



Is Strategic Thinking Still Alive in the West?

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Questions are increasingly being raised in political, military and academic communities as to whether sufficient thinking and effort has gone, or is going, into strategic planning for national militaries. Examples noted below highlight questions related to the rationale provided for recent military interventions abroad by Canada and other Western partners. In parallel, the examples identify current challenges being faced in clearly articulating how these countries will identify, prioritize and respond to future threats in both the near and longer term. This paper suggests that the strategic thinking and planning necessary for protecting a country's national interests against possible threats it may face have become something of a lost art.

Whether in a military, commercial or political context, 'strategy' is most often understood as describing what level of resources (means) will be applied to particular courses of action (ways) to meet high-level objectives (ends). Typically, strategy is viewed as a high level road-map on how to achieve government or corporate policy. Strategies, in turn, can be influenced by a number of factors, such as the environment, culture, resources, etc.

Although the military cannot be expected to assess the entire strategic overview, since it is expected to focus on the tactical situation, it is anticipated that the military can provide advice to the civilian leaders in order that the most effective and appropriate strategic plan is implemented at the outset.

United Kingdom

Concern that strategic planning was a lost art was triggered in the UK by an address in December 2009 by the outgoing Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshall Sir Jack Stirrup, in which he claimed that Britain had lost the habit of making strategy. As he noted,

But one thing that's struck me in my present role, and I think requires urgent action over the next year, is the degree to which we seem to have lost an institutionalised capacity for, and culture of, strategic thought. I'm not saying that we don't have people who can think strategically, or that we haven't evolved a proper strategic basis for our actions. But we've seized on ability where we've found it, and as a result our formulation of strategy has been much harder than should have been the case. We've been hunter/gatherers of strategic talent, rather than nurturers and husbandmen.¹

Such concerns were then echoed by a committee of the House of Commons and a large number of academics. These concerns were reinforced by the uncertain consequences of Britain's engagements in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The suggestion was that the UK had not thought through what its involvement in these wars was supposed to achieve, nor the requirements or likely consequences of the involvement, largely because it had lost the habit of consulting the rear-view mirror and developing the agnostic and questioning ways of thought that develop from that.² As Dr. Geoffrey Till stated:

Did anyone ask for evidence that Britain's intervention in the intense factionalism of Afghanistan would be any more successful this time than it had been the first, second and third times that Britain had tried it? ... [The lack of questions is] hard to explain except in terms of the speed of events to which the UK felt it must respond (allowing insufficient time for consultation and strategic reflection) and, perhaps, the lack of defence experience among the political class. Nor is the quality of the advice that the military offers to ministers exempt from academic and insider criticism.³

The strategic driver behind the UK's initial involvement in Afghanistan was one shared by a number of states, many complying with broader NATO mandates, and in support of the broader US 'war on terrorism.' Initial interventions were in response to international efforts to track down and eliminate al-Qaeda leadership and infrastructure based in Afghanistan that was viewed as posing a terrorist threat to Western states in the immediate post-9/11 environment. As with other countries, however, concerns began to arise regarding the strategic 'ends' and 'means' when there was a gradual mission creep – from the original focus on al-Qaeda to protection of the central Afghan government, countering Taliban forces, reconstructing infrastructure, advancing gender-specific agendas, etc.

A strong indictment of the UK's intervention in Iraq and the lack of a clearly articulated strategic rationale behind it has been the subject of a variety of official reports and unofficial commentaries. Collectively, they have established that the military, political and legal cases for intervention were deficient, the ability of the United States to make decisions related to the broader campaign and undermine UK leadership of its own forces in Iraq was underestimated, preparation and planning for the campaign were inadequate and, most importantly, strategic ends – however improperly defined – were not met. Beyond questions regarding the role that strategy could or should have played relative to UK efforts, government explanations for the rationale behind the intervention in Iraq, or the lack thereof, led to serious charges of deceit, cover-up and misrepresentation against the government.

Similar to the United States, the UK began to question the strategic reasons why it ended up in Iraq and Afghanistan based on the eventual outcomes to these wars. In other words, did the actions require the involvement of British troops and to what end could such actions be deemed a 'strategic' success?

The United States

Given the depth of US interests and presence across the globe, a clear articulation of US policies and related strategies cannot help but be complex and complicated. Militarily, for example, decisions are required about where to position resources to respond to a variety of potential threats (e.g., conventional or small wars? resources to which service?). Broader strategies, such as how best to employ military resources, different doctrines (counter-terrorism v. counter-insurgency) and what international partnerships are required to meet strategic ends, necessitate high-level and coordinated discussions among senior-level civilian authorities and military leaders.

To examine whether there was appropriate application of US strategy in the traditional sense, one must look at the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. While questions persist as to whether a well-thought strategy was or was not applied in these two campaigns, a more interesting question is how the outcomes of these two interventions are influencing current strategic thinking within

both civilian and military leadership (i.e., pull backs/draw down) that, in turn, appear to be providing opportunities for other states to expand their influence at the expense of the United States.

