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HOW THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL CAN HELP END WARS BETTER

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INTRODUCTION

Planning for conflict termination is a difficult undertaking. It requires significant forethought and the ability to visualize a desired outcome. This vision must then be translated into a plan to fight and end the conflict to reach that outcome. Most studies on the subject agree it is essential to plan for conflict termination prior to entering a conflict; however, time and time again we fail to give it the required focus and suffer the consequences. Conflict termination is not an event or a distinct moment in time when decisive military operations end. It must be looked at as the process of ending the fighting then stabilizing the environment to set conditions for a lasting peace. If Liddell Hart's statement holds true that "the object in war is a better state of peace – even if only from your own point of view"[1], a military campaign plan that ends at the defeat of opposing forces will almost certainly fail to achieve this. A better state of peace cannot simply be defined negatively as the absence of war, but must be transformed into a positive peace through stabilization after combat. Defeat of enemy forces must be seen as an intermediate objective with the translation of military gains into political ends occurring during the stabilization and conflict termination phase.

The operational level military has the ability to impact conflict termination beyond defeating enemy forces. How a war is fought and ended are critical factors in achieving post conflict stability. The military does not have the luxury of focusing on the destruction of the enemy then handing over a disrupted system to political leadership to stabilize. Operational commanders must plan for conflict termination and understand how military means should be employed to resolve political issues. Failure to do so means risking senseless violence without a chance of achieving a higher purpose. "Combat is characterized by breaking things and killing

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[1]Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1967), 351.

people; war is about much more than that." [2] War is about creating a better peace. The military should be prepared to do both.

This essay will examine the role of the military at the operational level in planning for and setting the conditions for conflict termination that achieve political aims. It considers the military role in determining how a conflict should end then aims to provide practical recommendations for implementation at the operational level for conducting operations with an eye on the end game. It also emphasizes the critical role stability operations play in successful termination.

HOW SHOULD IT END?

Conflict termination is an important concept whether fighting a conventional, irregular or hybrid battle, although the concept of victory may look very different for each. The probability of achieving decisive military victories in hybrid wars and insurgencies is lower than in conventional battles as is the chance that operations can be divided into distinct phases of decisive military operations and stabilization. We must be prepared to adapt. An operational problem can be describe as "a discrepancy between the state of affairs as it is and the state of affairs as it ought to be that compels military action to resolve it." [3] Resolving the problem demands understanding the problem, visualizing how the end should look then developing and executing a plan to get there. Often the first two components prove the most challenging. The US Army defines the generic operational end state as "a favourable, self-regulation situation within the campaign's operational space that is realized by the campaign and contributes to the overall achievement of strategic aims" [4] Clausewitz eludes that a belligerent's power of resistance is the

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[2] Frederick W. Kagan, "War and Aftermath," *Policy Review*, (August and September 2003): 4.
[3] Department of the Army, *Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design,* TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500. (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, United States Army, 2008), 8.
[4] *Ibid,* 27.

product of means and will.[5] Destroying an enemy's forces through fighting in the physical domain may reduce the means but not necessarily the will to fight. Belligerents who retain the will to fight despite defeat will adapt and the conflict is likely to continue in another form. Enemy will be fought in the cognitive and moral domains augmented by military action in the physical domain.

Modern conflict frequently comes in the form of an ill-structured or "wicked" problem being "interactively complex, non-linear and chaotic and therefore the most challenging."[6] Understanding this type of problem and visualizing a feasible, satisfactory ending is very difficult. Consider Iraq and Syria; this conflict features at least three interrelated conflicts[7] placed in the midst of the regional and global conflict against terrorism and extremism, competition between the US and Russia, the Arab world and Iran, and an emerging Kurdish federalism/independence movement involving Kurds, Turkey and the Arab world and an unstable central government in Iraq.[8] Combining this with the massive humanitarian crisis and reduction of the Syrian economy to 20-35% of its prewar level makes this one of the most complex mixes of conflict in modern history.[9] Little has been articulated in terms of a vision for the region post conflict. Participants have largely focused on limited military aims while intervening powers such as Russia and the US often work divergently. Ongoing international negotiations within the Vienna Framework are bypassing essential requirements for long term

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[5]Carl von Clausewitz, *On War.* Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 62

[6]Department of the Army, *Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design…*, 9

[7]The three interrelated conflicts refer to the fight against ISIS, a sectarian and ethnic civil conflict in Iraq and an intense civil war between pro-Assad, Arab rebel and Kurdish factions (most of whom see ISIS as a secondary objective).

