Populace-Centric Engagement: A Positive Change of Strategic Perspective for Winning the Long War

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How one looks at a problem shapes the solution sets that are developed to resolve it. To date U.S. engagement for the Long War has focused on the defeat of Al Qaeda and a growing number of affiliate non-state Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO).   This strategy recognizes that populaces are important, but places that importance below that of efforts to capture or kill senior VEO leadership and the development of counterterrorist capacity in the existing governments of the countries where these VEOs reside.   This strategy naturally lends itself to a family of engagement that requires a Department of Defense lead, with Department of State in support. Populace-Centric Engagement shifts the focus to understanding and supporting populaces around the world, and assisting them in attaining good governance on their own terms, and produces the following positive secondary effects:

- Lends itself to a family of engagement that is more consistent with the positive ideology upon which the United States of America was founded.
- Steers the U.S. away from an obsolete family of policies, relationships, and institutional priorities developed to recover from WWII and win the Cold War.
- Allows State Department to resume the lead for foreign engagement, with Defense in support.
- Does not preclude tailored capture/kill and capacity building engagement.
- Takes the U.S. off of the target list of nationalist insurgent movements and disempowers the anti-U.S. aspect of current AQN ideology
- Is positive, "White Hat" engagement, and as such is more embraceable by the American populace, while setting a positive example for rising nations.

What is Populace-Centric Engagement?

When introducing a new concept it is important to ensure that all begin with a common understanding of key terms. For the purpose of this discussion, the following definitions apply:

Populace-Centric Engagement (PCE): A holistic family of engagement that places primacy on understanding and facilitating meeting the requirements of a target populace for good governance, as shaped by its own unique culture and values. PCE is driven by the key concepts that governance is of, by and for the people; that populaces have the right to choose the form of governance which suits them best; and that insurgency occurs when governance fails. PCE

recognizes the populace as a shared strategic/operational center of gravity for whose support the various parties operating in any nation compete.

Threat-Centric Engagement (TCE): A program of engagement designed to defeat a specific enemy or alliance of separate enemies. TCE is driven by the key concept that ultimate victory is achieved by defeating the threat. Operations are typically intelligence driven with a focus on understanding and locating the enemy. Center of Gravity determination varies based on the accepted understanding of the threat, and can vary from capitals and armies for state threats, to ideologies and key leaders for non-state threats.

Good Governance: Self Determined government formed from and by the populace of the region that is served by that governing body. Good governance is committed to securing the unalienable rights of that populace, and continues to draw its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Success or failure of the governing body can only be assessed by the populace it serves; and that populace has both a duty and a right to abolish any government that breaches this contract with the populace it serves.

U.S. Ideology*:* Primarily codified in the second paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which together capture in general terms the rights of people everywhere, and the duty of government to preserve those rights.

Why the U.S. Should Abandon Threat-Centric Engagement Strategy

Military strategists have long proclaimed the critical importance of understanding the nature of the war one is in first in order to design and execute a strategy that will achieve one's desired ends.[i] As the U.S. Government is currently organized and focused, derived from its role over the past 65 years in successfully leading the West out of WWII and through the Cold War, the response to the attacks of 9/11 have been predictable in design, successful in execution at the tactical/operational level, yet in seven years have failed to achieve our strategic ends. To be clear, the purpose of this proposition is not to be critical of past engagement, but to be analytical in a way to facilitate future engagement. If the lead for the Long War would have been given to the State Department, the response would have been focused on engaging governments; as the lead was given to the Defense Department, one should not be surprised that the response has been focused on defeating some enemy. This is what those departments do; by design, by training, and by experience. The position taken here is that given the nature of the current non-state threat, and the forces of globalization that allow an unprecedented degree of networked cooperation, it is time for a focus that the U.S. government is not designed to take. It is time to shift our focus from the governments and VEOs of the world, and instead focus on the populaces of the world from which those entities arise. The state-based model born of Westphalia is in transition, and popular power will continue to grow as one of many effects of globalization. To achieve strategic success in this conflict on a global scale, one must think globally, but engage locally. To paint the current conflict as a "Global Insurgency"[ii] is helpful in that it recognizes that the principles of insurgency and counterinsurgency are at the core of the problem; while at the same time dangerous in that it tends to combine and address an incredibly broad mix of populaces with diverse cultures and varying conditions of poor governance (all

therefore requiring uniquely tailored solutions) with one broad brush. No, the U.S. is not faced with a Global Insurgency; it is instead faced with "Insurgency in a Globalized World."