The US National Defence Strategy (NDS) is produced every four years and is made up of the security documents presented by the US services and the US Coast Guard. It is established by the Office of the Secretary of Defence (OSD). From this document, the National Military Strategy (NMS) is written by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and signed-off by the Chairman. The three objectives of the NMS are as follows:

- to deter, deny and defeat state adversaries;
- to disrupt, degrade and defeat violent extremist organization (VEOs); and
- strengthen the US global network of allies and partners.⁴

An article by Gregory Foster, a professor at the National Defence University questions the utility of the NDS document of 2018. He notes that “[w]hat we know of the NDS comes from the 11 page, 4,900 word unclassified summary available to the public, which is distinct from the classified copy.... The latter copy is unlikely to provide anything appreciably more telling than the unclassified version, given the intellectual bandwidth of its preparers.”⁵

For starters, it is important to recognize that a strategy *document* – a quotidian, bureaucratic collection of words – isn’t necessarily a *strategy*, that is, a coherent conceptual architecture for dealing with and shaping the future. Thus, “the NDS document is a document, nothing more; its marketing as a bona fide strategy document grounded in strategic thinking is where the danger lies.”⁶

Iraq

To examine US strategy, you have to look at the US involvement in the Middle East; both in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US Army commissioned an unofficial two-volume history of the Iraq War, which shines a light on the need to examine how the United States understands, prepares for and conducts war.⁷ As noted, this review was conducted by the US Army and did not focus on the blemished political background of Messrs Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld’s intelligence reports about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and other risks. Such misinformation, indicating a weapons build-up by the leader in Iraq, led to the United States to invade Iraq in 2003.

One of the knocks against the otherwise comprehensive analysis is the report focused strictly on the operational and tactical aspects of the campaign. While these were obviously of primary interest to the military, the report did not address other factors, unsavory or otherwise, including a consideration of broader strategic sources, such as what were the strategic ends that would serve how the campaign was ultimately conducted.

Daniel J. Cormier, a professor at the US Navy War College examined the findings of this very complex report. In his review of the two-volume report, Cormier summarized the problems outlined by the report as follows:

The authors provided an unclassified account of how America’s senior military leaders in Iraq understood the conflict and reacted to the complex mosaic of challenges they faced. The second volumes begins by summarizing the flawed decisions made by senior US government

leaders early in the war. These included the proclamations that excluded Baath Party members from the new Iraqi government and disbanded the Iraqi Army, as well as constraints that Washington placed on American troop levels. Those choices disenfranchised Iraq's Sunni population and created a security vacuum. The former Iraqi soldiers and leaders resisted efforts to establish a new government in Baghdad. The decisions also revealed an American strategy for the conflict which was overly ambitious. For example, the objectives for the war were poorly aligned with the resources provided. Additionally, the US administration failed to sustain American public support or to create the international cooperation on which success depended. The administration never effectively responded to Syria's direct support of the Sunni insurgents and Iran's sponsorship of Shia attacks on US forces. This lack of coherent regional strategy ceded the initiative early to 'Syrian and Iranian proxies,' making the accomplishment of America's 'political and military objectives almost impossible.' ... The authors also detailed how the parliamentary elections in 2005 chiefly served to empower a new Shia elite that was beholden to the interests of religious and tribal-based factions. This led Iraqi government officials to pursue efforts to control the nation's security forces to dominate their Sunni rivals. A Kurdish push for semi autonomy for Iraq's northern provinces further demonstrated the scramble for power that American decisions unleashed. By 2006, Iraq effectively was divided along sectarian lines, jeopardizing its survival as a unitary state...⁸

The unanticipated outcomes related to the intervention into Iraq and the lack of strategic planning and forethought prior to the campaign have been well documented, starting with the lack of a clearly articulated and supported rationale for intervention in the first place.⁹ Undertaking a military campaign and subsequent stability operations 'on the cheap' indicates a clear lack of an exit strategy and objective (ends), and inconsistencies related to the application of appropriate counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies (ways) have been delineated both officially and unofficially.

By the end of 2008, the United States signed a strategic framework agreement with Iraq. The accord moved American forces out of Iraq's cities in the summer of 2009 and included a pledge to withdraw them completely by 2011.

The Iraqi Prime Minister thwarted the final attempts of the United States to build a strategic relationship with Iraq through a Status of Forces agreement that would have allowed a residual American advisory presence. Instead, Iraq's Shia-dominated government developed a closer relationship with Iran. The US Army report concludes that Iran was the "only victor from the war."

Professor Cormier also noted in his summary of the Iraq report that:

Commanders repeatedly and erroneously judged that Iraq was more stable than it was and that a rapid transfer of power was possible. This confusion was also seen in Vietnam. Additionally the nation's generals were never able to anchor military coalition efforts successfully to the political goals of the US in Iraq. This gap in strategy occurred in part because of a failure to discern the sociopolitical dynamics of Iraq and the Middle East; such as the rivalries that existed in Iraq and their link to its national politics.¹⁰

The US military involvement continued from 2003 until 2011, although America troops returned in 2014 to help fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – a mission which continues.

Cormier concludes his article with the challenges which lie ahead for the United States if it is to avoid repeating the same mistakes in future conflicts. Thus,

For the military, there is a need for substantive changes in how leaders are prepared to serve at the strategic level. This includes reconsidering how the context of modern warfare affects the efficacy of military force and conceptions of success as well as how hybrid warfare techniques and disruptive technologies – such as information, cyber, space, artificial intelligence, and robotics – challenge traditional preparations for conflict and competition. Importantly, the military needs senior leaders who are capable of wrestling with this complexity and linking the use of martial means to the context of the environment, as well as the political ends desired. They must also serve as custodians of competent and responsible strategic thinking. The ‘best’ military advice is irrelevant if it is not tied to achievable objectives.¹¹

The policy rationale for the intervention in Iraq was obviously very fluid as information unfolded that there was no weapons of mass destruction and no links to al-Qaeda. The decision to remove the Baathists within the Iraq Army and government was a significant disaster, leading to the Sunni uprisings and the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS).

