ASSESSMENT

The detailed history of the protracted debate over Afghanistan strategy has been covered elsewhere.²⁰ This section focuses on an analysis of the major components of the assessment.

Performance-Assessment Mechanisms

Even state-of-the-art operational assessment leaves much to be desired, and there is no evidence from the Afghan surge debate to suggest that strategic assessment is any easier to perform or yields better results. Multiple assessments by RAND, NATO allies, and service schools concluded that the complex metrics collection systems used in Afghanistan did not meet policy needs or those of military decision makers.²¹ One study on operational assessment noted, “Once again, . . . the pitfalls in trying to quantify complex dynamics [have] made the production of accurate and useful assessments a persistently elusive aim.”²²

The challenges in Afghanistan included the complexity of the counterinsurgency effort and the management of a large coalition. ISAF eventually put an extensive effort into data collection, but the focus was on operational and tactical data, and not at the right level for strategic audiences. One scholar concluded that the flaws in the currently used approaches “are sufficiently egregious” that professional military judgment on assessments is “rightfully distrusted.”²³ The ingrained optimism—the “can-do” spirit—of the U.S. military may be an additional complicating factor.²⁴

Assessments in Afghanistan proved especially problematic owing to that campaign’s dynamics, producing numerous criticisms and recommendations for innovative solutions.²⁵ NATO produced a major evaluation of the credibility of assessment methods for both Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation

ENDURING FREEDOM. That effort found that “[i]n both of these campaigns, senior leaders across the various coalition nations demanded reams of quantitative data from their operational commanders which, in some cases, may have been an attempt to compensate for a lack of operational and strategic clarity and the inability to discern meaningful progress over time.”²⁶

The NATO study includes a report that one regional command in Afghanistan required subordinate units to collect and transmit some four hundred different metrics. A senior assessment officer in Kabul once estimated that more than two thousand mandatory reportable quantitative metrics were levied on subordinate units across the theater.²⁷

In Afghanistan in the summer of 2009, the newly appointed commander of ISAF, Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, knew the critical importance of assessment and indicators at both the operational and strategic levels of war. Specifically, he understood that ISAF needed to identify and refine appropriate indicators to assess progress so as to clarify the difference between operational measures of effectiveness critical to practitioners on the ground and strategic measures more appropriate to national capitals.²⁸ In contrast, the component agencies tended to define their contributions and metrics in terms of inputs or traditional tasks rather than the actual outputs achieved.

McChrystal’s strategic review, which received augmentation by volunteer scholars, warrants more study in that it is an exception: it strove to be a real strategic assessment.²⁹ However, its orientation was on defining the requirements for a fully resourced and effective counterinsurgency effort, answering the presumed question about what it would take to defeat the Taliban, as opposed to providing a clear delineation of national interests, policy, and options. In addition, while the ISAF review was quite impressive, it lacked a broad enough charter and representation (State Department, embassy, coalition, and interagency) to serve as the basis for subsequent NSC deliberations. Moreover, it failed to address the trans-regional and political barriers that were the real problem in obtaining desired results. Some believe that the McChrystal approach should be continued—but they fail to recognize how critically the report was received at the White House.

In any case, theater military commands are not structured to produce such strategic assessments. The ISAF product failed to incorporate alliance perspectives, much less the concerns of U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry; and it did not truly address Pakistan. It was too narrow, so it only spurred the larger and longer review that the president and NSC staff started immediately upon receiving ISAF’s inputs and troop request.

Overall, in this case, performance-assessment mechanisms were limited, particularly at the NSC, which in the summer of 2009 was not yet effectively overseeing the administration’s foreign policy agenda.

Collaborative Information-Sharing Environment

The president's desire for disciplined debate, his request for options, and his evident discomfort with early portions of the debate suggest that information sharing was limited. The president's reaching out to his staff and to the vice chairman to gain additional insights and to push for more-constrained options suggests that this component of the process was not fully satisfied.