Based on this position, there are five primary reasons the U.S. should abandon the current strategy of Threat-Centric Engagement:

- TCE is based upon a flawed understanding of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency.
- TCE tends to judge organizations more by the nature of their actions and their affiliations than by the purpose of their actions.
- TCE allows an Intelligence Community that is primarily conventionally trained, focused and thinking (Red vs. Blue); to set the tone for what is a largely unconventional operation.
- TCE is susceptible to mission-creep; expanding both the number of nations where the war is waged and the number of organizations considered part of the threat far beyond the original intent of the war based upon bottom-up assessment.
- Lastly, as TCE pursues "the enemy" wherever he may go, it in many ways surrenders control of U.S. operations to that same enemy.

Understanding Insurgency

Most counterinsurgency efforts are reactive in nature and focus on the defeat of the insurgent organization. While this TCE approach is a reasonable one for a governing body to take, it allows governmental leaders to avoid personal responsibility for the failures of governance that gave rise to the insurgency in the first place. This approach essentially takes the position that the populace has failed the government.   One gains a clearer perspective on insurgency and counterinsurgency when they take a PCE approach. Good governance rises from the populace to support the populace. Insurgent organizations arise from that same populace when conditions of poor governance exist that cannot be resolved through existing legitimate means.   When a government ignores its own shortfalls and engages the insurgent, it is not only simply attacking a symptom of the larger problem; it is attacking an element of the populace as well, typically making the problem worse. This is the main reason why counterinsurgencies tend to be protracted and often reoccurring affairs. Even if a government is successful in defeating the insurgent, if the underlying caused are not addressed the insurgency will reemerge. To reset the status quo merely resets the conditions of failure that led to insurgency in the first place. A terrific example of a PCE approach is the U.S. Government response to the Civil Rights movement in the 60's. By admitting the failure of past policies and passing and enforcing the Civil Rights Act to address those failures, the U.S. was able to resolve the matter and move forward without the situation degenerating into a full-fledged insurgency.[iii]

Purpose of Action Defines the Organization

The title "Terrorist" is intentionally inflammatory.   Many legitimate organizations, to include the U.S. Government, conduct acts of terror. These acts, however, are deemed legitimate as they are justified by a higher purpose that required harsh action. In the Long War, taking a TCE approach, organizations are judged by their actions alone, which quickly expanded the scope of the war far beyond the original Al Qaeda organization that planned and led the attacks of 9/11.

Any affiliation with Al Qaeda also earns an organization a place on the target list, even if that organization does not participate in acts of terror directly. Switching to a PCE approach helps to narrow the target list for more focused operations.

Insurgencies fall into three broad categories (Resistance, Revolutionary, and Separatist), and the first step to resolving an insurgency is to understand what the purpose of the organization is, and to then assess the populace to understand what conditions of poor governance have given rise to this organization. The U.S. makes itself a target of terrorist attacks by such nationalist insurgent movements when we simply put our support toward helping the failed government in suppressing the popular movement. If one does this in enough places, it makes for a deep pool of organizations for a clever leader like Osama Bin Laden to essentially franchise to his networked AQN brand. By instead taking up the causes of populaces, and working with their governments to understand and address their failures, the U.S. can turn the corner on waging counterinsurgency in a globalized world.

