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Bismarck's Lesson on COIN:

An Invading Force's Presence in a Foreign Land is its own Enemy

by Ali Iqbal

An invading foreign force, on completion of its objectives i.e. regime change through violent means or having inflicted sufficient losses to a targeted group, should not prolong its stay and assume the role of occupiers. This tendency infuriates local passion built on independent beliefs, cultural biases, religious differences and historic events. This complex/non-linear environment poses tremendous challenges for an outsider to transform the invaded country and bring it to a desired level of stability. On the other hand, the same environment presents lucrative opportunities for non-state and other state actors who intend exploiting the volatile situation to further their agendas/interests. The actors relevant to this theory include a foreign force, which can be composed of a single nation or a coalition, local populace of the invaded country, non-state actors within, and outside the invaded country and regional/neighboring countries having negative or positive interests in the invaded country and the foreign force.

Pursuit of national interests should always take priority for all nations. Actions, including invasion of another country to depose a hostile regime or target a specific group which poses threat to the stability or interests of a nation are legitimate and in consonance with norms of national security. The sequence of actions required until the attainment of the core objective i.e. regime change or degrading the potency of a non-state actor, are purely linear and lie within the comfort zone of any nation or coalition which possesses the requisite capacity and capability to effect that change. These actions could include mustering domestic and international support for the invasion, conduct of lethal operations leading to destruction of the targeted enemy and the resultant deposition of the hostile regime, and imposition of an interim governance apparatus to portray some semblance of normalcy. However, from this point onwards, due to the relative ease of dealing with the linear challenges, an invading force may be lured into the belief that it has the potentials to permanently change the dynamics of that country and its people to suit their paradigm. The invading force apart from having the self-confidence, attained through linear operations, to bring this change might also fall in the trap of a prolonged stay as a commitment to put things right for the nation that they adversely affected. This perception eludes the fact that though it is simpler to deal with tangibles e.g. physical enemy and its establishment, it is extremely hard to identify and target the intangibles i.e. the psychological dimension of the people, which has matured and embedded in them over period of time and experience. This intangible dimension, with which the foreign force is unfamiliar, makes the environment complex, fused and non-linear.



Figure 1- Attributes of a Complex Environment

The environment, depicted in the figure 1, reflects the aspirations, apprehensions, and inhibitions of the people comprising an invaded country. These facets of the environment, though seemingly independent, are bound to each other by a number of commonalities, thereby making them inter-dependent; attributes of a complex and non –linear environment.¹ This environment, if interacted with in an attempt by the foreign force using the tools of stability apparatus i.e. Governance, Civil Security, Essential Services, and Infrastructure and Development, will be altered and is likely to become further complex with all its facets becoming undistinguishable and intermingled, forming a confluence of complexities.²

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

² FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of Army, 2006), 1-19.

