

The End of End State—

Strategic Planning Process for the 21st Century

by *William J. Davis, Jr.*

"The answer is 400,000 troops. Now what is the question?"

***— Storied response to use of force query by President
from senior military advisors during the Clinton presidency***

"Politicians want options."

— Former National Security Council member

The two quotes above are indicative of a cultural fault line that exists between national command authorities and senior military advisors over the decision to employ military force for matters of national security.¹ General Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted this fault line as a significant barrier to effective communications between civilians and military.² Political decision making involves embracing ambiguity and requires flexibility, whereas military planning is usually synoptic and attempts to “plan away” any and all ambiguities. Exemplar of the latter, the first paragraph of joint planning doctrine states: “Planning begins with the end state in mind, providing a unifying purpose around which actions and resources are focused.”³

Despite the many articles written about the need for more collaborative planning among the various agencies of the U.S., few suggest that an overhaul of the joint operational planning process should be considered as a solution. This article recommends just that. I contend that most of the strategic and operational lexicon of the U.S. military was born out of the tactical level of warfare. As I stated in a previous *InterAgency Journal* article,⁴ the optimal way to overcome

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interorganizational differences is to find couplers that allow each culture to operate intact. It is usually counterproductive to try to change a culture, as it brings to the situation a unique set of intricately intertwined skills. In this article, I am arguing that the lexicon and approach of the Department of Defense (DoD) should change to better work within the national security arena.

The Clausewitz-Huntington Paradox

Among U.S. national security professionals, the Clausewitz aphorism that “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means”⁵ is generally accepted as a truism. However, the situation is more contentious among national security professionals when accepting the basic premise of the Huntington model of civil-military relations. This premise states that military professionals have a monopoly on the appropriate application of violence to protect a country’s interests, and that once policies (political objectives in war) are set, the military professionals should be left alone to achieve those objectives without meddling from civilian authorities.⁶ When juxtaposed, these two ideas—that war is continuation of policy but military officers should be given autonomy once the goals of a conflict are set—are seemingly contradictory. That is, if war is merely the continuation of policy, then should not it and its execution also be equally susceptible to the ever changing and ambiguous character of a political environment? U.S. military joint doctrine does not adequately explain this paradox and, contrary to reality, embraces such definitive concepts as termination and termination criteria, national strategic end state, and military end state.⁷

As a nod to the possible paradox, joint doctrine admits that conflict and war are dynamic and changing, and that there is a requirement to assess and learn during plan execution and to adapt and update those plans to ensure they contribute to the strategic end state.⁸ However, this referencing of constant change, learning, and

adaptation provides only broad guidance that one should constantly assess the environment, plans, and situation. This article offers a way ahead in providing terms and doctrine associated with military strategic and operational planning that embrace, rather than ignore, the ambiguous and often changing world of policy, which is the main purpose for military actions. Joint doctrine must embrace the ambiguity inherent in the strategic and operational levels of war to ensure the best opportunity to protect and further American interests no matter the situation.

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First Things First

Culturally, it seems most of the concepts associated with strategic and operational planning are directly derived from the tactical realm. In addition, military officers spend most of their careers at the tactical level, and it is most often tactical success that gets one promoted to general officer.⁹ This focus on tactical issues, despite rhetoric to the contrary (Clausewitz 101 so to speak), means the American military tends to view military operations as a more apolitical undertaking than it should.¹⁰ As such, it appears many terms and concepts that have worked well in the tactical level of war have been inappropriately applied to the strategic and operational levels as well.

