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Rethinking the Challenge of Counterinsurgency Warfare:

Working Notes

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Much of the analysis of counterinsurgency is similar to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, except the men are not totally blind and the elephant keeps changing its shape and behavior:

- We see the portion of the problem with we fight or work with directly, or where we focus our research.
- We read the same old histories and case studies – forgetting all have failed before.
- We reinvent the same technical solutions in new forms.
- We find the answer that suits the facts, as we know them.

The question is how should the US really deal with these issues, and how do we become less blind and more conscious of the fact the elephant is not static and is not subject to rules we can issue in simplified form.

- There is an old joke about Americans as having the same solution to every problem: “Simple, quick, and wrong.”
- In this case, it is not as much of a joke as should be: We always do seem to begin with “simple, quick, and wrong.”
- Or, to paraphrase another old joke, we enter the fight like we were entering a third marriage: seeking a triumph of hope over experience.

This highlights the first point I want to make this afternoon: Winning requires acceptance of the complexity and instability of operations, that each war tends to be a special case, and that any kind of victory takes time and patience.

- Can learn from past cases, but need to focus on the case at hand.
- Accept the fact that situation is usually truly complex, and very country, time, threat, and ally specific.
- These complexities are made worse by the fact that:
 - Such wars usually only become serious because allies – especially conflict nations – are weak, incompetent, and in many ways unpopular; torn apart by internal factions and conflicts, and/or all of the above.
 - War evolves and enemy learns; for every approach and tactic there is a counter-tactic.
 - The law of unintended consequences is usually unavoidable at every level: Impact on enemy, impact on ally, impact on neighbors, impact on US policy, grand strategic impact.
- The search for quick and simple means we also go to war lying to ourselves:
 - Infantile neocons slogans in Iraq versus infantile neoliberal slogans in Vietnam. Which Administration was less prepared for the realities that followed: Kennedy or Bush?
 - Which Secretary of Defense was less able to deal with the realities of war: McNamara or Rumsfeld?

- Warfighters and military analysts are no better:
 - Easy to assert solutions – saw this in Vietnam, El Salvador, Lebanon in 82-84, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq. (oil spots, pacification zones, hearts and mind, decisive force.)
 - Saw French do in aftermath of Vietnam and Algeria; British in Malaya and Northern Ireland.
- The more you actually know, the more dynamic and uncertain the reality is.
- Time and resources almost always much longer and larger than want.
- Almost impossible to control history and grand strategic outcome; can only influence, not dictate.

The second point, and one that follows on these comments is one we repeatedly learn but then seem, to perpetually forget. Not every game is worth playing, and sometimes the best way to win is not to play at all.

- Cannot fall into the trap of waiting until have a national consensus that a “vital strategic interest” is at stake. Often need to act preventively or to deal with a comparatively low level crisis in at least humanitarian terms.
- **But**, far too easy to mischaracterize the situation; see intervention as too easy, and need for action as too great.
- Vietnam in 2000: NASA water, US fighters, Investors Journal; Duncan Sandys on Jomo Kenyetta.
- Letting some problems burn out is often at least as valid an option as intervention; particularly if cannot really shape the full outcome.
- **Must always consider the options**
 - Containment is often a better alternative: Iraq? Iran? Syria?
 - Work through local and allies proxies or either demand they be dominant or do not engage not at all.
 - Coalitions of pressure through allies and UN: Libya, Iran.
 - Selective strikes plus regime change? Stay outside.
- **If must engage, limit engagement and goals; accept the fact that limited war always means some form of defeat is acceptable.**
 - Haiti, Liberia,
 - Iraq?
 - Cannot get the last terrorist; stay to the end.
 - Thin line between acceptable outcome, partial victory, and limited defeat.
 - Change the map and not the world.
- Ruthless self-interest mixed with only one balancing consideration: Is the probable long-term outcome for the people involved really worth the American sacrifice.

The third point is that focusing on the military dimension is an almost certain path to grand strategic defeat in a serious conflict. If we must engage, and sometimes we must, then need to plan for both complexity and cost. Must again stress the dangers of oversimplifying and generalizing versus being case specific

- Have to prepare for either risk of long-engagement and escalation or set very clear limits and act upon them regardless of short-term humanitarian costs.
- **Look at the entire mission:**
 - **Maximize and sustain local, regional, and international support;** when make trade-offs with support and consensus, make them honestly and objectively.
 - **Plan for the risks of terrorism, insurgency, and escalation;** pay the cost upfront. Do a much as possible to contain the situation from the start.
 - **Accept the fact that the US can never win a serious conflict alone;** treat allies as full partner, build-up coalitions and local forces; prepare for “full spectrum conflict.”
- **Winning a “full spectrum conflict” means:**
 - **Acknowledging that most wars worth fighting cannot be won militarily,** and that shaping conflict termination and the grand strategic aftermath is the primary definition of victory. “And then a miracle occurs...”
 - A continuing ideological and political struggle for international, regional, and local support.
 - Stability operations and nation-building over a period of years – often exceeding five.
 - Effort to reshape political system and governance; win hearts and minds in practical sense. People cannot “live in the dawn of tomorrow; they must live in the noon of today.”
 - Effort to use aid dollars as supplement or replacement for bullets and bombs – both as short-term expedients and to bring longer-term stability.
 - Finding ways to work with the host government(s) and local powers to create the political and diplomatic conditions for victory.
 - Honestly preparing the American people and our allies for the real nature of the war to be fought, seeking Congressional and popular approval, and sustaining expense and sacrifice through truth, not spin.
 - Staying long enough to win.
 - **Having a limitation or disengagement strategy** and a strategy for communicating and exploiting it.
 - No one can guarantee success, and no limited war should be opened or surrounded in the same domestic and international political rhetoric as truly vital or existential conflict.

