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## Winning Indefinite Conflicts: Achieving Strategic Success Against Ideologically-Motivated Violent Non-State Actors

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Mark E. Vinson

*“This broader challenge of **countering violent extremism** is not simply a military effort. Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they are defeated by better ideas...”*

-- President Barak Obama, July 6, 2015

#### Elusive Success

If, as President Obama asserted, “ideologies are not defeated by guns,” but by “better ideas,” then how should the U.S. military be used to help achieve strategic success in the growing number of protracted, irregular conflicts with ideologically-motivated violent non-state actors (VNSAs)? In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, the Philippines, and many more countries around the globe, VNSAs, motivated by religious, political, ethnic and other status-quo-challenging ideas, have been remarkably resilient, perseverant, and influential. By surviving and rapidly recovering from punishing attacks by the United States and its partners—while continuing to carry out violent agendas against local, regional, and even global adversaries—these VNSAs can credibly claim that they are succeeding strategically. With broad, ambiguous long-term strategic objectives, and an open-ended, evolving path to strategic success, the United States has generally conducted limited military operations intended to disrupt and degrade such VNSAs, followed by the hopeful but indefinite objective of “ultimately defeating” them. In view of the VNSAs’ resilience, persistence, and ideological basis for conflict, the path to strategic success for the United States has remained elusive. Although its military has achieved tactical and operational successes against such adversaries, the U.S. government has struggled to define, much less achieve, strategic success. If military success is not sufficient against ideologically-motivated VNSAs, then how can the United States achieve strategic success and what is the military’s role?

Based on the results of a cooperative examination by the U.S. and Israeli militaries, this article examines key challenges associated with achieving strategic success in protracted conflicts with VNSAs. It then offers ideas on how to address the challenges and suggests some key conditions required to achieve

strategic success. The article concludes with thoughts on how the U.S. military might implement the ideas.

### **An Accelerating Treadmill**

U.S. intelligence capabilities are ill-suited for irregular conflicts with VNSAs, which tend to take place in complex, uncertain foreign operational environments. These operational environments are dynamic ecosystems containing a multitude of actors, each with unique tribal, religious, national, and ethnic identities that produce complex relationships based on myriad factors, all of which combine to make it impossible to predict system-wide effects of an action against any part of the system. In such unfamiliar environments, threat actors are conducting protracted, ideological conflicts, blending into populations, urban areas, and complex terrain. The U.S. military inevitably enters conflicts with a lack of local knowledge, language abilities, and cultural experience. Planners struggle to accurately understand and frame the operational problem, leading to flawed campaign design and planning.

The U.S. military generally lacks the essential support, both among the local population in a conflict zone and at home, to sustain its direct involvement in a protracted conflict with VNSAs. Local populations will naturally distrust the motives and long-term commitment of external forces, especially extra-regional forces with no tie to the local land or its people. As a foreign force, the U.S. military will naturally struggle to gain and maintain the local legitimacy required for successful direct involvement in a protracted campaign. Likewise, the sustained support of the U.S. public for direct involvement in such conflicts is unlikely unless political leaders can communicate a clear and compelling argument for U.S. interests. The protracted nature of conflicts with VNSAs, the huge cost of military operations, and the public's reluctance to accept casualties, make the substantial and long-term commitment of ground combat forces problematic for the United States and other western democracies. The current U.S. strategy against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) clearly reflects the lack of public and political support for ground force commitment after the extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, giving rise to the oft-heard expression of official non-commitment "*no boots on the ground.*"

In the face of complex and uncertain conflicts, U.S. leaders are challenged to describe specific long-term strategic objectives that align with those of its partners. As a result, leaders initially provide broad, ambiguous objectives that may be insufficient to enable national or coalition unity of effort. Without specific strategic objectives, and in light of VNSA threats that persist, adapt, and even expand in the form of dramatic **terrorist attacks** in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States, it is unclear whether U.S. operations are making progress toward strategic success.

Besides ambiguous strategic objectives, military operations against VNSAs generally suffer from a lack of effective strategic and operational orchestration. As a result, a series of tactically or operationally successful operations may not be integrated with interagency or other partners' lines of effort, and may not contribute to strategic success. However, without clear strategic objectives that find common ground with partners' various and competing objectives, U.S. operational planning will be unable to establish the integrating framework necessary to unify effort among all contributing actors.

In 2005, while the United States was responding to the 9-11 attacks with a global counter-terrorism effort, struggling to design and execute successful campaigns against VNSAs in Iraq and Afghanistan, Douglas Feith, then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, warned that if the nation's efforts were limited to "protecting the homeland and attacking and disrupting terrorist networks, you're on a **treadmill** that is likely to get faster and faster..." Twelve years later, the United States is arguably still on the accelerating treadmill, asking what strategic success looks like against such adversaries, what its role should be, and how its military should be used.

### **A Comprehensive and Indirect Approach**

Fundamentally, political leaders should not conflate military success with strategic success, particularly in complex conflicts with VNSAs. Although military and police operations play a critical security and stability role in a comprehensive approach, their contributions cannot be strategically decisive. As James Dorsey pointed out in his *International Policy Digest* article,

... even such a hypothetical defeat [of the Islamic State (IS)] would not solve the problem. Al Qaeda was degraded, to use the language of the Obama administration. Instead of reducing the threat of political violence, it produced ever more virulent forms which are embodied in IS...it is a fair assumption that defeat of the group without **tackling root causes** would only lead to something that is even more violent and vicious.

