



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Complexity, Defense Policy, and Epistemological Failure

Adam Elkus

“Complexity,” “uncertainty” and “chaos” are currently the preferred terms we use to describe modern conflict. It is an accepted truth that today’s world is more complex, more dangerous, and more uncertain than it was before 9/11. But is conflict significantly more complex than it has been in the past? While everyone feels that his or her own era is somehow unique, our perception of unprecedented chaos is powerful evidence that the intellectual framework that we draw from to analyze US defense policy is broken.

At heart, our intellectual impoverishment is a linguistic problem. The traditional US tendency is to bracket off politics from defense, depriving us of the vocabulary we need to analyze the world and the challenges we face. The unfortunate result is an erroneous perception that conflict has taken a quantum leap into chaos, a lack of imagination concerning threats such as failed states, and the confusion of operational and strategic approaches.

Complexity, Technoscience, and the Poverty of Politics

Every visitor to the International Spy Museum in Washington D.C is familiar with former CIA director R. James Woolsey’s quote that “it was as if we had been struggling for a dragon 45 years and finally defeated it — the Soviet Union — and then found ourselves in the jungle with a lot of poisonous snakes ... The snakes were harder to keep track of than the dragon.”¹ The notion that conflict today is fundamentally more complex and dangerous has been echoed so many times by defense thinkers that it has become received wisdom.

Yet just thirty years ago we faced a constellation of Soviet-backed or affiliated terrorist and insurgent organizations, a powerful military bloc poised to strike Europe, and fanatically anti-American Middle Eastern religious extremists. We struggled to sustain wavering alliances, crush challenges to clients, win a global war of ideas, sustain a complex international system, and avoid nuclear annihilation. So why is it that we feel that we’re somehow living in a more complicated era?

¹ Rebecca Leung, “Uncertain Future for US Spies,” CBS News, April 15, 2005. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/16/terror/main612193.shtml>

It is difficult to deny that decisive change has occurred. Globalization, urbanization, the powerful reach of information technology, the network society, the expansion of global crime, the super-empowerment of non-state actors, and strategic multipolarity are undoubtedly complex phenomena that have changed the international security environment. They also may be tied to larger processes of state change with far-reaching consequences for the international state system. It is natural and just that many strategic thinkers and defense analysts have labored to conceptualize shifts in the global system and their ramifications for American national security. But while the world has become more complex in recent years, terror and uncertainty have always been the distinguishing elements of both the subjective and practical experience of conflict. Edward Luttwak, for example, has made a point of arguing that strategy follows a fundamentally “paradoxical” logic that is separate of that from the day-to-day world.²

The problem is that American defense thought has not really equipped us to deal with the complexity that has always existed. As a result, we perceive things to be more complex and frightening than they really are. “Complexity” here is ultimately a codeword for *politics*—the nemesis of technocratic policymaking. Defense policy is utilitarian in nature, ontologically realist, and keen on deductive reasoning. There is a constant cognitive tension between the imperative to compartmentalize messy reality into a workable political framework for achieving strategic objectives and the necessity of maintaining the mental flexibility to deal with the uncertainty of conflict. Unfortunately, the inability to manage that tension results in the conceptual separation of politics from conflict and the elevation of a technoscientific paradigm of defense thought.

As Thomas K. Adams observes, there is an American tendency to view the sphere of warfighting as a wholly autonomous realm separate from that of politics and strategy, preserving it as a kind of pristine and objective world free from irrational politics and ideology.³ Robert M. Cassidy, Russell Weigley and Adrian R. Lewis all use the framework of “strategic culture” to explain why politics and American defense don’t necessarily mix. Cassidy makes a persuasive argument that the 19th century defense buildup to transform the US’s military forces into a professional European fighting force resulted in the absorption of deductive European thinkers such as Antoine-Henri Jomini and a concurrent attitude that politics and war are inherently separate realms.⁴ Weigley makes the now famous argument that there is a distinct American “way of war” that prizes fixed, maximal aims and absolute attrition through industrial and technological power.⁵ Lewis notes in *The American Culture of War*, “When it comes to war the American cultural preference for technological solutions dwarfs all other cultural tenets and the outcomes of the battles and campaigns have little or no influence on that preference.”⁶

² See Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004.