Some scholars suggest that, by trying to preclude political interference, the military input to the Afghanistan assessment process ended up degrading the civil-military discourse needed both to understand and to alter the strategy in that campaign.³⁰ No overt efforts to manipulate assessment data in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM have been identified, but the strategic dialogue between national and theater-level officials certainly was strained. Participants share considerable agreement that candor and trust were corrupted early in the process, and that their resultant low levels negatively impacted the decision-making process. On several occasions, speeches, leaks, and comments to the media or Congress created the impression that the military was trying to maneuver the president into a box.³¹ McChrystal's assessment was leaked almost as soon as it arrived in Washington, and Ambassador Eikenberry's secret cables also were deliberately given to the media. Both former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and General McChrystal believe that these leaks and media comments negatively impacted the decision-making process. Policy options and strategic discourse between civilian and military officials at the NSC are best conducted in a climate in which candor exists and options and various positions are debated thoroughly. Such a context helps produce sound policy decisions and strategies.³²

Strategic Coordination

In the case of Afghanistan, the NSC initially was not aware of the existence of resource gaps, confusion over the mission, or inconsistent objectives. It was not aware that the ISAF staff was unclear about U.S. policy objectives, and that, in the absence of clear policy aims or guidance, ISAF was making a counterinsurgency approach the basis of its strategy. The terms of reference for the ISAF strategic assessment, issued by Mr. Gates, were vague, but ISAF took many steps to ensure its own review had a strategic focus.

The greatest challenge in the surge debate was over the assessment of strategy options. A president and his policy team need options, and Mr. Obama expressly asked for distinct options. These should include a full range of credible options, not just the preferred solution. A military leader with NSC experience notes that representatives "must generate real strategic options to give the president actual choices; however, the ends to which each option can aspire and the inherent risks involved in them are often dissimilar, and the nation's senior civilian leadership needs to understand those dynamics as well."³³

If the president does not believe in the validity of the options the military provides, he will seek options elsewhere. The military did not give President George W. Bush a range of options for Iraq in 2006 until he insisted on their development, nor did it give President Obama a range of options for Afghanistan in 2009. Mr. Obama was not well served by the seemingly united front created by a Secretary of Defense, a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and a regional combatant commander who aligned behind, and limited discussion to, one option. Because of this, the president was engaged in deliberations more than was typical, and he felt compelled to generate his own option.³⁴

A second weak spot in the 2009 assessment was the isolation of the political element of the strategy from the military component. There was little doubt the thirty-thousand-troop surge would enhance security. It would blunt the Taliban's momentum, buying additional time by slowing, if not reversing, Taliban gains. The injection of additional forces could lead Taliban leaders to reconsider and to recognize that the United States was increasingly committed to securing U.S. interests, which could lead to more mutually beneficial negotiations within Afghanistan. Yet while the proposed new strategy accepted Afghan president Karzai as a difficult partner, the surge decision was not used to create additional political leverage and conditionality for Karzai to reform his government and mitigate levels of corruption and incompetence. Furthermore, the NSC decision did not assess and resolve correctly whether the Afghan security forces could meet their recruiting goals and minimum effectiveness standards within the resource constraints and timelines President Obama had framed. Creating sustainable Afghan national security forces clearly would be a longer-term but relevant issue if U.S. security interests were to be served. Finally, the State Department's contributions were long on promise but short on delivery. Both the strategic assessment and NSC oversight should have tested State's capacity actually to support the plan.

Coordination requires that both sides actually endeavor to understand various civilian and military perspectives. This is not a simple matter. As Dr. Janine Davidson, a former Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) policy official, has noted:

The "professional" military officer has certain expectations about how to craft "best military advice" for the President that are deeply embedded into the organizational culture and in fact hard-wired into the institutionalized and incredibly detailed military planning processes. This planning process is designed with expectations about the roles civilian leadership will play in providing guidance, which are in many ways out of synch with the expectations of the President and his civilian advisers. Ultimately, the output of the military's planning process fails to deliver the type of nuanced advice in the form of creative options that the President needs.³⁵

Ultimately, the nation's best interests are served when strategy decisions are the product of a rigorous process in which civilian policy makers have options and are informed about risks.³⁶ Such reviews require a thorough examination of a full range of feasible options. In this case, however, it was only with the personal involvement of and "pushing" by the president that discrete policy options were developed and debated. Ultimately, again with the deliberate engagement of the president, competing factions hashed out a consensus on both the aims and the specific "ways" of a strategy. However, because the gaps in political strategy were left open, and because the requisite nonmilitary contributions from State and the Agency for International Development were not tested for true feasibility, the strategic coordination phase, while deliberate, was less than robust, and therefore not fully satisfactory.