Conventional Intelligence focus on "Enemies" over "Environments"

The U.S. intelligence community does an excellent job of understanding and finding the enemy. They brief senior leaders daily in great detail about the latest activities of High Value Individuals (HVI) and the Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO) to which they belong. These same senior leaders then focus their operations on defeating those VEOs and either capturing or killing the HVIs. In TCE, Intelligence truly does lead operations. The question then becomes, what is leading intelligence?

To be fair, in the past few months the intelligence community has put more effort into understanding the environment in which these organizations and individuals operate. The strategy is still TCE, however, so the focus remains on identifying, finding, and defeating "the enemy." By switching to PCE, the intelligence community gets a new focus. This vast and talented resource would then drill into understanding the populaces around the world where insurgencies are occurring, find out what the issues of poor governance are from those populace's perspective, and also what the purposes of the various insurgent organizations are. This then turns the focus of daily briefs to what aspects of poor governance need addressed, which VEOs should be isolated (and potentially brought into legitimacy some day), and which VEOs the U.S. should work by-through-with the host nation to deal with more directly. The goal becomes ensuring that populaces have good governance, not that VEOs are defeated.

Susceptibility to Mission-Creep

Many factors lead to mission-creep. Each Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) in the U.S. military competes for resources for engagement in their respective theaters. In the Long War, with TCE as the strategy, this competition is won by making the case that VEOs are operating in their area of responsibility. Any VEO (as judged by its actions) is a legitimate target, with bonus points awarded if some affiliation with Al Qaeda can be demonstrated as well. In a globalized world Al Qaeda is aggressively working to leverage the networks of other terrorist or criminal networks, so these connections are easy to make, expanding the target list far beyond what was imagined when the Long War was first embarked upon. A nationalist insurgency with a primary

goal of addressing conditions of poor governance does not suddenly become a threat to the U.S. because it changes its name to Al Qaeda. It is still simply a nationalist insurgency and the U.S. empowers both the organization and Al Qaeda when we recognize an enhanced status and begin conducting counterterrorist operations against them (and of course the populace they arise from). This expands the war with no positive effects toward ending it.

A switch to PCE changes the rules of the competition and the focus of the GCCs. Instead of focusing on identifying enemies and developing programs to help host nations defeat those enemies, the GCCs would now focus on identifying conditions of poor governance, and working with those same host nations to address their shortcomings. A PCE approach empowers U.S. Ambassadors, and puts the GCCs in clear support of their efforts.

Surrendering Operational Initiative to the Enemy

TCE goes to where the enemy is. The more places he goes, the more places the U.S. must go as well. There is no way to get in front of the enemy. This allows Al Qaeda to conduct economy of force operations by sending a few operatives to a broad range of areas, which in turn requires the U.S. to commit resources to each of those areas, drawing strength from major efforts in other areas, and expanding the number of populaces that now perceive the U.S. as a heavy-handed actor that is reinforcing and supporting the poor governance that they are struggling to overcome. With a PCE approach the U.S. regains operational initiative. Where the U.S. engages would be driven by a combination of U.S. national interests and where populaces are struggling to achieve a self-determined good governance. The U.S. would supplant AQN as the champion of the people, disempowering their ideology while at the same time reducing the reasons for Al Qaeda's very existence in the first place.

Why the U.S. Should Adopt a Populace-Centric Engagement Strategy

Engagement Based on U.S. Ideology

The U.S. is unique in that it did not create an ideology to fuel an independence movement; instead an ideology developed that demanded that the nation be independent. The point being, that for the U.S. there is only one ideology, and it is the core of what the U.S. is as a nation. While this is very powerful, and needs to be exploited more effectively in our foreign engagement, it also blinds the typical American to the traditional role of ideology in insurgency in general. It is far more instructive to take the Chinese perspective on ideology to understand its role in insurgency. Mao Zedong understood that the primary purpose of ideology in a movement aimed at effecting political change is that it binds the populace to the cause of the insurgency and that it takes a position that the government is either unable, or unwilling to concede. While the Insurgent leader may appear to be wed to his chosen ideology, if he is a true insurgent, he will remain focused on his desired ends, and not so much on the means to achieve it. Mao changed ideologies in combat like Custer changed horses; with three ideologies figuratively shot out from under him, he rode a fourth message of land reform which carried his movement to ultimate success.[iv] (A success, by the way, that did little to provide the promise of land reform to the populace of China.) Equally illustrative is this quote by Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, in regards to ideology: "It does not matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice."[v]

