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On Pirates and Strategies

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Let us talk about pirates, and piracy and viable options. But first, and most importantly, let us consider the ways to think about the problem. At least, from a military perspective. What follows is a brief primer that may help each of you form your own opinions about the various options offered by pundits left, right, center, military, political and everything in between.

For starters, let's get really basic. There are a lot of people now who read Small Wars Journal, and not all of them are professional military. Moreover, despite the existence of some damned fine doctrinal definitions, we have all seen examples where the same word means different things to different people. So to remove that area of potential error let me start by pointing out that no matter what Joint Publication 1-02 says, there are not just three levels of war, there are four levels of war. These levels are: Tactical, Operational, Strategic, (the only three the military acknowledges) and the highest, the Political level of war. That's easy, right? So that we all understand each other, let's do a quick hash of what these levels mean.

Now the tactical level is one man vs. one man, or 10,000 vs. 10,000, or thirty ships vs thirty ships, whatever. It is the level of short term engagements. Things that last a pico-second, or an hour, or a week. We call events that occur at this level "skirmishes" or "battles." This is the level of "tactics."

The next level, Operational, is where you plan to string together a series of battles in pursuit of your theater objective. This is the level where you see whole Fleets, and Corps (in the Army) working through successive events for a longer-term. Events at the Operational level last weeks and months. You use the Operational level to achieve your Strategic objectives.

At the Strategic level you are making deliberate choices about how you, as a nation, want to fight. Now in JP 1-02 (the dictionary), there are sub-divisions acknowledged but poorly explained. "Grand Strategy" and "Military Strategy" are among those divisions, but for our purposes we can skip those. There are at the strategic level, really only a couple of choices. In essence there are only three, with a potential fourth, military strategies: Annihilation, Attrition, and Exhaustion (the fourth might be "Fabian," but let's not go there for the moment, ok?) So, well, let's define those.

Strategy of Exhaustion - A strategy which seeks the gradual erosion of an enemy nation's will or means to resist.

Strategy of Attrition - A strategy which seeks the gradual erosion of the combat power of the enemy's armed forces.

Strategy of Annihilation - A strategy which seeks the immediate destruction of the combat power of the enemy's armed forces.

Now let's look at what some people have been saying.

Essentially, those people who have been writing op-eds about shooting pirates on sight and coastal raiding, are really only writing about tactical responses. And that's fine. But tactics don't win wars most of the time. What I am discerning in the different approaches advocated here and there in various op-eds and Sunday Morning talk shows is not really a disagreement that something must be done, but a tendency to examine the issue from different levels of war. They are people who claim to be talking about a solution to a conflict (and piracy is a conflict), but they are only talking about tactics. Those folks who talk about shooting don't link that idea, as it should be linked, to an overarching understanding of conflict at the strategic level. The Germans demonstrated, twice, that this is not a good way to win.

Follow me on this: Shooting individual pirates/pirate boats/villages is Tactical. If one follows their logic they appear to believe that if we shoot enough of the pirates, the effect will be strategic. But they don't say that, usually because they don't know what they're talking about. Essentially what they are really advocating is a strategy of attrition. (Remember, that one is defined as: "A strategy which seeks the gradual erosion of the combat power of the enemy's armed forces.") This, by the way, is not necessarily wrong. It's just that most commentators don't link the strategic plan to their emotional tactical suggestion. In the end most of these folks just come off as old-school jingoists.

Other solutions one hears about, such as a convoy system through the affected areas off the coast of Somalia, are more akin to an Operational Level approach, but these too are not Strategic level solutions per se, they are responses to mitigate a situation, not solve one. In other words they are not strategies for a long term solution, they are ways to transfer the cost that commercial shipping companies (read: Big International Business) are now bearing to the taxpayers of the countries that can afford navies. Yes, I know, it's a wee bit ironic that many of those on the political left are advocating a course of action which has, as it's primary beneficiary, large global corporations. But again, these folks usually haven't had any education in theories of war and conflict at the highest levels, so they don't understand who the beneficiaries really are.

Those in the final category, the people who focus on changing the conditions ashore, particularly in Somalia, are looking at the issue from a Strategic level from the git-go, but in their case they're often hazy on the tactics. In most cases the suggestions I've seen would seem to fit under the concept of a strategy of Exhaustion. (Again, remember, that one is defined as: "A strategy which seeks the gradual erosion of an enemy nation's will or means to resist.") Personally, I think it is pure idiocy to advocate a strategy without understanding the costs, in real military terms, what it will take to implement that strategy, but more on that in a moment. A friend asked me a really salient question on this issue. He wrote, "In a failed state, such as Somalia, is there not some point where tactical, operational, and strategic levels become one? After all, except for a "government" that reportedly controls a few blocks in the capitol, the folks in charge are warlords and criminal organizations."