Decision-Making Authorization Clarity

There appears to be little doubt that the president was immersed fully in making, and invested fully in, the final strategic decisions in 2009. However, the six-page strategic memorandum that President Obama purportedly authored contains contradictions. The president apparently intended, on the basis of a reading of Gordon Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster*, that the Vietnam War problem of unclear objectives would not be repeated.³⁷ Yet his strategic guidance, while intended to reduce ambiguity and reflect the president's commitment to the decision, evidences distinct tensions between the diagnosis of the problems in Afghanistan and a limited allocation of resources and time.

Clarity was augmented by the discourse among the principals, and by the president directly questioning each to receive an express assent to the final strategy. From the inauguration in January 2009 through late November, the ISAF commander may have had some questions about what the new administration really wanted to achieve in Afghanistan; that doubt or ambiguity was clarified during the surge debate. The president's 29 November memo reinforces the clarity of the commander's intent. The U.S. goal in Afghanistan was "to deny safe haven to al Qaeda and to deny the Taliban the ability to overthrow the Afghan government." The military mission was defined in six operational objectives, which were to be "limited in scope and scale to only what is necessary to attain the U.S. goal."³⁸ In case there was any question, the president's memo noted, "This approach is not fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building."³⁹ However, the president also listed numerous military and civilian tasks at the operational level that are fully consistent with a broad counterinsurgency approach. The guidance instructs the military to reverse the Taliban's momentum, deny it access to and control of key population centers and lines of communication, disrupt the insurgency and

its Al Qaeda allies, and degrade their capability to a point at which Afghan national security forces could manage the threat.

There is little doubt the president reshaped the mission's scale; authorized resources for specific purposes; and introduced a temporal dimension, framing a faster introduction of U.S. forces. But while he narrowed the mission and authorized a substantial force, that force was to accomplish many challenging tasks within a tight time frame. Moreover, that time frame was introduced into the debate only belatedly, at a time when military commanders were not inclined to argue with the president. Overall, this element of the framework was satisfied only partially.

Strategic Coherence

Senior leaders, both civilians and military officers, are hard pressed in their deliberations to preserve the vital linkages between policy and strategy and between objectives and operations. Richard Betts has warned that busy leaders have little time to ensure that the logic of a strategy is tested or that the coherence of ends, ways, and means is preserved. Often what is left is a strategy that "has unexamined assumptions and slogans left over from coping with their main preoccupations."⁴⁰

The adaptations the Obama administration proposed in 2009 sought to align U.S. strategy better with policy aims, but ended up focusing almost entirely on the military "means"—the size and duration of the surge—rather than the possible "ways." Despite references throughout the strategy review to the centrality of Afghan politics and governance, there is little evidence that alternative political strategies were considered.⁴¹

As Secretary Gates has noted, the concept of an efficient, corruption-free, effective Afghan central government was "a fantasy."⁴² By 2009, there was growing recognition that the highly centralized Afghan government created through the 2001 Bonn Agreement and the 2004 constitution was becoming untenable.⁴³ While McChrystal's staff was cognizant of the need for a bottom-up approach to complement efforts to build the capacity of the central government, the White House review process did not generate alternative political strategies to induce Kabul to devolve power or reduce its perceived corruption.⁴⁴

Policy and strategic discussions during this reassessment too often focused on the familiar military component (force levels, deployment timelines, and so forth) and too little on the larger challenge of political reform, state building, and host-nation capacity. The need for some political influence over Karzai was evident, but was not incorporated into the U.S. strategy. Unlike in Iraq, there was no discussion about using conditionality of U.S. support as a form of leverage to

push for political reforms in Kabul. Absent those changes, as Ambassador Eikenberry stressed, success from the surge would be limited.⁴⁵

The strategic assessment conducted in 2009 better defined U.S. core interests, policy, and plans. Were those criteria exhaustive, the strategy review would be judged a success. However, the decision was promulgated with a defined time limit. This had some utility, in that it created a sense of urgency for deploying troops and accelerating Afghan force training. But it also generated the perception of limited U.S. commitment to success. The premature announcement of the withdrawal was an error induced by U.S. domestic politics.⁴⁶ This signaled to both our allies and regional powers that American patience was waning—and could be outlasted. This did not contribute to positive coalition or host-nation perceptions or to U.S. strategic success. Moreover, the civilian and political components of the surge were not well integrated into the final strategy, leaving them less likely to be implemented as needed.