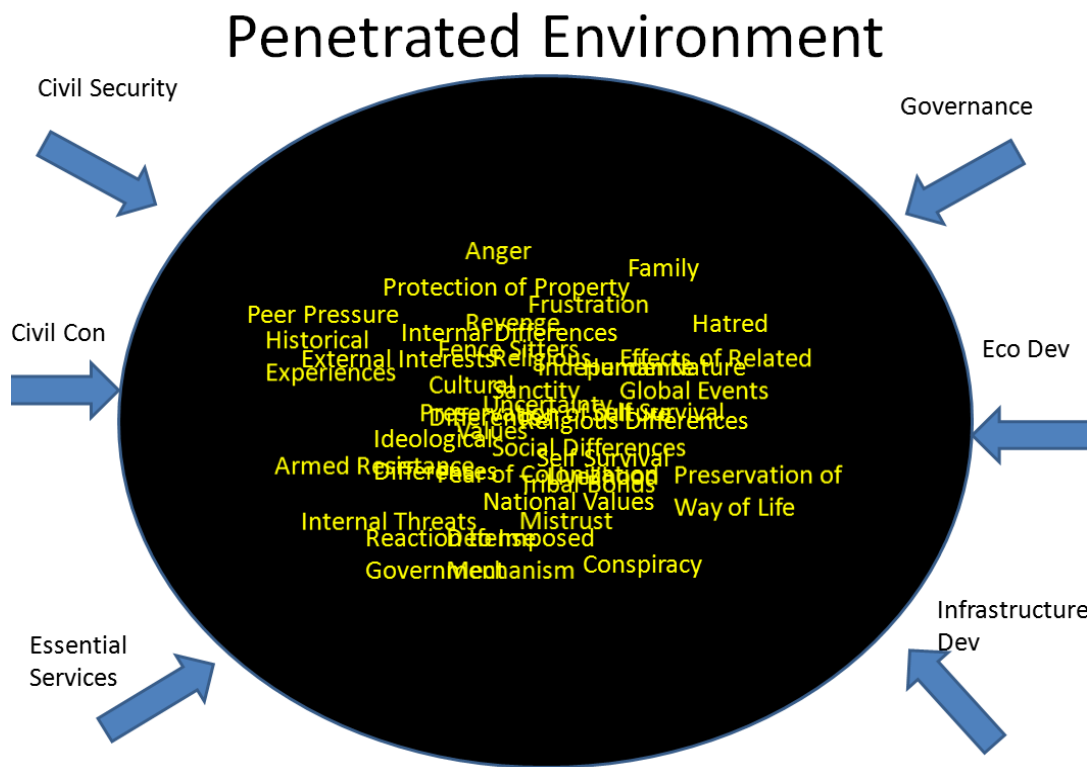


Figure 2 – Environment depicted in figure 1 becoming blurred/fuzzy once interacted with.

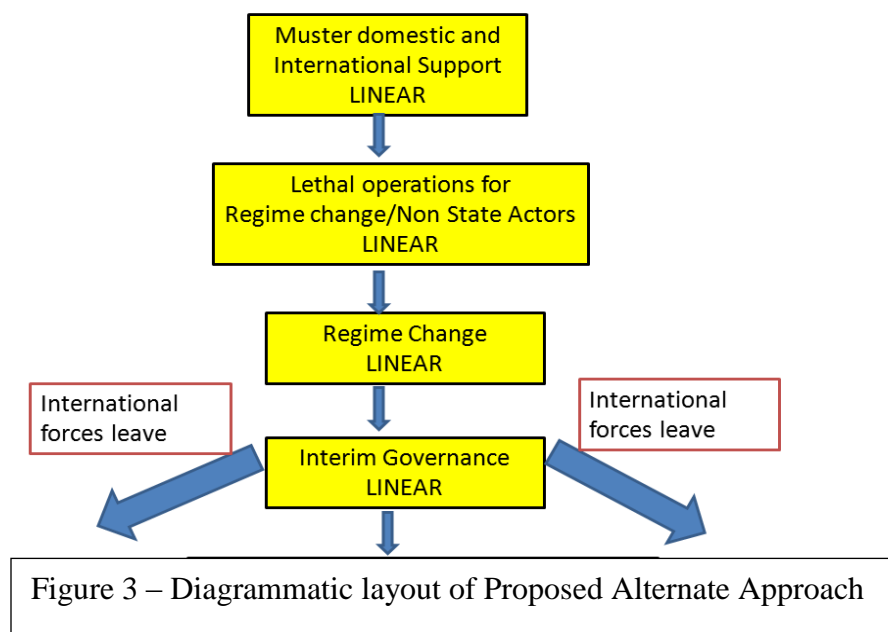
This environment (depicted in figure 2) once entered, inextricably engages the foreign force and further complicates their role. Conversely, this web of intricacies presents the ideal opportunities to the remnants of the country's defeated forces giving them an opportunity to rise and gain legitimacy amongst the people, to whom they can relate more intimately than the foreign force. Apart from the rise of those remnants, the environment also provides a window of opportunity to other non-state or state actors who intend exerting their influence in the country or harming the interest of the foreign force through indirect means. Thus, a situation that was favorable to the invading force now becomes untenable and the further it tries to unknot the complexity the further it finds itself in a tangle.