In the longer term there lacked the capacity to engage effectively in counter-insurgency campaigns, and clearly no thought was given to strategic ends once the initial military operations were completed. As with Afghanistan, the strategic links were fragile at best.

Two issues come out of this. First, it is clear how important accurate and timely intelligence is at both strategic and operational levels, and the importance of its role in supporting informed decision-making when it comes to strategic planning. This became all the more important as the military role, and related operations, changed from invasion to stability operations. Iraq also served as an excellent example of what happens when ‘neutral’ intelligence reporting becomes politicized by political leaders to support their agendas. Second, while there are often policy challenges to making direct historical comparisons with past events, lessons learned from COIN experiences in Vietnam seemed to have been institutionally forgotten or neglected by the US military in Iraq; likely a result to some degree by the overwhelming conventional success of Gulf War I in the early 1990s. Instead, the United States constructed COIN strategies from the ground up once again. It had to re-examine questions to determine which approach would provide more success. Would it be better to establish a substantial number of forward operating bases in bandit country, or protect civilian populations and cut off insurgent access to them? What role should the military play in a successful COIN strategy, relative to other COIN tools or local forces? What support from local populations could militaries count on?

Afghanistan

With the final withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in February 1989, the United States was quick to remove itself from any further involvement in that country, despite the vicious civil war and emergence of the Taliban that immediately followed. Had al-Qaeda (AQ) leadership and infrastructure not located in that country, it is questionable whether the United States would have had any immediate strategic aims or interests in Afghanistan going forward, other than perhaps ensuring other countries did not achieve undue influence in that country.

After 9/11, President George W. Bush and his administration quickly determined that al-Qaeda, which was centred in Afghanistan, was responsible and must account for the terrorist attacks in New York City and on the Pentagon. With the support of the international community,

US actions began with air strikes on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, followed by the arrival of troops from the United States and other NATO countries. These actions, and the over-arching counter-terrorism-based strategy, had specific objectives (the removal or elimination of the AQ presence in the country), and presumably a related short-term exit strategy.

Things became more complicated in that country from a strategic perspective due to the resulting ‘mission creep’ that very quickly expanded the counter-terrorism mandate. Much of this can probably be placed at the feet of the neo-conservative agenda of the Bush administration, whose proponents saw events in Afghanistan as an opportunity to promote democratization in far-away places.

Consequently, the first order of business of the expanded agenda was the establishment of a more democratic and centralized government under President Hamid Karzai, something that was anathema to both Afghan society and culture. The new government, because of its fragile condition, needed protection, both literally and socio-economically.

The first challenge in doing so was to eliminate the threat posed by the Taliban. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were supportive of one another at the tactical level, but by no means did all the Taliban support al-Qaeda. The Taliban members were not international terrorists; al-Qaeda members often were. The Taliban were fighting against the ‘infidels’ who were seen as invaders in their country; similar to the British and the Soviets. Taliban leaders and much of the local population believed that the Western troops were invaders conducting a religious war against Muslims/Islam. As Matthew Hol, a top US civilian official in Zabul province, noted: “[w]e have special ops teams chasing after mid-level Taliban leaders who are not threatening the US; who are only fighting us really because we’re in their valley.”¹²

Some critics argued that the United States was annoyed that the Taliban leadership failed to surrender al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden to the Americans immediately after 9/11, and for that reason decided to invade Afghanistan. After Bin Laden fled to Pakistan and remained there until his demise, the United States focused on the Taliban, and not al-Qaeda. As would be the case in Iraq, the military focus quickly shifted from counter-terrorism to a much more lengthy and expensive counter-insurgency operation to meet the threat to the government posed by the Taliban. This, in turn, required a ‘hearts and minds’ based strategy. History has demonstrated that getting the right mix in terms of a coherent and successful COIN strategy has been both difficult in terms of implementation and questionable as to its success. In Afghanistan the Taliban has, over the years, expanded the degree of its territorial control over the country.

The second challenge was that the country’s infrastructure was in very bad shape after decades of internal conflict. Consequently, and in support of the broader ‘hearts and minds’ COIN strategy, parallel efforts were made to undertake a number of projects throughout the country (schools, hospitals, roads, irrigation, etc.), undertaken by Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). However, these initiatives most often required physical security of some kind provided by Western forces. Otherwise, efforts would be destroyed by local Taliban forces in the dead of night and/or workers (both local and international) would be intimidated or killed.

The situation was exacerbated by a number of other related issues over time, including conflicting policies regarding opium production, changes to the traditional relationship between central and provincial political leadership, the ongoing inability of domestic militaries and security forces to assume responsibility for security and defence mandates, and the conflicting agendas of external countries (Pakistan, India) related to Afghanistan. Finally, the military focus on Iraq starting in 2003 essentially resulted in Afghanistan becoming a second tier operation in terms of allocated resources and policy visibility

After close to two decades of military involvement in Afghanistan, outcomes have been less than satisfactory. This comes down to a lack of strategic thinking, as some members of the Bush administration belatedly came to realize. Part of the problem was that the United States did not know enough about the country it was invading. The United States tried to set up a strong central government in a country that had never had this. For many years the regions of the country were either controlled by the Taliban or local warlords “who ran parallel governments, collected taxes, administered justice, and appointed local leaders.”¹³ As well, it was easy for the Taliban to argue that the government in Kabul was controlled by foreigners, was completely corrupt, and was unable to provide either good governance or security.