- Such a strategy should not be communicated in ways that encourage resistance or the enemy. **But**,
 - The host government and actual allies should know they must take responsibility.
 - The world should know the US is ready to withdraw without retreating from an area.

The final points that I would like to make about counterinsurgency focus on the problem of warfighting, and I should stress that my concerns are not with the details of military strategy and tactics, but rather with broader lessons I have learned over more than 40 years from Vietnam to Iraq:

- **We need to focus relentlessly on the desired outcome of the war and not the battle or overall military situation.** The moment the US military lose focus on the outcome, the priority becomes the battle at the cost of other priorities.
- **We cannot afford to underestimate the enemy or our vulnerability. Capable opponents will never fight us on our own terms:**
 - **Will seek to fight us below and above our threshold of conventional warfighting superiority.**
 - Stupid to call enemies cowards or terrorists because will not fight on our terms – similar to 19th century complaints about Zulus and Boers.
 - **Fighting below our threshold** of conventional warfighting superiority means will engage us tactically in ways that minimize or avoid our ability to exploit superior battle management/C4I, technical IS&R, precision weapons, night vision, armor, airpower, etc.
 - Exploit time, attrition, and casualties as weapons. Victory by outwaiting.
 - Win through disruption, fear, and paralysis of ally.
 - In most cases, do not need to win their objectives (which in any case may be impractical), simply keep denying us the ability to achieve ours.
 - Will always have an option as long as they have substantial political tolerance or support. There is no decisive conventional military option against an adaptive enemy with significant political leverage.
 - **Fighting above our threshold** means taking advantage of superior ability to handle political and ideological dimension, local cultural, political, and religious factors.
 - It also means isolating us from our allies, forcing us to take over as much of the fight as possible, fragmenting or defeating efforts at local politics, governance, security, and economic development.
 - Level of difficulty very case specific.

- In Iraq, wasted years realizing Iraq was Iraq; in Vietnam lost Buddhists and created myth of elected government.
 - In Kosovo and Bosnia, opponent lost.
 - Weapons of mass destruction possible future alternative.
- **To win, every US military officer and civilian must understand we must win politically, not militarily, and use full spectrum of options.**
 - Stability operations, nation building, conflict termination are more important than fighting and tactical operations, not less.
 - Every tactical action must have a political context and set of goals.
 - Use of economic aid, building political system, establishing local security and governance are at least as critical as tactical victory.
 - Need risk taking and experienced civilians to match the military, create civil-military jointness. Do not need State Department and DHS civilians who won't go into the field, take risks, and who cower in the green zone or fortress embassies.
 - **The key battle is always political and ideological at every level from the local to the international.** No military victory is possible without political victory.
 - Political victory is always local and regional, never just national. You can't win where you do not go *and stay*.
 - In almost all of the world, personal relations with locals at every level are critical, and require continuity, real area expertise, *and continuity*.
 - The military need to create effective area officers with real career tracks, but meaningful civilian national builders, aid teams, even more critical.
 - Must create specialized units and assignment systems with long tours, and suitable payment, career rewards. Need 18-24 month assignments with substantial overlap.
 - **Victory is always allied victory – not ours. The US must focus on developing local forces, local governance, local politics, local security, and local economics. It must move to the supporting role as soon as possible.**
 - We begin to lose when we take over, we begin to win when our local allies take over.
 - We cannot win hearts and minds, only local government and forces can. We will never have enough language and cultural experience; our values will never be their values.
 - We can never get enough Americans to go native. You can take the American out of America, but with rare exceptions, you cannot take America out of the American.
 - **Far more is needed than a new focus on interoperability with local forces. Developing allied forces that can lead and dominate the battle**

is the key to success. American warfighters buy time for a perceived or real victory by others.

- This will often be the key military mission from day one. At a minimum, it must begin immediately and be given high local political and media priority.
- “Legitimacy” in such environments is generally more dependent on how well the local government can take over such missions, and the inclusiveness and political conduct of such forces, than how the government is chosen.
- In most cases, the US needs to learn to be more adaptive to local ways of organizing and fighting, and less prone to zero base and reinvent local forces.
- Political, ethnic, and sectarian divisions and realities are part of the mission. So is the risk that part of such forces can turn and become part of the problem.
- A full partnership means much more than having allied combat units to substitute for US units.
- Need to build effective Ministries, create effective HQs and battle management, create forces can finance and sustain. The US must also prepare for the time when the partner leads.
- Need to consider longer-term advisory role from start, and have five year plans, not five month plans.
- Local security and local governance are as important as local warfighters. Effective ministries, regional authorities, and putting a *lasting* government and police presence in place at the local level are critical.
 - Training local police and governance and supporting them is as critical as training national military and security forces.
- Democracy is the last, not the first, priority. Security, effective governance and services, rule of law and limits to corruption, education, health, and employment all have a much higher priority.
- **Situational awareness and effective intelligence means full recognition of these realities:**
 - The US military and government cannot afford to fall in love with mission, and live with illusions or denial.
 - “Positive attitudes” and “group think” are self-inflicted wounds. Need ruthless objectivity.
 - Technology and HUMINT equally limited tools; keys are informed, expert analysis and constant local engagement mixed with major efforts to expand allied capabilities.

- Humancentric is more important than netcentric, and real expertise at the local, cell, and tribal level – coupled to use of direct contact -- is going to be more critical than netting.
- Targeting and tactical operations require extensive expertise at the political as well as military level.
- Need to “localize” intelligence support from allied forces and governance as soon as possible.