To date the U.S. has been far too focused on trying to defeat the ideology of Bin Laden's movement. With a TCE approach the U.S. reinforces his message, with a PCE approach the U.S. disempowers it. The word "Democracy" does not appear in either the U.S. Declaration of Independence, nor the Constitution; and it should not appear in U.S. engagement with foreign nations either.[vi] To simply focus on the pure message of inalienable rights, self-determination, and the right and duty of every populace to rise up in insurgency in the face of poor governance, presents a powerful message that speaks to all people. The U.S. goes astray when it colors this message with current U.S. values. The U.S. had to evolve to get to where it is today, and possessed an ideology that both allowed and guided that evolution. To order populaces to skip that evolutionary process puts the U.S. at odds with its own ideology. Patient application and adherence to the bedrock tenets of U.S. ideology is an approach that Bin Laden cannot counter.[vii]

Evolve U.S. Engagement for a Globalized World

Recognizing that the world dynamic today is far different than it was throughout the Cold War demands a major reevaluation and overhaul of the complete gamut of institutions, policies, and relationships that the U.S. uses to engage with other nations. As an example, the United Nations does not need to disband, it simply needs to evolve. Designed to operate in a non-globalized, bi-polar world, it is ill suited to function effectively in a globalized, multi-polar world. The U.S. needs to lead this movement of change. A shift to PCE from TCE facilitates looking at problems around the world in a manner that highlights the changes that are required to function in a world where popular power is on the rise, with several nations serving as regional hubs of power and responsibility.   When the U.S. stops taking the position with others that is in charge of everything, it will stop being held responsible for everything as well.

Much of the recent TCE engagement by the U.S. has been aimed at maintaining the status quo, which is both the most likely and the most dangerous (to itself) approach for a government to take when faced with insurgency. Meanwhile other nations, like China, India and Russia, are surging forward to seize a new future, while the U.S. is wrestling to hold onto a glorious past. Unlike the Roman and British Empires, which both crumbled when faced with this crossroad, the U.S. has a powerful advantage: The warning example of their folly to guide her, and more importantly, possession of a powerful ideology of popular power that is perfectly suited for the globalized world that is emerging. The U.S. need simply trust in its ideology, turn loose of the past, and jump.

Allow State Department to lead Foreign Engagement

Granted, the State Department more than any other needs to evolve to be less state-centric and more populace-centric as the world becomes more globalized, but even with that handicap, it is absolutely the department that should lead and shape U.S. foreign engagement. Shifting to a PCE strategy makes the perfect time to shift the lead from Defense for waging the "Long War" over to State to lead the "Long Peace." In fact, one of the great struggles within Defense today is to try to define exactly what kind of war it is that the U.S. is fighting.   This has resulted in the creation of a concept of "Irregular Warfare" that cobbles together all of the many forms of military engagement that are primarily executed in times of peace as a new form of war. Far

better to embrace a new form of peace than to create a new form of war; for as Russia recently reminded the world in Georgia, the rise of peer competitors and increased competition for resources demands the U.S. maintain a strong conventional warfighting capability to both deter such aggression and defend U.S. interests.

Right-Size Capture/Kill Operations

Al Qaeda is a networked operation, and that network consists of nodes that perform various functions that are embedded in the populaces around the world that Bin Laden seeks to influence. Some of those nodes are vulnerable to engagement, while others are not. Some of those nodes are critical to operations in a particular populace and others are not. All are manned by Al Qaeda affiliates of varying degrees of importance. By targeting those individuals who are essential to the effective operations of the most critical nodes, one can dramatically attrit the effectiveness of Al Qaeda in its efforts to influence a particular populace, or to franchise local dissident/insurgent organizations to their cause. Senior leaders are easily replaced in any organization, but start taking out the guys who know how to keep the generator running or the website up, and you start creating serious havoc.