The adjustment of terms and concepts required to ensure current doctrine accounts for the differing dynamics and environments in the various levels of war is slow to arrive. For example, the Joint planning community is

currently in a state of flux as it seeks to change the concept of the Joint Operational Planning and Execution System (JOPES) to the more flexible Adaptive Planning and Execution System. Although doctrine eliminated references to the JOPES terminology from some manuals, there is still confusion as to exactly how the system has changed, which might be the result of attempting to apply previously well-defined terms to a concept that is different and should have unique terms.¹¹

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In addition, while doctrine addresses some critical aspects of military operations, such as ensuring outcomes endure and preserving advantages gained, the outdated language it uses acts as a constraining element in conceptual understanding. A case in point: The military should stop using the term and concept of “end state” at the strategic and operational levels. Time does not end, and looking at a very finite moment to define either the focus of the operation or its success is short sighted. Instead, the military should adopt terms that reflect reality.

The military should accept that its efforts are only able to set the conditions for an environment that is more acceptable to the interests of the U.S. and cannot create a terminable environment. In addition, it should understand that any problem addressed will most likely not be completely solved but will require some sort of maintenance (either by the military or some other instrument of national power) to ensure resources are not wasted.

All Military Operations Lead to the Theater Campaign Plan Road

The combatant commander’s theater campaign plan is the primary means through which the military supports achieving or protecting the national interests of the U.S. The theater campaign plan details a range of steady-state military activities (security cooperation, military engagement, deterrence, etc.) that when coordinated with activities from the other instruments of national power should avert major conflict. However, because the international environment is a complex, adaptive system, there are times that despite the best efforts of the U.S., it fails to protect and further national interests.¹²

When steady-state activities can no longer protect American interests, the military instrument of national power is often called upon to create a more favorable environment for America. During any increased use of power, the goal is to reach the position wherein steady-state activities are able to protect and further American interests. “Plans developed to respond to contingencies are best understood as branches to the overarching global campaign plan or [theater campaign plan].”¹³

Joint doctrine and the interagency understanding of it should be updated to reflect the reality of the strategic and operational environments. However, if the joint planning community perceives new doctrinal terms as too radical, then, at the very least, the doctrine should be rewritten to modify the definitions of current terms to acknowledge the transitory nature of the strategic and operational environments.

Figure 1 (page 19) offers changes to current doctrinal terms that should be replaced. These new concepts and terms are required if the DoD wishes to move forward in creating a more realistic and adaptable planning culture.

Current Doctrinal Term	Suggested New Term
Termination	Changeover
Termination Criteria	Changeover Criteria
Military End State	Supporting Military End State
Strategic End State	Enduring State
Courses of Action*	Strategic Options
*The term "courses of action" would still be viable; "strategic options" would substitute for it at the combatant commander level and above.	

Figure 1. Doctrinal Terms

Changeover and Changeover Criteria

Within doctrine, the terms “termination” and “termination criteria” include a robust focus on the transitional aspects of terminating any military operation. However, for all concerned, continued use of the expression “termination” is confusing and creates a mental paradox that does not reflect reality. Joint doctrine should ban the term “termination” because the situation never terminates, it transitions to another state. However, the term “transition” is used continually in other contexts throughout military culture, so to avoid confusion, I propose using the term “changeover.”¹⁴ To terminate means to bring to an end.¹⁵ Using “changeover” provides a necessary way of viewing all military operations and will set the conditions for the proper mindset when planning. For example, although Operation New Dawn did end, the U.S. did not terminate its military operations in Iraq in 2011, but instead changed over to the Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq. Thinking in terms of changeover will focus current and future commanders on a better understanding on how to changeover operations instead of how to terminate operations and leave the changeover for others to consider.

Supporting Military End State

When General Tommy Franks, briefed President George W. Bush on the operational approach for Operation Iraqi Freedom, he noted

two things that would signal the end state of the operation— “weapons of mass destruction removal” and “regime change.”

General Frank’s briefing slide did not annotate whether the end state shown was military or strategic. Suffice it to say, it was neither. Depending on one’s view of the operation, the two signals were either intermediate military objectives or a military end state.

In other words, they were specific, desired results that should have only facilitated a much more robust political vision. In fact, if all military operations are only a continuation of policy, then there is no such thing as a military end state, only military objectives that support policy.