³ Thomas K. Adams, “Military Doctrine and the Organization Culture of the U.S. Army,” Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, New York, 1990, p. 27, qtd in Robert M. Cassidy, “Prophets or Praetorians: The Uptonian Paradox and the Powell Corollary,” *Parameters*, Autumn 2003, pp. 130-143.

⁴ Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War*, Palo Alto: Stanford Security Studies, 2008, p. 107.

⁵ See Russell Weigley F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.

⁶ Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 32.

But “technology” cannot solely be reduced to a love of gadgets and gizmos. Colin S. Gray, for example, writes of an “engineering” mindset that looks for technical fixes and believes that American knowledge can find a solution to nearly every problem.⁷ What Gray describes is a mode of thought called “technoscience.” We perceive defense issues through the prism by which we increasingly view the social world as a whole: science.

The British political scientist Antoine Bousquet argues that “it is science that provides the dominant way of looking at the world whether as a methodological disposition of problem-solving or in informing our conceptions of how the world works.”⁸ In his book *The Scientific Way of Warfare*, Bousquet chronicles the succession of “technoscientific” regimes—essentially paradigms of technocratic organization and thought—and their impact on military theory and organization. Echoing Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Bousquet sees different paradigms that various modes of technocracy fall into.⁹ Each managerial and technological paradigm is an unconscious larger intellectual paradigm that influences certain ideas, modes of organization, and doctrine. Bousquet’s central claim is that “throughout the modern era the dominant corpus of scientific ideas have been reflected in the contemporary theories and practices of warfare in the Western world.”¹⁰

The definition of “science” Bousquet uses can be used to describe everything from corporate methods of management to new technologies. The principal aim of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)-era thinkers was to mimic the organizational innovations of the corporate world. Because information technology lay at the root of the transnational corporation’s flexibility, RMA-era thinkers bet heavily on massive sensor arrays to make viable “just-in-time war.”¹¹ In American defense thought, the technoscientific mindset offers a means of systemizing policy solutions and eliminating uncertainty. Chaos and uncertainty are viewed not as eternal features of the landscape but policy problems remedied through scientific management.

The greatest consequence of the technoscientific mindset is linguistic impoverishment. Technoscientific thinking lacks the basic vocabulary to describe and understand conflict because it fundamentally denies and actively minimizes politics, often viewed by technoscientific thinkers as messy or irrational. The technological tunnel view is by no means limited to the world of defense. The dotcom bubble was marked by a mode of technoscientific thinking that John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid call “infoenthusiasm.”¹² Infoenthusiasm pervades the technology industry and is boosted by hypemen in the press who push more and more fantastic visions of future technological change divorced from political, social, or economic contexts.

⁷ Colin S. Gray, “Strategy in the Nuclear Age” in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein (eds), *Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 592.

⁸ Bousquet, p. 2.

⁹ Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 3.

¹⁰ Bousquet, p. 3.

¹¹ Frederick Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*, San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005, p. 214.

¹² See Adam Elkus, “Information Counterrevolution,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 6, 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/07/information-counterrevolution/> and John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information*, Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

They argue that technology and new modes of production will signal the “end” of various things, including the press, brokers, firms, politics, government, cities, and the nation-state itself.¹³

Current insurgent and terrorist challenges have broken the carefully imposed (but wholly unsustainable) binary between defense and politics. It is tempting to ascribe this cognitive dissonance to the maxim that insurgency and terrorism are overwhelmingly political forms of warfare. But this oft-held view denies the overwhelmingly political character of conventional engagements. It would be more accurate to state that conflict against non-state forces casts the political dimensions of conflict into sharper view, and in doing so exposes some of the weaknesses of technoscientific thinking.