[8]Anthony H. Cordesman, "Syria and Iraq: How Should These Wars End?" Center for Strategic and International Studies. April 2016. http://csis.org/publications/Syria-and-iraq-how-should-these-wars-end.

[9]Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Comparative Metrics of ISIS and Failed State Wars in Syria and Iraq" Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2016. http://csis.org/publication/comparative-metrics-isis-and-failed-state-wars-syria-and-iraq.

success in Syria.[10] Simply defeating ISIS militarily is unlikely to bring stability to Syria. Deep

difference between internal factions and external powers will still pose significant problems. So

who should answer the question of how should this war end?

The fact that it is a very difficult question does not mean we should not try to answer it.

There are many roadblocks to clearly defining objectives at the political level. Credibility suffers

if objectives are not achieved and political leaders often focus on avoiding undesirable outcomes

rather than on achieving desirable outcomes.[11] Political direction is issued in the form of

constraints and restraints as opposed to objectives.

> Virtually every study of war termination concludes that failure to clearly define
> objectives is a common obstacle to rational war termination. War termination strategies
> cannot be devised nor can war termination decisions be made in the absence of clearly
> defined objectives. Deciding when to stop fighting requires an assessment of whether the
> benefit of continuing to fight outweigh the costs and risks. Without clarity of objectives,
> accurate assessment of the cost and benefits is impossible….There is a need to deal with
> war termination strategies in the military planning process not only because military
> actions contribute to and shape war termination, but also because experience suggests it
> will not be done elsewhere.[12]

Although many elements of the solution space are primarily political responsibilities[13], the

military component has the luxury of being trained in framing problems and considering the

entire system. The emerging concept of "design thinking" may be particularly helpful in this

challenge. Well prior to the introduction of design thinking, then Col Bruce Clarke proposed a

10-Step Analytical Process for conflict termination planning that mirrors design thinking in its

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[10]Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding and Katherine Zimmerman. "U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and AL Qaeda – Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of An Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition. *Institute for the Study of War.* January 2016. http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%202%20FINALFINAL.pdf

[11]Bruce C. Bade, "War Termination: Why don't we plan for it?" (National War College, Washington, D.C., 1994), 12

[12]Bruce C. Bade, "War Termination: Why don't we plan for it?"…, 11.

[13] Examples of political responsibilities in conflict termination include reforms to political systems, economic recovery plans, validity of territorial claims, sub state succession, lustration policies, etc.

first two steps of defining the problem and defining the settlement/post conflict situation.[14] Although the traditional planning process imply that orders flow from higher to lower, understanding often flows from lower to higher, especially when operational problems are complex.[15] Taking the initiative to begin framing the problem and visualizing a favourable outcome opens essential political dialogue producing greater clarity on both the problem and strategic objectives than simply awaiting direction.

WHAT CAN THE MILITARY DO TO MAKE THAT POSSIBLE? CONDUCTING OPERATIONS WITH THE END IN MIND

Design and political discourse will assist in determining what the end should look like. Determining what the military can do to help get there falls into the realm of operational planning and mission execution. Operations should be conducted with the end in mind.

Have a plan and a team

During combat, it is very easy to be consumed with fighting the military battle. Even if an operational command acknowledges the military responsibilities in conflict termination and does not assume that post-combat planning is a civilian responsibility, it is still very easy to neglect when faced with the immediate concerns of fighting a battle. General Tommy Franks told Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowicz "You pay attention to the day after, I'll pay attention to the day of" on the eve of the Iraq invasion.[16] The consequences of military inattention to what should happen after major combat ended in Iraq were disastrous and fueled an evolving conflict that continues today.

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[14]Bruce B.G. Clarke, "Conflict Termination: A Rational Model." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 16, no. 1 (1993).

[15]Department of the Army, *Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design…*, 5.

[16]Gideon Rose, "How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle," (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3

Conflict termination must be included in the campaign plan. Because of its importance but tendency to be surpassed in priority by the conduct of operations, a team should be dedicated to conflict termination; planners to keep an eye on the end game and adjust the initial plan as operations unfold, operation team members to ensure conduct of the battle considers effects on post-combat stabilization and intelligence members to assess when conditions are favourable for conflict termination and advise on how to shape conditions based on enemy objectives and their definition of victory. Operational conflict termination plans should include reiterate the strategic objectives as well as detail plans for handling belligerent forces and prisoners of war, provision of security, restoration of essential services, facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid and potentially transition to civilian control, a United Nations force, local security forces or others.