INSIGHTS

Improving Performance Assessment

Continuous monitoring of strategy implementation is a task shared among the NSC, OSD, and Joint Staff. Periodic reassessment is necessary for the successful prosecution of any strategy, and its scope should include intelligence, assumptions, and execution. In this case, a lack of staff mechanisms for monitoring prevented the necessary reassessment and the timely development of potential solutions for the president. The NSC staff should institutionalize these mechanisms rather than depend on ad hoc tasking.

The experience of the last two wars suggests that improved strategic oversight is needed.⁴⁷ Instead of a planning board, strategic planning directorate, or war czar, some form of implementation board or strategy assessment directorate appears warranted.⁴⁸ Implementation oversight really should be the most important role the NSC staff plays on behalf of the cabinet. But “unless the President himself makes it very clear that the NSC staff has specific authority to oversee implementation, there is a strong resistance from the Departments to respond to the NSC staff,” as a former NSC staffer has noted.⁴⁹

The functional departments should not view this role for the NSC staff as “intrusive.”⁵⁰ And the cost of a dozen personnel at the White House seems a pittance if it helps a harried set of leaders understand how well their strategic direction is being implemented or how the adversary is reacting. It certainly amounts to far less than the bill for poorly crafted strategies or ineffective operations. The NSC leadership should be able to conduct independent and rigorous strategic

reassessments, and employ red-teaming techniques.⁵¹ Reassessments must be brutally objective and consider external and diverse viewpoints (including those of coalition partners). It is hard for folks to “grade their own homework” objectively or to recognize quickly that a preferred plan is not succeeding. The employment of staff dedicated to these reassessments would help to avoid strategic inertia and the politicization of the assessment process.⁵²

Building and Sustaining a Collaborative Environment

Given the complex nature of contemporary conflict, integrated strategy development and assessment processes are necessary. In an atmosphere of deliberation, candor, and transparency, efforts should focus on maximizing the value of diverse and interdisciplinary inputs to policy/strategy development and assessment.

The experience of the past fourteen years suggests that effective civilian and military interaction is (and always has been) critical to the framing of realistic policy objectives and effective strategy.⁵³ Effective civil-military relations are critical to effectiveness in assessing and adapting national policy.⁵⁴

Senior joint leaders must strive to sustain a professional relationship with civilian policy makers and avoid the appearance of trying to go around or negate presidential decisions. An absence of friction within policy debates would be suspect, but such friction never should be publicly evident, at least emanating from military professionals.⁵⁵

Collaboration does not mean tension-free debate or the subordination of the military. The existing NSC system has tensions built into it; these make debates uncomfortable but productive. Instead of fighting the process or trying to impose a military framework on civilian politicians, military leaders should understand the process and embrace it.⁵⁶ As former CJCS Mike Mullen has noted, “Policy and strategy should constantly struggle with one another. Some in the military no doubt would prefer political leadership that lays out a specific strategy and then gets out of the way, leaving the balance of the implementation to commanders in the field. But the experience of the last nine years tells us two things: A clear strategy for military operations is essential; and that strategy will have to change as those operations evolve.”⁵⁷

Senior military leaders should understand that influence and trust go together and that, just as networking and relationships with peers are important to professional success, the same relationship building will pay dividends vis-à-vis political leaders.⁵⁸ Moreover, civil-military relations are an important professional ethic and part of the educational process for both civilian and military leaders.⁵⁹ Senior officers embrace that ethic, but also must temper their public communications carefully to avoid creating an impression that they are attempting to influence decisions in the public arena.

Improving Strategic Coordination

It is important for senior military leaders to understand the decision-making process and participate in that process fully. American history contains examples of problems encountered in the meshing of civilian and military perspectives.⁶⁰ Given the iterative nature of policy and strategy formulation, some tense interaction should be expected; however, a deep historical understanding of strategy and solid relationships should overcome friction at the council table.