It is here that the linguistic impoverishment wrought by technoscience takes its toll. Because of our underdeveloped political vocabulary, the principal focus is on the capabilities of terrorists, insurgents, militias, and criminals but little on their aims, beliefs, strategic culture, and motivations. While capabilities are important, aims and motivations determine the context in which they are used. The British international relations scholar Ken Booth describes this tendency in his book *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*:

“The preoccupation with capabilities leads to the guideline that what the enemy *can* do it *will* do. The result...is to lead the analyst into dwelling on the *possible* (hostile) behavior of another nation almost unrelated to its cultural and political context. We are therefore left with an image of a hostile Strategic Man with a given amount of military capabilities and economic resources. The intentions of this other nation tend to be neglected, because they are ‘uncertain’. Into the resulting political vacuum are projected one’s own assumptions of what any ‘rational [but hostile] man’ would do. In addition, it is often assumed that ‘what hurts me must help him’, and that creating such mischief will therefore be an important adversary objective. When threats are identified, the tendency will be to worry more about one’s own vulnerabilities...rather than concerning oneself with recreating the other nation’s view of its own interests and priorities.”¹⁴

When we fail to substantively analyze the political intentions of our opponents the result is a view of them akin to KAOS, the omnipresent global criminal organization in the 1960s TV show *Get Smart*. Perhaps the best example of this political impoverishment is the consensus over failed states and ungoverned zones. The consensus is limited to the observation that terrorists occupy ungoverned zones and use them to plan attacks. But the US doesn’t have the resources to project power to every ungoverned zone, and doing so is not exactly useful in an environment where insurgents can effectively plan and organize attacks while living in orderly, Western urban environments.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, some living in ungoverned zones wish Americans harm and have the capabilities to translate their wishes into gruesome reality. The observation that failed states pose dangers for

¹³ Seely Brown and Duguid, p. 16.

¹⁴ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, New York Holmes and Meirer Publishers, 1979, p. 111.

¹⁵ See Steven Metz, “Trends, Threats, and Expectations,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 20, 2009. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/03/trends-theats-and-expectations/>

US national security is an eminently reasonable one, but must be qualified by the secondary observation that failed states themselves do not necessarily generate threats. Purely capabilities-based analysis has been tremendously useful in creating a library of insurgent tactics and operational art, but politics is the tool by which we use to evaluate the intentions of our adversaries and prioritize which ungoverned spaces should be contained, destroyed, occupied, or simply left alone.

Political impoverishment becomes deadly when combined with a more generalized lack of political guidance. US strategic practice is plagued by the problem of what Army War College Professor Steven Metz calls “ad hocery.”¹⁶ Domestic politics shape defense strategy, and little consensus is produced. “Without a central strategic paradigm,” Metz argues, “American security policy tends toward astrategic meandering.”¹⁷ One form of ‘ad hocery’ is the elevation of operational methodologies to strategies, as the now ubiquitous phrase “counterterrorism strategy” indicates. In the face of conceptual chaos, these narrow frameworks are being marshaled to give direction to a largely formless US foreign policy. Because these doctrines are neutral tools, Mark Safranski argues, they can be easily appropriated for a range of contradictory missions.¹⁸

In practice, however, the mismatch between narrow operational frameworks and the larger requirements of national strategy increases the complexity and uncertainty policymakers must contend with. In an attempt to overcome the limitations of the operational level, some operational approaches are given strategic qualities as well as the burden of achieving aims far out of proportion to their intellectual and practical means. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the usage of Effects-Based Operations (EBO) in Lebanon. Traditional concepts of objective were thrown out in favor of a vague idea of “cognitive collapse” that could be achieved with precise targeting of political, economic, and military nodes in a vast system. But Israeli analyst Ron Tira noted in his insightful monograph *The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations* that the idea of “cognitive collapse” in Lebanon required a substantial “leap” of faith:

“[I]n a classic war the military force is activated at the tactical and operational level in order to generate directly a unilateral change in the reality, and it is this change that – at some advanced stage – causes the cognitive collapse of the enemy. However, in the classic war the ‘leap’ between unilaterally changing the reality and cognitive collapse is not great. For example, it was only after the Allies killed five and a half million German soldiers in battle, destroyed a considerable number of German formations, occupied over half of Germany’s territory, and their land forces reached Berlin that the Third Reich experienced a cognitive-strategic collapse. The ‘leap’ required to bridge the gap between reality change and cognitive collapse was sufficiently narrow.

