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THINKING**

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IDEOLOGICAL WARS AND MAGICAL THINKING

Abstract:

Over the last decade, one of the main reasons for military interventions in armed struggles in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq has been the ideological vision of conflicts. The problem that this conception of operations poses is that the level of ambition it demands is very high in comparison with the military efforts we are willing to assume. This leads to the formulation of faulty strategies and to the stagnation of conflicts. Ideological concepts make military interventions easier, but it is not enough to carry them out and less still to win. In fact, in order to begin a military intervention, more solid reasons are needed; reasons closer to political realism and to the defense of national interests. Therefore, in order to succeed in modern conflicts, the design of coherent strategies is in order. These should start with the desired end state and, from this point, they should define the way to get there and the mechanisms needed to achieve it. This requires to limit the level of ambition and to use adequate means in accordance with the set objectives.

Key words:

Ideology, Level of ambition, COIN Doctrine, Magical Thinking, Objectives.

THE IDEOLOGICAL VISION OF CONFLICTS

At the outset of the invasion of Afghanistan, the mainstream thought defended that the roots of evil were to be found in the Arab societies. Moreover, according to this thinking, in order for actions like the 9-11 not to be repeated again, the United States had the duty to employ its formidable military power, even if unilaterally, as catalyst for transformation within a gigantic process of social re-engineering. In this way, as stated by President Bush, the strategic objective of the 2001 invasion had to be building a blooming democracy that could serve as an alternative for an odious ideology.

However, the years that have elapsed since the invasion of Afghanistan provides us with added insight and we can thus assert that the ideological vision of war translated into unattainable levels of ambition for the military forces. For that reason, the military campaigns, initially conceived as limited, ended up becoming never-ending wars, whose final objectives were increasingly questioned. In the end, the very same mistake that occurred in Vietnam was repeated, in which the old cliché stated that instead of a ten-year war, it was a one-year war repeated ten times.

Wars driven by ideological reasons, although not limited to them, pose a problem: the moment soldiers are deployed to the areas of operations, the level of ambition is very high and success is expected within a very short time frame. For this reason, planning processes take place within short time frames, normally within the period of time that military commanders last. And planning is rarely done to alleviate future consequences derived from those decisions taken prior to the conflict. This leads to a very difficult situation because in theatres where the main threat is an insurgency, the design of coherent strategies requires a commitment of various years, so that these strategies could be launched, and so many more years are needed for them to succeed.

The former Ambassador in Pakistan General Karl Eikenberry harshly recognized the risks associated with ideological wars when he asserted that "when we went into Afghanistan it's fair to say that all of us – the international community, the Americans, the Afghans – did not fully understand the level of effort that would be needed to achieve some of the goals and objectives that we initially set for ourselves".¹

The danger of operating for ideological reasons is that political leaders, but also military chiefs, end up becoming intellectually arrogant and operationally strict. This leads them to ignore that complex security issues can hardly be resolved with simple solutions and that relying exclusively on the use of military forces normally generates monumental failures at the strategic and operational levels.

Karl Eikenberry Former general talks on U.S' war. THE TARTAN, Carnegie Mellon's Student Newspaper Since 1906. Available in <http://thetartan.org/2013/9/30/news/eikenberry>.

IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE

The validity of the military doctrine according to which the military forces must operate is an absolutely clear-cut case related to the influence of ideological considerations. This doctrine known as counterinsurgency, or COIN, was jointly developed by the former Commander of the United States Central Command -and later responsible for its Central Intelligence Agency-, General Petraeus, along with the professor David Kilcullen. This is the doctrine that prevails today. The COIN doctrine claims that wars against insurgencies cannot be won with military force alone. In fact, in order to defeat the insurgency, it is necessary to win the hearts and minds of the population in which the intervention takes place. In other words, to achieve the security objective in places like Afghanistan it requires a vital commitment with the nation-building that goes beyond the mere military occupation of the country. In this way, the terms Counterinsurgency and national reconstruction become interchangeable sides of the same scale.²

Nevertheless, this suggestive and ideological military doctrine is easier said than done. Firstly, because this means to assume a serious presence prolonged in time that governments and public opinions refuse to accept and, secondly, because it also requires an extraordinary expansion of the traditional mission of the military forces, which is to succeed militarily. That is the reason why the simple idea that the final victory is only possible with the integral reconstruction of the country normally generates serious reticence among political and military decision-makers about its often unaffordable cost.

On the other hand, this doctrine is incomplete as it seems to accept that victory in modern counterinsurgencies may not be definitive, and that only permanent contention of insurgent or terrorist groups could be achieved at most. In this way, wars become, in economic terms, something similar to a competitive and violent market, in which no actor can aspire to total domination, to strategic victory. At most they can only aspire to maximize their advantages, whether military, political or economic.

Given that complete victory cannot be achieved, at the same time, this concept is becoming degraded until it is finally replaced with the simple idea that a more or less dignified exit is sufficient, with the consequences associated with it. In the end, we end up accepting exit strategies that are not oriented towards gaining victory. For this reason, these strategies should be considered as mere exit plans instead of strategies oriented towards success.