An important insight for senior policy advisers is to understand how decisions are made and how information is evaluated in the policy/strategy process. Policy makers are not hardwired to apply lockstep templates or a linear, military-style decision-making process. NSC staff officials will not be graduates of professional military education (PME) programs. Civilian political officials often will explore an array of options without defining a firm political end state. They may be more comfortable exploring “the art of the possible” and examining political factors and risks differently, including in a far more fluid or intuitive manner. They may be more comfortable with ambiguity, political elements, and other intangibles.

During reassessment, as during strategy development, senior military leaders should be prepared to challenge assumptions and vague policy aims, as well as to offer creative options (ways) to satisfy desired ends. As one military observer to this process has concluded, “To be effective and to assist the president in crafting and implementing national-security policy involving military force, senior military leaders must embrace a more involved role in the back-and-forth dialogue necessary to build effective policies and workable strategies.”⁶¹

Senior joint leaders must give the president options as, at the end of the day, he is the accountable decision maker. As General Martin Dempsey observed, “That’s what being commander in chief is all about.”⁶² Options not wholly acceptable or valid for military reasons may still be viable to policy makers and should be considered, even when they are neither preferred nor supported. Of several possible “sins” in strategy development, the commandant of the Army War College, Major General William Rapp, noted that the first is for the military to present a single option to civilian leaders, trying to force a decision rather than engender a dialogue. The next-worst course is to offer an artificially framed suite of strategic options centered on the option desired, with all the rest designed to be presented as throwaways.⁶³

Policy makers want options, but these need to be real options; they must be feasible and suitable; they cannot merely be politically expedient, nor merely satisfy preferred military paradigms.⁶⁴ A failure to provide more than a single solution will cede the initiative to the NSC staff or other outlets. Senior military officers critical of what they perceive as recent NSC staff intrusions into strategy options overlook their own responsibility for previously having shorted President

Obama's request for an array of strategic options in Afghanistan. In the Afghanistan case study, a number of options did emerge, but the NSC process failed to reconcile those competing views productively.⁶⁵

The Department of Defense should adapt its education programs to prepare officers better for the complexity of national-level policy-making processes at the interagency level. Those reforms should emphasize a more iterative mode of policy-strategic interaction.⁶⁶ We are preparing future military leaders for frustration or failure if they come away from the classroom with only a linear and mechanistic approach to strategy, one that is long on process and short on the reality of strategy development at the highest levels. Educational programs also should ensure that military officers understand the interplay of all elements of national power. Senior military leaders need to be able to participate in and shape national strategy discussions involving these elements, not just to apply military tools.⁶⁷

Gaining Better Strategic Decision Clarity

It is clear that military leaders were unclear on U.S. policy aims in Afghanistan during much of the first year of the Obama administration.⁶⁸ Theoretically, the president himself established the strategic clarity behind the Afghan surge in a formal document late in the deliberative reassessment process. Despite that document, some, such as Professor Hew Strachan, have claimed that there was a lack of clear political guidance, resulting in doubt about what the actual U.S. policy was.⁶⁹ Yet the ISAF commander and the U.S. ambassador, along with their chains of command all the way back to Washington, participated in a rather painstaking review of that policy. If, after the December decision and the presidential speech, there was confusion about either the policy or the resulting strategy, it was not because senior military leaders were absent from the council table or they lacked the president's written guidance. More accurately, the final decision contained compromises that reduced clarity and imposed constraints on the strategy that Central Command and ISAF preferred, in terms of time and force levels. A lack of agreement on an element of the strategy is not the same as a lack of clarity. The president's guidance memo was clear on the "how" and the "what," but was silent on the inherently political "why" and the desired end being sought. Understanding Mr. Obama's intent would have helped.

The NSC staff can also do a better job of generating presidential policy decisions in a timely manner. To preserve strategic coherence and coordination at lower levels across the joint force, senior defense leaders should ensure these decisions are promulgated.