Robert Gates, who became Secretary of State of Defense in 2006, wrote in his 2014 book *Duty* that:

Our lack of understanding of Afghanistan, its culture, its tribal and ethnic politics, its power brokers, and their relationships, was profound. After becoming Secretary of Defense ... I came to realize that in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, having decided to replace the regime, when it came to, ‘with what?’ the American government had no idea what would follow.

These experiences – these ghosts – led to my strong conviction that the idea of creating a strong, democratic (as we would define it), more or less honest effective central government in Afghanistan, to change the culture, to build the economy and transform agriculture, was a fantasy.¹⁴

Given the desire essentially to reconstruct the political, socio-economic and cultural foundations of a country, it is not surprising that broader strategies and objectives, including those of in-country militaries, were either complicated or undermined by a myriad of competing objectives or agendas by numerous different parties. Militaries were obliged to adapt to an ever-changing policy landscape and objectives that were not accompanied by well-thought out corresponding strategies. Instead, militaries were forced to respond in an ad hoc, ‘seat of the pants’ manner.

The criticisms of US actions in Afghanistan have come from many quarters. Journalist Ahmed Rashid wrote succinctly that after more than a decade, “NATO has achieved none of its strategic aims – rebuilding the Afghan state, defeating the Taliban or stabilizing the region.”¹⁵ As of 2003, the United States was fighting both in Iraq and Afghanistan which was causing a significant drain on defence resources and manpower.

Similar to Iraq, it is difficult to conclude that the United States can declare a victory in Afghanistan after close to 20 years of fighting the Taliban. Thus,

- After close to 20 years fighting the Taliban, as of January 2020, they managed or controlled approximately 50% of the country;
- The reconstruction projects coordinated by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been a failure;
- Since 2001, opium cultivation has increased as a major source and income for the local population;
- Afghan forces are still unable to support themselves and still suffer increasing casualty rates and desertion, resulting in ongoing training problems for NATO instructors;
- One-quarter of Afghans are unemployed;
- As of September 2019, 775,000 US troops have been deployed to Afghanistan, with 2,400

troops killed, and over 20,000 wounded. At least 28,267 US troops have been deployed five times or more to Afghanistan¹⁶;

- It is estimated that the war in Afghanistan will cost the US taxpayer \$2 trillion. The United States borrowed heavily in financing this war, with costs of up to \$600 billion in interest on the loans through to the year 2023.¹⁷ It will take years to repay these costs.

There is a reason why Afghanistan has often been referred to as the ‘graveyard’ of empires.

The significant question which must be addressed is what was the policy-strategy link in the prolonged and costly engagement if it was recognized over time that the Taliban did not represent a domestic threat to the United States. Some would argue that the Bush administration wanted to establish US-friendly democratic institutions in the region where none existed before.

From a strategic narrative perspective, history would suggest that the United States had no strategic interests in the country after the Soviets departed, and the strategic narrative/rationale necessary to maintain public and political support for the continued US presence in the country after 9/11 proved to be inadequate or ill-defined.

As of January 2020, there are approximately 14,000 US troops still remaining in Afghanistan. President Donald Trump is currently attempting to work-out a peace agreement with the Taliban and the Afghan government in Kabul, and remove all US troops from this country.

It is interesting to note that as of March 2020, the US Marines and Army are returning to their previous roles and operations. After the past two decades, as a result of 11 September 2001, they ended up fighting in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. They will now be transforming into the US first line of defence in the Pacific.¹⁸ This change of strategy was a result of the 2018 defence document which declared that great power competition with Russia and China would be the new priority.

In both the Afghan and Iraq interventions, the characterization of counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency efforts as part of a broader ‘war on terrorism’ has arguably served to obfuscate the ability of US administrations to develop and implement successful strategies. Wars typically have a defined objective, occur for a limited period of time, and most often result in some sort of negotiated settlement. Strategies are developed accordingly. But how do you define a ‘war on terrorism’ as being both successful and completed, the ‘ends’ of any strategy? Is it over when all terrorists everywhere are eradicated? When no attacks have been undertaken in a home country after a certain period of time? Does this include just ‘international’ terrorists, or those located domestically as well? How do you negotiate with parties that are most likely not interested in negotiating (the Taliban being a recent exception)?

The strain on military forces after almost 20 years of operations, and lack of public support for any more boots on the ground being sent anywhere after decades-long campaigns that produced only marginal results after much blood and treasure was expended, is clearly governing current defence policy and strategies, such as they may be, in the United States. Other than a modest presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (where US efforts are all about confronting ISIL forces, not regime change, which is the objective of longstanding allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia), the focus has been on a reduction of US forces in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. The vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces, and therefore US influence, has in turn created opportunities for other states (Russia, China, Iran) to step in to fill the void, either militarily or economically, without firing a shot, or any sort of lesser confrontation. Other than the decades-long suffering of indigenous populations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the loss of US legitimacy in the global community, this is perhaps the most disconcerting outcome of the absence of strategic

thought or planning on the part of US administrations and military leadership over the past 20 years.

In December 2019, the *Washington Post* released “The Afghanistan Papers,” consisting of more than 2,000 pages of previously unpublished notes of interviews with persons who played a direct role in the war.¹⁹ The report was generated by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction as part of an \$11 million project meant to “diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan,” called “Lessons Learnt.”