The conceptual limitations of this counterinsurgency doctrine seem to have been clearly understood in the operations in Libya. In this conflict, nobody suggested, not even in the United Nations resolution that legitimized the intervention, nor in the declarations of the main Western leaders, the

See FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency or see article Counterinsurgency Redux published in the Survival Magazine 2006-2007.

need for commitment for the reconstruction of the country, as the COIN doctrine claims: an objective, which from the very first moment was conceived as a too distant and ambitious one for the military forces deployed in the country.

In view of all of the above, it is easier to intervene with military forces when there is no pressure to leave a stable government or a reconstructed state behind. Moreover, the possibility that what eventually emerges from the intervention would be another more or less democratic government is assumed, but one with a kinder face. Thus, everything is easier from the very first moment we know that those reconstruction tasks that are so arduous for the military forces, the responsibility to modernize the economy and to put into effect political structures are tasks borne by the national authorities.

IDEOLOGY AND "MAGICAL THINKING"

The greatest risk that is taken when using military forces on an ideological basis is to fall into what it is usually called "magical thinking": that form of causal reasoning that assumes that an inevitable correlation exists between certain decisions or actions that we make or the results that we aim. The clearest example is the rain dance, in which one could believe that there is a direct relation between the execution of certain dances and rain production. This may be true in matters of faith and magic, but in strategy is not like that and neither is it in the use of military forces.

In 2002, magical thinking assumed that Afghanistan was safe and that it was necessary to reconstruct the country to create a situation of normality. In 2006 the Taliban had returned to the interior of the country and the magical thinking assumed that it was sufficient to gradually increase the number of troops in order to achieve its eradication. Similarly, in 2009 amid a strong rhetoric that emphasized the virtues of the counterinsurgency doctrine, the magical thinking stated that by imitating the famous surge applied in Iraq a few years before, the situation could be reversed. Finally, in 2011 it was thought that a transition strategy could be designed. A strategy that allowed a total retreat of forces in 2014, based on the idea that by that date, Afghan forces would be able to guarantee security to the country. However, we now lack any guarantee that it is really going to be like that. On the contrary, the challenges that are being posed relating to the transfer of responsibilities and to the future financing of the Afghan army and security forces, allows us to suspect that the idea of a post-international-intervention Afghanistan free of the Taliban could be just another example of magical thinking.

A paradigmatic case of magical thinking in the operational level has been the road construction in Afghanistan. The predominant idea since Roman times is that roads are an excellent tool to project military power, expand government action and the rule of law as well as to facilitate economic development. In other words, roads have been seen as the easiest solution to solve security issues, especially in rural areas. But roads are just roads, and hence they can also be used by the insurgency to besiege towns, capture entire districts, attack civilians, and execute complex ambushes against

international forces. That is exactly what has happened in Afghanistan; where the construction of paved roads instead of increasing security has led to its decrease while facilitating insurgent mobility and activity.

CONCLUSIONS

Ideological concepts make military interventions easier but it is not enough to carry them out. In fact, in order to begin a military intervention, more solid reasons are needed; reasons closer to political realism and to the defense of national interests. Only then, from this vision, we can understand why it was relatively easy to intervene in Libya under such an ideological concept as the responsibility to protect. It has not been however possible to reach the same thing until today in the case of Syria, where massive human rights violations are still taking place; and neither it was in Cambodia, Congo or Rwanda.

We cannot assert that ideology is going to disappear as an important element when deciding the use of military forces in future conflicts. However, its function tends to be reduced to play as a booster in the political decision-making and as a catalyst of popular will. The Libya intervention was decided under these parameters with the Operation Unified Protector. In that resolution, "all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack in the country" were authorized, while it excluded "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory".³

In view of all of the above, when using military forces, if one does not want to fall into ideological conceptions, one should work on the basis of the certainty that success in modern conflicts requires the design of coherent strategies. These should start with the desired end state and, from this point, they should define the way to get there and the mechanisms required to achieve it. This is what General Alonso Baquer used to call strategy of purposes (what), manners (how) and means (with what).⁴

The problem is that if we make this bottom-up analysis in an honest way, we arrive to the conclusion that we normally do not possess -or we are not willing to use- the necessary means to get to the desired solution, given the nature of modern conflicts and the uncertainty about the final outcome. For this reason, we become reluctant to use military forces in complex interventions operations. Syria or Iran would be paradigmatic examples of these considerations.

³ Approved by the 1973 Security Council resolution in March 17th 2011.
Miguel Ángel Alonso Baquer, ¿A qué denominamos guerra? Spanish Ministry of Defense, 2011

The conclusion that can be drawn from that and it is one that we have learnt over the last few years is that if we are not willing to accept a high level of commitment and sacrifice, including the need to stay for a long time, it is preferable and even much more realistic, to limit the level of ambition and to define adequate objectives to the efforts we are willing to make. We seem to have learned this lesson in Somalia, where we are now content with something as limited as it is to fight against piracy, or in Syria, where the possibility of an open intervention has not even been considered until today.

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