Establishing Greater Strategic Coherence

At the national level, policies and strategy are inseparable. National strategies must focus on achieving political objectives. Because war is a political act,

military strategies must be embedded in and supportive of overall national strategies. The latter must address the use of all elements of national power, they should be founded on a strategic logic, and the two types must be linked coherently to each other. Sustaining coherency, as Betts notes, involves asking “whether choices at any level do or do not maintain a logical consistency with levels above and below, and ultimately a consistency between political ends and military means.” Senior military leaders must be prepared to serve as the principal strategists to ensure a coherent linkage between desired policy objectives and a detailed and feasible plan to obtain them.

Strategic coherence in conflicts such as Afghanistan includes a political element, and during that conflict U.S. military officers appeared reticent in engaging in that element of strategic discourse (General Petraeus was an exception). Yet senior officers have to be cognizant of all instruments of power and the elements that drive conflict. National and military strategies are not separate, and military officers cannot simply isolate themselves in a professional “lane.”⁷⁰ Civilian officials expect to receive inputs from military leaders who truly are expert in their sphere (the application of military force), but they also prize advice from senior officials who understand how the different components of U.S. power are integrated and best applied coherently.⁷¹

The political literacy of U.S. military officers is considered suspect by some of the military’s own strategists.⁷² This may be a function of the U.S. military’s apolitical character, which some scholarly observers find to be too focused on connecting operations to tactics and too ready to perceive the operational level of war as a “politics-free zone.”⁷³ Instead, the interplay of political factors, including coalition and domestic politics, must be understood as part of high-level strategy. American military officers must get past their reserve about the role played by politics, in all its forms. Political considerations do not constitute simply an inconvenient restraint on military operations.⁷⁴ Over the course of the last decade, the American military community has experienced the consequences of political illiteracy and has absorbed a keener appreciation for political influence at all levels.⁷⁵ PME institutions should ensure their curricula capture and reflect this hard-earned experience.

The military literacy of civilian officials requires equal attention. Civilian leaders need a better appreciation for the complexities of military strategy and operations. Richard Betts’s observation from fifteen years ago remains just as true today: “For strategy to bridge policy and operations, civilian and military professionals on either side of the divide need more empathy with the priorities and limitations that those on the other side face. . . . Civilians cannot do this responsibly, however, unless they acquire much more empirical knowledge of tactics, logistics, and operational doctrines than is normal for top-level staff these days.”⁷⁶

Our senior military leaders must be completely frank about the limits of raw military power, risk, and time frames for action.⁷⁷ They also should ensure that military resources are not being risked without commensurate support from other agencies. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military was overinvested in doing its part, and it let military contributions get well ahead of the other instruments in the strategy.⁷⁸ So security conditions were established, at great cost, to enable political and economic activities; but then nonmilitary elements of the strategy were completely absent, were not feasible, or were executed poorly.

Donald Rumsfeld was right: indeed, we do go to war with the military we have, and with an initial strategy as well. But wars rarely are won or concluded with the same force or the original strategy. The nature of war as a competitive clash of wills requires leaders, as the conflict evolves, to assess progress, recognize shortfalls, and resolve gaps in strategy or operational methods. The case studied herein supports the conclusion that the capacity to oversee implementation, conduct assessments, and alter strategy under fire during wartime is a clear contributor to strategic success. Professor Williamson Murray concluded a 2011 study of military adaptation with the claim that “[t]he ability to adapt at every level of war from the tactical to the strategic and political would seem to be more important . . . than [at] any time since 1941.”⁷⁹ If that is true, this research is both timely and relevant.

U.S. policy makers and our military leaders eventually learned this lesson in both Iraq and Afghanistan. They adapted strategies to reflect new or changed circumstances. The joint force adapted its approaches in both conflicts and changed the senior commanders. However, this case shows we have room for improvement in tying together policy and strategy changes while conducting wartime reassessments. While senior-level courses at joint PME institutions address national decision-making processes, more attention to enhancing political literacy of future leaders appears warranted.

Future military leaders should draw on this case to enhance their understanding of strategic decision making and the assessment processes at the apex of our government. Strategic success in the future undoubtedly will depend on the factors that facilitated past successful strategies: proactivity in making choices, flexibility over rigidity, and discipline in thinking when applying force in the pursuit of political goals.⁸⁰ It also will require an understanding of the influence of cognitive limitations, organizational politics, military culture, and civil-military relations that can preclude the timely conduct of strategic assessments.⁸¹

NOTES

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