One general interviewed for the project stated that US officials “were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan [and] we didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking.” The report noted that officials lost sight of the end goal in Afghanistan shortly after the invasion. It wasn’t clear if the United States was committed to nation building, defeating terrorists, or providing aid. As the report noted “this led to an unclear military landscape in which US troops after couldn’t tell friend from foe in battle.”

One key takeaway in “The Afghanistan Papers” is that it wasn’t necessarily the *military* that was lacking in strategic thought. It was merely responding as best it could to the policy direction coming from civilian sources. It was Washington that was lacking in strategic thinking as mission creep would suggest. Governments at large, not just the military, must show their ability to think strategically. “The Afghanistan Papers” also reveal that despite high levels of failure and confusion, there were “explicit and sustained efforts to deliberately mislead the public.” US officials consistently misconstrued statistics, including casualty counts, to fit the narrative of sustained military progress and success.

Syria

With respect to the US role in Syria, there are a number of strategic questions which should be addressed. I will ask just one here. How strategic was it for the United States specifically to abandon its Kurdish allies in the country, remove most of its ground troops, and relinquish the territory to both Russia and Turkey? Russia now has established airbases in Syria and has reinforced its naval port at Tartus, with access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Canada

The number one priority for Canada’s military is, of course, defence of the realm. However, other than the threat posed by Soviet nuclear missiles, Canada’s geography and security relationship with the United States regarding the North American continent have meant that the government of Canada has historically had flexibility and discretion when it comes to the employment of its military forces. Other than a short period between 2001-2005, when the security priority was the domestic, mostly civilian, response to the events of 9/11, Canada’s security strategy has largely employed military units to push Canada’s security perimeter beyond domestic shores; often in conjunction with broader foreign policy objectives. Canada’s role in NATO, peacekeeping activities in the 1960-80s, and peace *making* thereafter (Balkan states, Somalia, East Timor, Haiti, etc.) serve as examples of this broader strategy.

In terms of strategic ‘ends,’ are Canadian strategies linked to government policies specifically prioritized as opposed to the broad statements reflected in policy papers? How are these priorities divided between domestic and global-based threats (i.e., Canada’s Arctic sovereignty versus threats to the Balkan countries)? One of the significant problems with strategic documents is that

they don't enunciate provisions for the means to carry out the strategies, such as providing the three services the appropriate equipment to carry out their respective roles and mandates.

Canada has issued three defence policy statements since 2005: the Defence Policy Statement in 2005; the Canada First Defence Strategy in 2008; and Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy in 2017.

The 2005 document laid out a framework for transforming the Canadian Forces to make it "more relevant, more responsive and more effective."²⁰ Central to this approach was General Rick Hillier's plan, as Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), to transform the Canadian Forces to achieve greater integration of joint operations and better interoperability with partners and allies, and to increase capital investment on major equipment.²¹ What this document did not do, however, was to lay out the fiscal plan to achieve this vision.²²

General Hillier used his influence to shape Prime Minister Paul Martin's decision in 2005 to send Canadian troops to Kandahar, Afghanistan.²³ Hillier argued that taking a leadership role in Afghanistan would demonstrate Canada's commitment to the United States after Prime Minister Jean Chretien's decision not to participate in the Iraq War.

Similar to the UK were the questions that were not raised in the Canadian House of Commons before the country engaged in war in Afghanistan. Such basic questions were never asked in the House as to why Canada would be launching an attack in the first place, what it was supposed to achieve, what the needs and requirements were, what would be considered a 'success' for the mission, and what would be the end-date for the operation.

One of the primary reasons for Canada entering the war in Afghanistan from a strategic sense, and recognizing that time was at the essence, was placating the United States as Canada's major ally and largest trading partner. Since Canada failed to join the United States in the Iraqi conflict, entering the Afghanistan war did serve Canadian interests by assisting the United States in this war zone.

It is interesting to note that a new research paper by Alan Barnes, entitled "Getting it Right: Canadian Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, 2002-2003," says that Canadian intelligence assessments on Iraq were generally accurate in the run-up to the US-led invasion of 2003 – unlike reports produced in Washington and London which were used to justify the war in that country. The paper notes that "the most notable difference in the Canadian case was the lack of any significant political or other outside pressure on assessment organizations to slant the Iraq analysis in a particular direction."²⁴

From a timing perspective, after 9/11 feelings in the United States were running very high and no one at the time was questioning the political decision to go after Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan as rapidly as possible. Under these conditions Canada quickly agreed to assist its neighbour militarily and send forces to assist in the operations in Afghanistan. Later the media began asking questions about who actually took part in the 9/11 attack and whether Bin Laden was actually located outside Afghanistan.

From the Canadian perspective, its forces took a larger role in Afghanistan three years after the original invasion, in which case it could be argued that the primary strategy was already set and Canada's influence in changing this was likely minimal at this stage of the war.