Addressing the foundations of a conflict with VNSAs requires a tailored, integrated, strategic approach, comprehensively applying all elements of national and coalition partner power. This approach was reflected in President Obama's 6 July 2015 statement on U.S. strategy against ISIS, when he said "[o]ur **comprehensive strategy** against ISIL [ISIS] is harnessing all elements of American power across our government—military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic development, and perhaps most importantly the power of our values." But how can the strategy succeed without the sustained public support at home and in the conflict area?

To enable a sustainable, long-term campaign that gains and maintains public support, the U.S. military must employ an indirect approach. This approach requires a sustainable *patron–regional partner–local partner* relationship that will enable a long-term campaign to succeed against a VNSA adversary (Figure 1). To enable such a partnership, trust and cooperation based on an alignment of strategic objectives regarding the VNSA adversary must be sustained. The key ideas behind the indirect approach result from two complementary concepts: a top-down *go local* concept and a bottom-up *grassroots* concept. An external patron, such as the United States, *goes local* by encouraging and supporting regional partner states with a direct stake in the conflict and historical ties to the vulnerable territory and its local populations, who in turn encourage and enable local actors to be committed partners that holistically address their populations' needs. This means that vetted local partners—who are intrinsically committed to and inherently knowledgeable of the local population's needs—must be identified and enabled with sustainable support during a protracted conflict. In turn, the empowered local actors use a bottom-up *grassroots* approach to establish local security, legitimate governance, economic opportunity, and sustainable services, tailored to their constituent populations.



eventually incite a global apocalyptic war. In order to do so, ISIS is framing a strategy to remain and expand across three geographic rings: the Interior Ring, the Near Abroad, and the Far Abroad.” How would a comprehensive and indirect approach be applied to contain such a threat?

Containment operations include complementary military and civilian lines of effort to build and manage a coalition, to halt VNSA territorial expansion, to prevent VNSA recruits from entering a regional partner’s territory, to support local governance and economic opportunity, and to deny VNSA access to weapons, funds, and resources. A containment operation is a defensive approach unlikely to be decisive on its own, but it could provide a stable basis for follow-on offensive operations. Thus, containment should be considered as an intermediate objective in a broader campaign designed to ultimately succeed operationally against a VNSA. Such an operation might be employed early in a campaign to prevent expansion and to stabilize and protect vulnerable regional and local partners.

While territorially containing a threat is essential, the idea must be extended beyond the physical to comprehensively contain the influence of VNSAs that embody and promote violent ideologies. As James Dorsey observed, “[c]ontainment addresses the immediate problem but ignores factors that fuel radicalization far from the warring state’s borders and make jihadism attractive to the disaffected across the globe.” Addressing the spread of violent ideas and associated violent acts requires a different approach. This challenge returns us to President Obama’s statement that “[i]deologies are not defeated with guns, they’re defeated by **better ideas**.” However, this begs the practical question of how can a better idea be applied to defeat a violent, ideologically-motivated VNSA? Or more specifically, how can a better idea produce the key conditions of security, legitimacy, and sustainability?

More than information operations or a persuasive philosophy, better ideas require a fusion of compelling messages and congruent actions. To counter or defeat an ideology-driven VNSA, better ideas must be formed and legitimized by *tangible actions* and measured by *concrete results*. These ideas and actions must address the fundamental issues that produced and supported the VNSA, and they must be tailored to achieve the key aforementioned conditions of security, legitimacy, and sustainability for each relevant local population. Only by successfully achieving these conditions, will the United States and its regional and local partners demonstrate the idea’s credibility, the integrity of which can then be used to influence other relevant populations and to proliferate the idea. As the idea is successfully implemented, using the indirect approach described earlier, it could then be spread incrementally via a *cellular approach* that first establishes an outer defensive containment ring of local security forces that consolidates their gains by establishing legitimate governance and sustainable services. As the containment ring succeeds, the idea and supporting actions could be extended to contract the VNSA territory, counter the credibility of its ideology, and ultimately to achieve the critical security, legitimacy, and sustainability conditions described earlier.

### **Implications for the U.S. Military**

While the U.S. military needs to be able to fight and win major wars, it also needs the ready capabilities and capacity to sustain and eventually achieve strategic success in long-term campaigns against VNSAs.

To improve its ability to achieve strategic success in such conflicts, the military first needs improved intelligence capabilities to better understand local and regional populations, to assess root-cause issues, and to enable effective campaign design, planning, execution, and assessment. The U.S. military should consider developing more tailorable command and control capabilities to better enable a unified planning and execution effort with U.S. government agencies, and across a broad coalition of patron states, regional partners, and myriad local partners.

To sustain its support to partners, the U.S. military requires sufficient regionally-focused and trained

personnel—with language and cultural training—to rotate forces and sustain trusting relationships for the duration of a long-term campaign. Given the specialized nature of U.S. enabling operations, the military needs special operations forces and other high-demand forces that can directly engage with partners. They must have the language skills and cultural knowledge to adequately understand the situation, and to gain and maintain influence. While special operations forces are best suited for these roles, many of the traditional intelligence, communications, joint fires, and logistics support functions reside in the conventional forces. Likewise, in view of persistent, region-wide conflicts, the military requires the capability to rapidly and effectively organize, train, and deploy conventional forces to expand its special operations forces' capabilities and capacity without breaking the conventional force.

## About the Author



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Mark E. Vinson retired as a U.S. Army colonel after 27-years of service in various command and staff positions. Since 2005, he has worked for the Institute for Defense Analyses, conducting joint studies and analysis, and providing joint concept and capability development support to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the United States Joint Forces Command, and the Joint Staff on a number of joint and multi-national projects (including work with NATO, the Israel Defense Forces, and the Colombian General Staff).

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