Russia's invasion of Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, French and US involvement in Vietnam and Napoleon in Spain present explicit lessons for us in which an invading/occupying force overstretched its role/stay in countries whose majority took strength from the invaders mere presence in their homeland and strove to fight and expel them. In spite of having internal difference, the presence of an invader amongst them provided a source of unity to stand in defiance and present a formidable resistance. As an alternative, history also provides us with a case in which the invader, cautious of the implications of an occupation, settled for a limited victory that served the national objective and yet avoided a prolonged unfavorable duel. *Bismarck's strategic brilliance in the Austro-Prussian war of 1866*

is a case in point, where the threat of an irregular protracted war was avoided by an amicable victory settlement with Austria.

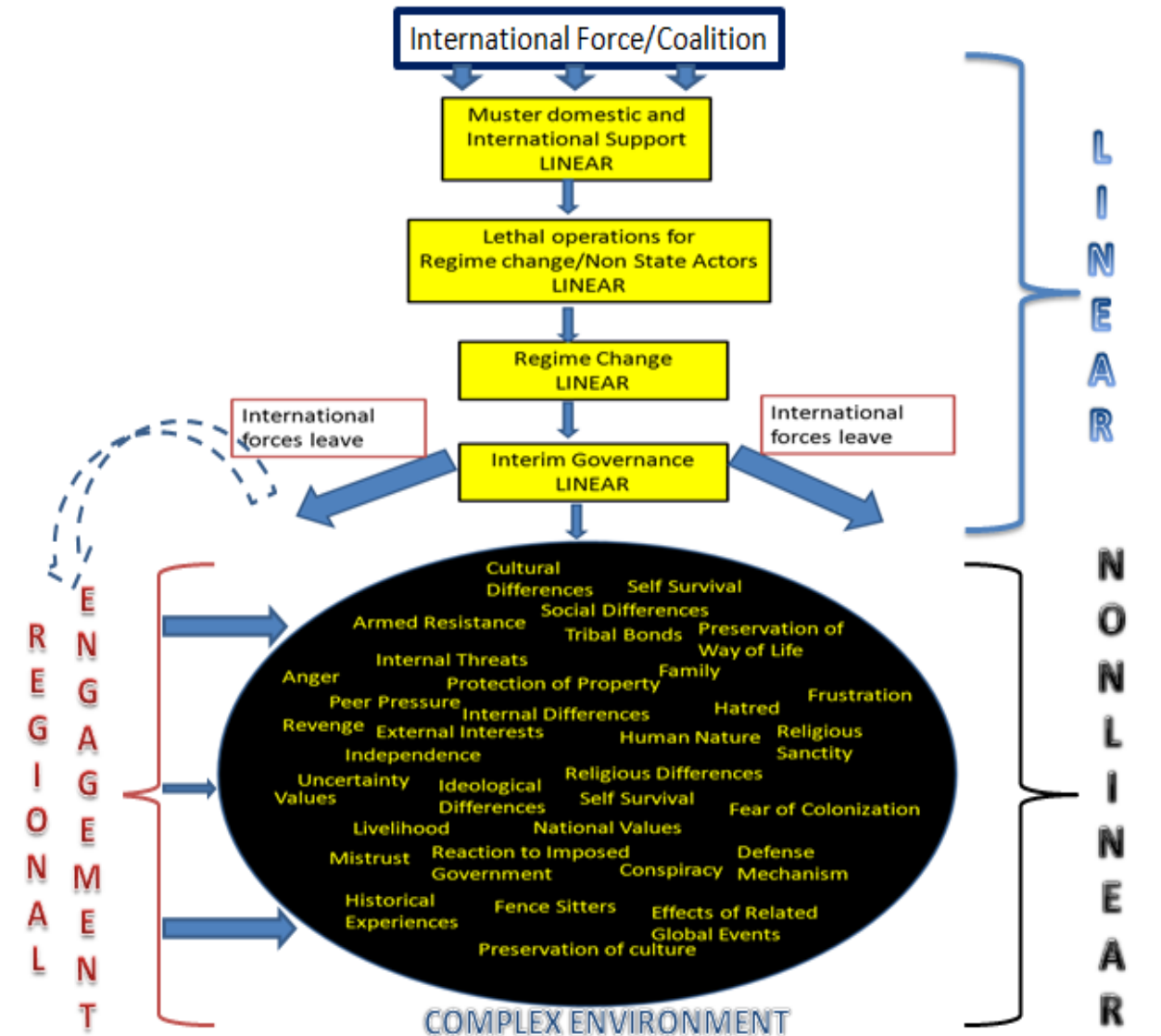
At this point, I will venture to propose an alternate approach, which to many may seem irresponsible and chaotic, yet I would insist on at least giving it a through consideration, before out rightly rejecting it. As mentioned earlier, the role of the foreign force should stay focused to the paradigm with which they are comfortable. They should only dedicate their resources and time to the linear aspects of the war i.e. mustering support, lethal operations to destroy enemy, regime change and establishing temporary governance apparatus. The establishment of the quasi governance machinery should be the cue for the foreign forces to re deploy and leave the war on an advantageous note. The engagement of the invaded country through regional/neighbors partners should continue to ensure that the future shaped has some semblance with the desires of the international community. This “strategic maneuver”, indirect in nature, will preclude chances of further altering the complex environment. This will also give a chance to the locals to shape their country, with indirect help through regional partners, and avoid postures, which may threaten their sovereignty in future. It is again reiterated, that it may seem like an irresponsible approach but it has worked in the past. Who would have forecasted in 1975 that after the withdrawal of forces and leaving Vietnam in a chaotic state, the Country would itself reconcile/stabilize and one day become