As per my argument in the US section of this paper, the first question I would have asked our political leadership at the time is why are we attacking the Taliban in Afghanistan when al-Qaeda has moved out of this country and into Pakistan. Should we not be looking into the Pakistan's military (ISI) relationship with al-Qaeda in its western provinces along the border with Afghanistan? What about the American military pursuit of Bin Laden in Tora Bora being scaled

back in order to concentrate a military build-up in Iraq in 2003? There appears to be very little documentation of strategic questions being asked by members in the Canadian House of Commons before the deployment of troops to Afghanistan before eventually Canada withdrew its forces on the 15th March 2014. Forty thousand Canadian troops served in that country with 158 killed and 1,800 wounded during this campaign.²⁵

There have been several critics questioning Canada's involvement in the Afghanistan War. Among others, Retired Major General David Fraser, the former Canadian Commander in Afghanistan, questioned the rationale for fighting the Taliban from the beginning of the military campaign.²⁶ Gwynn Dyer, the noted Canadian military historian wrote:

[N]o Taliban member has ever been involved in terrorist attacks abroad (except in Pakistan), and it is very much doubted that Osama bin Laden told the Taliban leaders that he was planning to launch the 9/11 attacks. It would have been a dangerous breach of security, and more important, it would have alarmed his hosts, who would have anticipated that they would be blamed for the attacks and be invaded by American forces. A brief military incursion to destroy the al-Qaeda group in Afghanistan might have made sense, but the continual military occupation of the entire country for thirteen years after the surviving al-Qaeda members have fled across the border into Pakistan, a much better base for their operations, was an expensive irrelevance.²⁷

The Canada First Defence Strategy issued in 2008 under Prime Minister Stephen Harper represented a significant change in the operational priorities of the Canadian Forces, away from a focus on international commitments to the maintenance of Canadian sovereignty and security at home. General Hillier's vision for a Standing Contingency Task Force for expeditionary operations disappeared and was replaced by commitments to the Arctic and domestic rapid reaction battalions.²⁸ Critics, however, argued that the 2008 document was one of "money without a vision."²⁹

The 2017 defence policy document issued by Justin Trudeau's government is supposedly based on a 20-year horizon. It states:

This policy is grounded in a thorough assessment of the global security environment – one that is marked by the shifting balance of powers, the changing nature of conflict, and the rapid evolution of technology, increasing threats such as global terrorism and those in the cyber domain which transcend national borders. These trends undermine the traditional security once provided by Canada's geography. Defending Canada and Canadian interests thus not only demands robust domestic defence but also requires active engagement abroad.

The document then goes on to describe its vision:

- Strong at Home – Canada's sovereignty well-defended by a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) also ready to assist in times of national disaster, other emergencies and search and rescue;
- Secure in North America – active in a renewed defence partnership in NORAD and with the United States; and
- Engaged in the World – with the CAF doing its part in Canada's contributions to a more stable, peaceful world, including through peace support operations and peacekeeping.

To succeed, the document goes on to say that the Department of National Defence will initiate the following steps:

- Actively address threats abroad for stability at home;
- Field a well-educated, combat-ready military;
- Develop awareness of its operating environment to better predict and respond to crises;
- Act as a responsible and valued partner with NORAD, NATO and Five-Eyes partners;
- Work with the United States to ensure that NORAD is modernized to meet existing and future challenges;
- Balance traditional relationships with the need to engage emerging powers;
- Field advanced capabilities to keep pace with allies and maintain an advantage over potential adversaries;
- Address the threats stemming from terrorism;
- Bolster its ability to respond to increasingly severe natural disasters at home and abroad; and
- Increase presence in the Arctic over the long term and work cooperatively with Arctic partners.

One of the important elements of the 2017 defence policy was the increase to the defence budget for the next 10 years; from \$18.9 billion in 2016-2017 to \$32.7 billion by 2026-2027 on an accrual basis. Specific capital equipment was named for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and the Regular Force was projected to grow by 3,500 personnel to 71,500.

Similar to any business corporate strategic document, it is important to clarify how the broad parameters listed in the plan are to be actioned over this 20-year period. As well, similar to a yearly business plan, it needs to be determined who in the government and DND is ensuring that such broad steps are actually implemented on a yearly basis. With this in mind, there are a number of questions that could be asked in terms of the goals and plans in Strong, Secure, Engaged, and their implementation. For example:

- How do you “address threats abroad”? Should you not identify the perceived threats, such as Russia and China, and outline their potential risk potential to the country? What equipment do they have which may cause defence problems and how do you alleviate such systems? Why are these countries a potential threat?
- One of the active items in the plan is to modernize NORAD to meet existing and future challenges. Dr. James Fergusson’s January 2020 Commentary for the MacDonald-Laurier Institute, “Missed Opportunities: Why Canada’s North Warning System is Overdue for an Overhaul,” builds the technical, military and operational case for the NWS modernization in a great deal of detail. To date, however, after four years and recent concerns raised by the United States, the government has not undertaken any action to upgrade the North Warning System. Canada will have to commit billions of dollars to complete this upgrade, in concert with Washington.
- There is mention that DND should have an increased presence in the Canadian Arctic. To date, as compared with many Arctic countries, it has a limited profile in the Arctic. Russia has a very active military presence in the Arctic region and China is building significant icebreakers to possibly transit the Northwest Passage. More infrastructure is required to be

built in our Arctic for use by the RCN and the Canadian Coast Guard. Unlike many other Nordic countries, there are very few large docking facilities in the Canadian High Arctic for naval or commercial shipping. As well, the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) being built for the RCN at Irving Shipyard/Halships are behind schedule.³⁰ The first AOPS was delivered to the RCN in the summer of 2020, after repeated delays over the years. The second AOPS was supposed to be delivered in late 2020 with the last of the six ships to arrive in 2024. In addition to the schedule slippage, there are questions about the AOPS capability. In 2017, the Senate Defence Committee raised a number of serious concerns about the ship's capabilities.