As such, if doctrine deleted the idea of a military end state and replaced it with the idea of a supporting military end state, it would advance and inculcate the concept that military action at the operational level should directly support political vision, and, more importantly, it would send a message to civilian authorities that the use of military power is not an end unto itself.

Enduring State and Options¹⁶

Once again, the concept of an end state, in this case a strategic end state, contradicts reality. This affinity for annotating a final end state most likely stems from tactical military planning culture. In tactical planning, the end state is usually an achievable and measurable objective. Definitive tactical objectives such as “take that

hill” or “destroy the enemy’s tanks” engender a synoptic approach to developing ways to achieve the objective. However, often at the strategic level of war, such definitive objectives are allusive. For example, the political vision and hence the enduring state desired by the U.S. tends to change with the development of ongoing situations similar to what has been happening in Syria, Iraq, and Nigeria. In each of these, the situation changes based on factors such as the international community’s involvement, public opinion, the focus of and on the belligerents,

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number of refugees, and regional overflow of the problem. These situations necessitate flexibility from civilian leadership that is completely incongruent with the culture of military planners who want to plan to an end state. To resolve this problem, doctrine should focus on having the military develop and provide options instead of courses of action at the combatant commander and higher level. Strategic options will provide an expected result emanating from the military action taken, thus leaving a wide array of results open for civilian leadership to consider, courses of action are normally developed based on a pre-determined expected result.

Joint doctrine does refer to “providing options,” but does not provide a clear picture of exactly what that means. For example, doctrine states: “The planning staff uses [the Joint Operation Planning Process] to conduct detailed planning to fully develop options....” It goes on to state: “Strategic Guidance. This function is used to...formulate concepts and strategic military options....”¹⁷ It also describes “Flexible Response Options” in Appendix F.¹⁸

This ambiguous multi-referencing of the term does not provide appropriate guidance to Joint planners as to what exactly comprises an option. To further add to the confusion, Joint doctrine also uses the term “options” to denote developing branches within a course of action and even states inasmuch that “options” is another word for “branches.”¹⁹ The idea of strategic options as presented here has been explored at the Basic Strategic Art Program given at the Army War College.

One of the functions of the combatant commander is to assist the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in his advisory role in informing the President and Secretary of Defense about military options to help them form national strategy and guidance. Strategic options are not courses of action. Strategic options assist the senior leaders in the use of military force in the context of all instruments of national power. Likewise, strategic options are not accomplished as an afterthought during planning, but rather are addressed as a precursor to planning efforts. They are theater centric and require the involvement of the combatant commander.

An illustrative example may help to understand the concept of strategic options. In 2002, the Secretary of Defense asked the Central Command (CENTCOM) combatant commander for military options to remove Saddam Hussein from power. What CENTCOM provided was a summary of a completed plan with significant detail developed from a desired end state. The Secretary of Defense, however, viewed that plan as just one method of removing Hussein from power and wanted additional options, which were not forthcoming. However, if the CENTCOM commander presented some options, along with the assumptions and risks that came with the options, the Secretary of Defense would have been in a better position to advise the President in forming the national strategy. Options presented to the Secretary of Defense may have included seizing the southern

Strategic Option or Course of Action	
Strategic Option	Course of Action (COA)
Different assumptions	Common assumptions
Scenario driven	Single scenario
Different changeover criteria	Common termination criteria
- Will lead to a mission - Each option will likely be a different CCMD mission	Mission dependent
Different military objectives	Common military objectives
May be expressed in relationship of M to other elements of power (DI&E)	Expressed as how to apply M ICW DI&E
“Branch planning up front” leads to different mission statement	Will have branches to deal with different assumptions, but same mission

Figure 2. Strategic Option vs. Course of Action

oil fields to increase economic pressure on the regime, arming the Kurds and/or Shia tribes, escalating Operation Northern and Southern Watch, or working with Iran to increase pressure on the regime. These are widely varying options, with different timelines for achieving national objectives, different kinds of risks, and certainly different resultant missions for the military. Figure 2 summarizes the stark differences between strategic options and courses of action.