Well, in examining this issue I first focused on the issue of warlords and criminal organizations, and cast about for a stateless parallel in history. The closest I could come was the continent of North America, from roughly the 1650s-1890, and the perpetual war waged against literally hundreds of different tribes, which lasted roughly 250 years. That is my intellectual baseline here, the worst case scenario which I hope we can avoid. Any de facto conflict/war which lasts 250 years is not a "success" in anyone's book.

The parallels that I see, twixt the two, are these: In both situations you have/had decentralized power on one side, and a central power on the other. In both situations one side focuses upon a raiding style of conflict, darting in and out, while the other largely depends upon a larger more conventional force which has its own problems finding the small raiding parties. I would note that this seems to apply on land as well as on sea. Somalia is a "failed state." The continent of North America, as it existed prior to US colonization, was not a state at all in the first place. (This extends down to the tribes, and even individual villages, where culture kept most people in-line, but even a powerful sachem could not necessarily control his own young warriors in most places at most times.) There are other parallels, quite a few in fact, but these are sufficient.

What I realize is that it is in the major difference between the two examples that we might see daylight for a positive outcome today. In short, Somalia is a lot smaller in a crucial way than is/was North America. There are only so many places along the Somali coast from which one can put to sea, and there are only a few population centers supporting this situation. Somalia is big, but it is very low density in most places (too low to support piracy), so only a few population centers have become hubs. That makes them vulnerable.

Now, on the original question that my friend posed to me about the fusion of tactical/operational/strategic issues in stateless situations, I think my answer is a definite, "no." That is not to say that events at the tactical level can't have a strategic effect, they certainly can. One need only look as far as the so-called "CNN Effect" to know that what one rifle platoon (or a squad of prison guards) does have strategic impact. But that's not the same thing. It is also not to say that there is not bleed-over between the levels. That is also quite obviously true. But it still seems to me that as there are really only three (with that stipulated potential fourth) military strategies: Annihilation, Attrition, and Exhaustion, it still makes sense to start there when you are thinking about a problem like this, and work your way down. Coming from the Political Level of War a decision must be made, "we will do something." Then move down to the type of strategy you want to employ, then that will determine your assets and the broad outlines of the Operations and Tactics you will pursue.

So we must decide first, "What strategy do we prefer to use against opponent X?" This should be based, in a rational world, upon his vulnerabilities, not our capabilities. (Basing your strategy on what you have on-hand is a recipe for the old "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," solution.)

So, for example, if somebody advocating shooting pirates on the high seas as "the" solution had said first, "We should seek to defeat the pirates through a strategy of attrition," then it would have made perfect sense for his follow-on recommendations of intercepts at sea and killing them one at a time. That may take years, but it should be fairly low cost to both sides.

Somebody else might say, "We should annihilate the pirates." OK, well that calls for a rapid destruction of them by main force, which suggests a couple of USMC Marine Expeditionary Brigades in some Expeditionary Strike Groups all conducting simultaneous amphibious landings at the six main ports/towns we know the pirates issue from, destroying all things that float, and holding the port or stretch of shoreline for thirty days until all those low-endurance pirate vessels at sea have either succumbed to the weather, starved, or come in and surrendered. This, obviously, unless we're invited, is also an act of war. Or it would be, if we were doing it to a "state."

Finally, there is the idea advocated by a couple of fuzzy thinkers, that we might pursue an indirect strategy of exhaustion. That's ok, but in my structured way of thinking of these issues, I do see it as lacking in hard edges. In my opinion this one has the least likelihood of success. I'd point out that this is not least because we've already seen a failure on this front, as some might recall from fifteen years ago. We can't make the people who are practicing piracy and kidnapping "lose their will" to make money in this way short of making the entire nation as rich as a Western European country. In my humble opinion, it just ain't gonna happen. So the ideas to "exhaust their will or means to resist" by making Somalia into a Utopia is just that, utopian. (Caveat: Some who advocate the "shooting them at sea" option also suggest that by killing them individually at sea, in the act of piracy, that that will sap their will. I disagree. We have not really seen a good example of a third-world country "losing will" due to attrition in the past. That seems to be a phenomenon currently confined to defined and rich democracies.)

So there you have it, the intellectual tools to analyze the various options presented by yourself. There are, of course, infinite variations. I am merely noting the framework most useful to helping one define the parameters.

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