- What does it mean to “field advanced capabilities to keep pace with allies and maintain an advantage over potential adversaries”? Acquiring, for example, 88 F-35s would be a step ahead but to date no decision has been made to acquire these fifth generation fighter aircraft. Other NATO countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark and Norway are already flying these aircraft in operational squadrons. It will be years before Canada is able to do so!
- How is DND “to address the threats stemming from terrorism”? What is the role of the three services to counter such threats?
- Strong, Secure, Engaged states that Canada should be more engaged in peace support operations and peacekeeping. Canada's involvement in ‘peacekeeping’ operations has been on the decline for years. The recent operations in Mali in 2018/19 consisted of primarily helicopter evacuations in the northeastern section of the country.
- Although Strong, Secure, Engaged wants to increase the Canadian Forces to 71,500 personnel, to date this figure has been difficult to achieve. The RCN is significantly short of sailors and the RCAF is short of pilots.

Much has been written concerning Canada's procurement system for acquiring capital equipment for the three services. Very few of these articles have been complimentary when compared to the acquisition of such equipment by other NATO countries. As any system or program takes time to develop and implement, and capabilities typically remain in place for decades, ideally there should be a reliable and sustained means to deliver, and it should be linked to some overarching strategic ends. The way of implementing a strategy to meet the ends is obviously linked to procurements for the CAF. It must be asked if they are appropriate.

Conclusions

Here we return to the question asked in the title of this paper – is strategic thinking still alive in the West? As quoted earlier, Cormier suggests that today's threat environment is more complex than in the past – i.e., that hybrid warfare techniques and disruptive technologies, such as information, cyber, space, artificial intelligence, and robotics, challenge traditional preparations for conflict and competition.”³¹ Thus the need for strategic thinking and planning is greater than before. But is the threat environment more complex, and is the current need for strategic thinking greater? Did those charged with implementing the strategy of containment during the Cold War face any fewer multi-dimensional threats? There were complex threats in the past as well. For example: there was the loss of China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam to communist ideologies; sooner than expected nuclear capabilities on the part of the Soviets; Communist support for ‘wars

of liberation' in Third World countries; advances in missile technologies by the Soviets; and numerical superiority of conventional forces on the part of the Warsaw Pact countries. Did civilian and military leadership get it right when it came to implementing strategies to address the broader Cold War threat, and have post-Cold War strategies merely got it wrong, as opposed to not being consciously considered at all?

At any time, strategic planning and implementation is fraught with pitfalls even for the most astute and 'tuned-in' political and military leadership. Many of the key variables necessary for a well-articulated strategy – knowledge of the capacity and intent of potential adversaries, the degree of support from allies, the reliability and veracity of intelligence, public support and domestic politics, and the complexity of international relations – are in most cases beyond the control of those creating and implementing strategy. Furthermore, as was the case for Afghanistan, strategy is often required to be crafted in times of immediate urgency. Achieving the optimum balance among ways, means and ends, capabilities and commitments, foresight and uncertainty, and the need for strategic 'discipline' versus flexibility, will rarely if ever happen. The conduct of strategy also requires leadership to do a lot of soul searching to provide frank and honest assessments about strategic intentions and capabilities, what constitute 'national interests,' what is the best role for the military in whole-of-government efforts, and how to integrate the 'how' with the 'what' and 'why.' This is difficult to do if policies are working at cross-purposes to each other, short-term politics assume a prominent role, different agendas are in play, and a fair degree of hubris consumes most of the oxygen in the room.

As has been noted, strategy is unequivocally tied to the implementation of policy. In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, this nexus was hard to identify, and in both cases this led to strategies that were constantly in need of upgrading or revision, which could lead one to conclude that strategies were either ad hoc or non-existent. In the case of Afghanistan, changing policy objectives after the invasion in 2001 resulted in mission creep for militaries, and this required ongoing changes at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. By the time Canada arrived in force to the country (2005), however, the strategic and operational environment, with its inherent challenges, had actually settled down to some degree. Consequently the policy road-map for the conduct of operations was already effectively established. As noted previously, a case could be made that Canada's intervention in Afghanistan was driven more by issues related to the relationship with the United States than to a need to address national security concerns. That said, Canada's participation in Afghanistan did continue to be a priority foreign policy focus for the period Canadian troops remained.

In the case of Iraq, policies and related strategies were necessarily adjusted for two reasons. First, the rationale or justification for the intervention changed quickly over the course of several months after March 2003. Initially it was to address threats posed by Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, then possible links of Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda, then the implementation of a democratic government. Second, the degree to which coalition forces would be required to maintain internal stability in the country after the initial invasion and a clear exit strategy were clearly not considered going in. An apparent lack of forethought during the planning stage and the ultimate outcome of the campaign have led to legitimate questions of whether any meaningful strategic thought was applied to the campaign, or whether it was simply a case of 'damn the torpedoes' when it came to implementing the Bush Doctrine and neo-conservative agenda for that country.

Has Canada – and the West in general – lost the ability to think strategically? Certain recent interventions by Canada and its allies have demonstrated that key elements of the strategic

planning process were ill-conceived, ill-considered or not considered at all. Clearly articulating the link between where resources (means) are applied to strategic ends is most important, as resources applied to the Canadian military are often identified by those responsible for the delivery of specific programs as being inadequate to meet stated mandates. And sometimes the resources allocated to the military are the first to be either deferred or canceled outright.