Communication of a strategic option must be in a format and use language that is easily understood by civilian leaders and policymakers. Though there is no standard for a strategic option, each strategic option should contain the following elements:

- Conditions and assumptions upon which the option is based.
- Desired changeover conditions.
- A description of the concept with emphasis on the use of military actions in the context of the use of other instruments of power.
- A general description of the resources required.

- A general timeline for how the option would play out.
- The strategic and operational risks entailed in this option.

In crisis action planning, combatant commanders engage early with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense in providing analyzed military options to help shape the national strategy and guidance. Again, the various strategic options presented by the combatant commander will likely result in different missions for the command. There are many ways that the combatant commander can communicate strategic options, as there will likely be a high level of interest in the crisis by senior leaders. One way is through the formal crisis action planning messages. A combatant commander is expected to provide a commander’s assessment as early as possible during the situation development phases of crisis action planning. He should describe the options for military activity in this assessment. The commander and staff can and should follow through with continued development of the options as time allows and demands. Later steps of crisis action planning narrow the strategic

guidance and direction to enable the command to focus on the mission it must execute. However, the command must continue to keep in mind the other possible options for the use of military force as the situation changes.

There is also a need to consider and communicate strategic options during execution. Commanders and staffs must acknowledge that the dynamic environment will likely require strategic reassessment and adaptation during execution. They, therefore, must be prepared to present options to adapt the strategy and potentially the policy to react to the changing environment. This requirement for change might be due to unforeseen successes, failures, or other circumstances. It is especially important for the commander and staffs to look at the holistic national strategy to determine the need for and the impact of changes to the military approach to adapt to the circumstances.

A Changed Culture

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff published a list of desired leader attributes that include things such as recognize change and lead transitions, anticipate and adapt to surprise and uncertainty, and understand the environment and the effect of all instruments of national power.²⁰ Joint doctrine changes offered within this article can be a catalyst for creating a culture that thrives on those attributes and facilitates critical communications between civilian and military leadership. It is time for the Joint community to embrace the dynamic reality of the political employment of the use of force and train and plan for the uncertainty of the strategic environment in order to achieve those attributes so definitively outlined by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Janine Davidson, “Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 1, pp. 129–145. Davidson artfully detailed this phenomenon. The first quote was a running joke during the Clinton presidency as to the military response anytime the use of force was considered, and the second quote was by a former member of the National Security Council.
- 2 “From the Chairman, An Interview with Martin E. Dempsey,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 78, 3rd Quarter, 2015, p. 5.
- 3 Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, August 11, 2011, p. I-1.
- 4 W.J. Davis, “Why We All Can’t Just Get Along: Overcoming Personal Barriers to Inter-Organizational Effectiveness,” *InterAgency Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, Summer 2014.
- 5 Carl von Clausewitz, in Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds.), *On War [Vom Krieg]*, indexed edition, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, p. 87.
- 6 Samuel, P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1957.
- 7 Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. I-7.
- 9 Tom Ricks, “General Failure,” *The Atlantic*, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine /archive/2012/11/general-failure/309148/2/>>, accessed on August 25, 2014.
- 10 Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: Davis Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 86–87.
- 11 If it is not considerably different, then why change at all?
- 12 Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, p. II-4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. II-23.
- 14 Dictionary.com, <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/changeover?s=t>>, accessed on August 25, 2014.
- 15 Dictionary.com, <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/terminate?s=t>>, accessed on August 25, 2014.
- 16 Many thanks to Dr. Kidder, U.S. Army War College, who provided extensive review and input of not only the entire article but most particularly the section on options.
- 17 Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, pp. xvi and I-5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, Appendix F.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. III-36.
- 20 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Desired Leader Attributes for Joint Force 2020,” Memorandum, June 28, 2013.