In contrast, the initial ideas of the Israeli General Staff about how to approach the second Lebanon War were mainly to make a direct ‘leap’ to strategy – in other words, to address the collapse of the enemy as a system and principally to achieve

¹⁶ Steven Metz, *Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy*, Washington: Potomac Books, 2008, p. xxi.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Safranski, “The Kilcullen Doctrine,” *Zenpundit*, May 29, 2009. <http://zenpundit.com/?p=3116>

its cognitive collapse, while bypassing the need to expend time and resources on a tactical bloody confrontation in southern Lebanon.”¹⁹

EBO is now out of favor. But the danger is that the basic error can be replicated in infinite ways in future conflicts without a strong political guidance.

Considerations for Future Debate

There are four immediate steps that can be taken to improve the defense debate. First, policymakers should conceptualize what Antulio Echevarria and Huba Wass de Czege call a “strategy of positive ends.”²⁰ Threats obviously impact US security, but a strategy exclusively defined by threats “has the distinct disadvantage of yielding the initiative to outside forces,” Echevarria and Wass de Czege write.²¹ Furthermore, it offers no answer to larger questions of war and peace:

“[Threats-based planning] focuses on deterring or defeating specific threats, rather than taking advantage of the intrinsic dynamism of the new security environment in order to create conditions that might promote long-term peace, stability, and prosperity. It has the additional disadvantage...of placing defense planners in the position of having to make difficult resource choices in the absence of the underlying rationale that a clear threat would provide.”²²

A conceptual frame for macro-level US goals—such as ensuring access to global markets or preventing the rise of a Eurasian hegemon—will do much to clarify the recent changes in the strategic environment. It is important, however, that this strategic discussion goes beyond academic dissertations of classical neorealism. Traditional means of evaluating strategic objectives should be re-evaluated in light of the changing international system. But neither should policymakers indulge themselves in happy (but decidedly vague) humanitarian pieties.

Second, there must be a more wide-ranging debate about the international state system. The “failing states” and “new middle ages” views of state change are popular and well known, but the same cannot be said for other theories of state change, state formation, or economic geography or sociology. While both the “failing states” and “new middle ages” approaches may have merit, other scholarly ideas deserve consideration lest planners become locked into one erroneous conception of the world. The kind of information-age network state envisioned by former RAND scholar David Ronfeldt, for example, is a potent vision that policymakers have failed to seriously examine.²³

¹⁹ Ron Tira, “The Limitations of Standoff-Based Firepower Operations: On Standoff Warfare, Maneuver, and Decision,” Jaffee Center Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum 89, 2007, pp. 31.

²⁰ See Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria III and Brigadier Gen (ret) Huba Wass de Czege, *Toward a Strategy of Positive Ends*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001.

²¹ Echevarria III and Wass de Czege, p. 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ See David Ronfeldt and Danielle Varda, “The Prospects for Cyberocracy (Revisited),” December 1, 2008, p. 41. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1325809>.

Third, we should conceptualize counterterrorism, targeted attacks, raiding, police work, development, and other such approaches as narrow methodologies that best work in tandem with each other as parts of an overall strategy. When we raise operational frameworks to the level of “strategy” we begin to not only use narrow methodologies for wide and abstract concerns but also learn to see the world through an exceedingly limited mindset. Mark Safranski and Steve Metz’s concerns about strategic drift deserve caution and careful consideration.

Most importantly, we need to focus on the granular implications of new forms of complexity without confusing ourselves into thinking that conflict itself has become drastically more complex. Such a task requires transcending our self-imposed barrier between politics and conflict and recognizing that all conflicts are essentially political in nature. Conflict is complex because the natural complexity of the massive social world comprised by interacting social, economic, and political systems is heightened by the dizzying effects of clashing organized groups and nations that must juggle a host of ideological, organizational, and logistical concerns in mobilizing and utilizing force. Only by accepting the primacy of politics can we decipher conflict and successfully pursue our vital interests.

Adam Elkus is an analyst specializing in foreign policy and security. He is currently Associate Editor at Red Team Journal. His articles have been published at the West Point CTC Sentinel, Athena Intelligence Journal, Small Wars Journal and other publications. Mr. Elkus blogs at Rethinking Security, Dreaming 5GW, and The Huffington Post. He is currently a contributor to the Center for Threat Awareness’ ThreatsWatch project.

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