Furthermore, as systems take many years for development and are employed for decades, their procurement has to be tied to over-arching strategies that have broad application over time, and are not subject to frequent adjustments to meet political agendas. However, on that note, strategies are designed to implement policy, and policy is developed by civilian leadership. Canada's political leaders do not have the same degree of military pedigree that are present in both the US- or UK-based systems. However, as illustrated in this paper, the United States and UK have not necessarily benefitted despite this.

The military commanders in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) must be able to clearly articulate to their political masters the perceived threats and risks, and the limitations in the ability of the CAF to carry out their respective mandates under the current strategic documents (i.e., resources and equipment). Are there venues within the CAF to instill creative strategic thinking in senior officers, such as the US Naval War College in Newport Rhode Island?³² How effective is the military input into the creation of Canadian strategic documents when compared to the bureaucrats in the Prime Minister's Office or Treasury Board?

In implementing the 20-year 2017 Defence Policy Review document Strong, Secure, Engaged, in concert with the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS) of 2010, how many of these projects for the three services will be completed over the next several decades? And if they are deferred or cancelled, how will such decisions affect the operational capability of the three services to carry out their mandates as described in these strategic documents?

The threat environment is changing. Non-state terrorism is no longer considered an existential threat to Western countries. It is now regarded as being sufficiently managed. Instead, the primary threat to global stability is seen as being state-generated, as North Korea, Russia, China and Iran, for example, seek to expand their influence, regionally, if not globally, at the expense of Western interests and values. Cormier is correct when he suggests that the means of doing so (hybrid or 'gray' warfare, space-based warfare, etc.) may result in Western militaries having to face unconventional or non-traditional means of threat projection that, in turn, require some deep thinking in how best to respond. But the need to balance resources (means) with a need to protect or enhance clearly articulated national interests (ends) via strategy has not changed.

Canada has traditionally focused its military efforts abroad as a means of pushing the security perimeter beyond domestic boundaries, and to serve broader foreign policy interests. Canada's recent military interventions have not in any way served to tilt the balance against hostile forces, and have largely been discretionary on the part of the government as to when and where they are deployed. But in terms of future strategic thinking, while Canadian contributions abroad are sure to remain, perhaps greater thought should be brought to bear on the protection of Canada's territorial sovereignty (coastlines, Arctic region) and infrastructure and continental security in partnership with the United States. As in the past, political will and policy will provide the drivers. Strategy will continue to articulate the ways, means and ends.

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Notes

- ¹ In an address before the Royal United Services Institute, RUSI, 3 December 2009, available at www.rusi.org.
- ² Geoffrey Till, "History, Truth Decay and the Naval Profession," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Autumn 2019), pp. 13-14.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁴ The National Military Strategy of the United States of America, June 2015.
- ⁵ Gregory D. Foster, "The National Defence Strategy is No Strategy," *Defence One*, 4 April 2019.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak (eds), *The US Army in the Iraq War, Vol. 2, Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011*, Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019.
- ⁸ Daniel J. Cormier, "Will the United States Learn from the Iraq War?" *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Winter 2020), pp. 133-137.
- ⁹ It may have been simply that the United States was intent on going after Saddam Hussein again after his foray into Kuwait in 1990.
- ¹⁰ Cormier, "Will the United States Learn from the Iraq War?" p. 156.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- ¹² Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, New York: Nation Books, 2013, p. 333.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ¹⁴ Robert G. Gates, *Duty*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 336.
- ¹⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan*, New York: Viking Press, 2012, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ Dan Lamothe, "How 775,000 US Troops Fought One War: Afghanistan Military Deployments by the Numbers," *Washington Post*, 11 September 2019.
- ¹⁷ Sarah Almukhtar and Rod Northland, "What Did the US Get for 2 Trillion Dollars in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 9 December 2019.
- ¹⁸ "Send the Marines: The US Marine Corps Sheds its Tanks and Returns to its Naval Roots," *The Economist*, 4 April 2020.
- ¹⁹ Craig Whitlock, Leslie Shapiro and Armand Emamdjomeh, "The Afghanistan Papers, Part I: at War with the Truth," *Washington Post*, 9 December 2019.
- ²⁰ Ward Elcock, Deputy Minister Defence, Rideau Club Public Policy Breakfast, Ottawa, Ontario, 10 May 2005, available at <http://www.forces.gc.ca>.
- ²¹ Department of National Defence, "Defence: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World," Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 2005, pp. 11-15.
- ²² Brian Frei, "The Evaluation of Canadian Defence Policy through the Pragmatic Control Theory of Civil-Military Relations," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Autumn 2019), p. 19.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, footnote 3.
- ²⁴ Alan Barnes, "Getting it Right: Canadian Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, 2002-2003," *Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, published online 28 May 2020.
- ²⁵ See <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca>. It is estimated Canada spend \$18 billion fighting in Afghanistan.
- ²⁶ "Regime Change not the Solution': Pushing Taliban out was a Mistake, Former Canadian Commander Says," *National Post*, 24 February 2016.
- ²⁷ Gwynne Dyer, *Canada in the Great Power Game: 1914-2014*, Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014, p. 393.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, footnote 3, p. 21.
- ²⁹ Martin Shadwick, "The Canada First Defence Strategy," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2008), p. 112.
- ³⁰ David Pugliese, "Arctic Shipbuilding Renewed, for Now," *Calgary Herald*, 6 June 2020, p. NP7.
- ³¹ Cormier, "Will the United States Learn from the Iraq War?" p. 157.
- ³² See Captain Hugues Canuel, RCN, "On the Rise of the Materialists and the Decline of Naval Thought in the RCN," *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2020) for a discussion of this.