In the Philippines, U.S. and host nation forces have been extremely careful to differentiate between nationalist insurgent movements and those affiliated with Al Qaeda, and the results in attriting that unwanted influence while at the same time building the degree of confidence that the local populace has in its governance is a direct result of making that distinction. Similarly, the strategy finally employed in Iraq by General Patreaus to seek to understand and differentiate between the many gun wielding organizations allowed the U.S. to turn the corner in that operation as well. Capture/kill operations will always be an important aspect of any sound counterinsurgency program, they just need to be properly focused, relegated to a supporting role of the overall operation, and to the extent possible, executed by-through-with the host nation's security forces.

Disempower Al Qaeda and Take the U.S. off of Insurgent Target Lists

Al Qaeda is a non-state power; this is both its greatest strength, and its greatest weakness. It is a great strength in that so long as they remain a non-state power they are virtually impervious to the majority of the tools that are used in state on state engagement. It is their greatest weakness in that if Al Qaeda is ever successful in gaining a state, or building its Caliphate, it becomes just one more weak state that can be easily defeated with those same tools.

The important thing to remember is that *Al Qaeda has no populace*, and as such it must borrow the populaces of other states in order to draw from those sources of power. Populaces that are experiencing conditions of poor governance are willing to join this networked alliance because they see it as their only hope to effect change at home. When these same populaces see the U.S. as supporting and helping to sustain in power these same governances, they are easily convinced that their only path to self-determination at home demands breaking the outside support of the U.S. as the requisite first step. A change to PCE changes this paradigm completely. A U.S. that is committed not to supporting governances around the world where critical U.S. national interests reside, but that is instead committed to supporting the populaces of those same nations,

is a U.S. that is no longer a target of popular attacks, but is instead a supporter of popular rights. This will cause Bin Laden's network to wither about him. Besides, governments come and go, but populaces are constant. By focusing on the populaces of the world, the U.S. is always supporting the right side.

Be the Moral Leader

Arguably the high water mark of U.S. credibility and respect was during the Truman administration. Decades of leading the West's efforts to win the Cold War tarnished that reputation, one compromise at a time. Wars are dirty business and require actions as a matter of course that would never even be considered in times of peace. When a war is short in duration, conventional in nature and ends dramatically, like WWII, it is easy to stop bombing cities and get to work rebuilding them instead. When a war is long in duration, much more subtle in nature, and simply fades away, like the Cold War, the cues and necessity to change are not so clear. This is made even more complex when significant financial arrangements and governmental alliances have grown from the war-driven actions.

The Middle East was a principle battlefield of the Cold War, and the U.S. was the face of Western engagement there. Just as the U.S. helped rebuilt the economies of Japan and Western Europe following WWII, the U.S. must help repair the damage done by the Cold War to the Populaces of the Middle East. A recognition that this must be done, and a switch to a strategy of Populace Centric Engagement will allow the U.S. to regain the moral high ground once again.

Conclusion

The U.S. must ask and answer the questions of what type of world does it wish to exist in, and what role does it want to play in that world. To focus on "the threat" is to focus on a symptom of the larger problems that gave rise to those threats, and quite arguably to engage those threats exacerbates those underlying conditions and lends credence to Bin Laden's anti-American rhetoric. In short, by allowing ones enemies to shape and drive ones operations, one accomplishes their enemy's ends.

Shifting the focus to one of supporting the populaces of the world breaks this cycle and puts U.S. operations back on message with the powerful Ideology that gave birth to and shaped this great nation.

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The views expressed in this paper are the author's personal judgments. They do not represent the policy of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or U.S. Special Operations Command.

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[vi] Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States of America.

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