a major U.S. ally. The same pattern can be found in Algeria. After the withdrawal of French forces in 1962, the country seemingly rudderless underwent tremendous internal turmoil that resulted from the vacuum created by the departing foreigners. However, the Country and its people managed to strive on their own and finally in 2002 managed to bring back normalcy and assume the role of a responsible nation after the defeat of the insurgent groups. The lesson learnt from these two case studies is; on withdrawal of an occupying/invading force, a country may face tremendous challenges and it may pass through a viscous cycle of unrest and instability, yet it will manage to survive and assume its natural role, which through years of despondency and unrest, will be focused on stability and responsibility.

Alternate Approach



The current era, where wars are under the influence of “Chaos and Complexity”, demands theory and application to be adaptive and dynamic. To address the challenges of this complex contemporary operating environment, routine thinking and blind implementation of prior experiences should not affect our planning abilities. As the enemy keeps transforming and adapting, we must also respond in kind and be a step ahead to understand its designs, thereby, denying opportunities that give leverage against us. Any foreign force operating outside its borders within an alien environment has the inherent disadvantage of not having popular support and legitimacy amongst the people who are apprehensive about invaders' intentions and the future that awaits them. This disadvantage can be needlessly further compounded by prolonging their role and stay, which reinforces the perception of being occupied by the locals. To summarize, a foreign force, even with all the good intentions, is its own enemy, as its presence generates confrontation and resistance.

COMPLETE MODEL



Major Ali Iqbal, Pakistan Army, is currently a student at the School of Advanced Military Studies Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has served as an instructor in School of Armor and Pakistan Military Academy and has twice served as brigade operations officer in an infantry and armor brigade. He has also served as United Nations Military Observer in Sierra Leone. He is a graduate of Command and Staff College, Pakistan and has a master's degree in Arts and Science of Warfare.

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