Operational commanders must be particularly thorough in planning for stabilization and conflict termination when regime change is a political objective. When a regime is removed through armed conflict, it is likely that its security forces will also be incapacitated leaving the society devoid of law and order and creating a power vacuum. As the cessation of hostilities approaches, it is essential that friendly forces are resourced, positioned and prepared to immediately secure critical population centers and key infrastructure. It is a military responsibility to maintain order and, in conjunction with other agencies, prevent the development of a humanitarian crisis. The operational commander should have a plan to immediately begin working to restore essential services necessary to keep the defeated society functioning.[17] The swift establishment of security and order along with the provision of services will go a long way towards gaining legitimacy while preventing the development of a power vacuum likely to be filled by undesirable opportunists. This will buy time for state-building activities to commence and ease the transition to a new government as it will not be required to push out whoever has

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[17]Frederick W. Kagan, "War and Aftermath," …, 13

filled the power vacuum. Having a plan and the resources to establish control post combat is a vital military task. Many of these points apply regardless of whether or not regime change is an objective. In cases where regime change was not the objective, the size, presence and tasks of the post-combat force must be measured against the remaining local capacity to govern.[18] It is risky to rely on or make assumptions about local capacity when planning security requirements for this vulnerable post-combat phase. "As the country moves away from a highly precarious situation and towards increasing stability, the degree of the international presence must be progressively reduced."[19] Post-combat security forces serve as a deterrent to possible outliers or spoilers who may be looking to capitalize on the situation or consider resuming combat. Providing security and services reduces the incentive to resume conflict while maintaining a credible deterrent alters the cost versus gain equation for potential hold outs.

Integrate Conflict Termination and Targeting

The significant intelligence preparation that goes into understanding adversary systems for targeting could prove very useful in planning for stabilization and conflict termination. The "nodal system analysis studies used as a baseline for target selection"[20] could drive the planning for restoring essential services and infrastructure post combat. Conflict termination plans must be factored into the target validation process and not wished away as a future issue. The destruction of vital infrastructure such as power grids can have a disproportionately large impact on stability. The US Army has added *restraint* as a Principle of War. Options should be explored for disabling these services through other means such as cyber-attack or technical sabotage to increase the speed of restoration post combat. The integration of targeting and conflict

[18]Mona Fixdal, *Just Peace: How Wars Should End* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012), 142.
[19]*Ibid*, 142.
[20]Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-60, Joint Targeting* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11 April 2007), D-2.

termination planning provides the commander with an opportunity to rapidly gain credibility

with the local population post combat through the rapid restoration of essential services. When

military necessity drives the requirement to destroy key infrastructure, plans for conflict

termination must be adjusted to reflect the restoration requirements. The speed at which a sense

of normality can be restored is key in establishing legitimacy.

Operational commanders must understand how military conditions during the course of

the conflict contribute to the tacit bargaining process. Military operations can shape conditions

for negotiated settlements without requiring the complete destruction of the enemy.

Understanding and threatening action against targets of particular importance to the enemy may

successfully manipulate his cost versus gain analysis. Commanders must recognize opportunities

to coerce the enemy to the bargaining table and highlight them to political leaders. The military

has an important role to play in shaping negotiations as the enemy is more likely to negotiate if

he believes you are willing to continue fighting[21] or threatening key interests. We should strive

for negotiated conflict termination as opposed to exhaustion, annihilation or capitulation not only

to limited suffering, damage and cost, but also because negotiated settlements have a better

record of leading to enduring peace.[22]

Targeting intelligence can provide insight into the leadership structure of the adversary

allowing us to distinguish reconcilable from irreconcilable elements. Reconcilable elements

should become the focus on influence targeting to incentivize ceasing hostilities. They should be

targeted on the moral and cognitive planes with a view of presenting the cessation of hostilities

as a mutually beneficial prospect, possibly reconciling objectives or motivating a change in

leadership to elements within the faction seeking conflict termination. Planners should determine

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[21]Bruce C. Bade, "War Termination: Why don't we plan for it?"…, 13
[22]*Ibid,* 12.

what conditions reconcilable elements must meet to participate in negotiations. For example, a Salafi-jihadi militant base in Syria possess a threat; however, attacking it would risks alienating many Sunni's who should be included in the post-Assad government. Accepting certain pre-determined conditions, these fighters could be included in ceasefire negotiations and the future government.[23]

Stabilize

Campaign plans simply must include stabilization. The United Nations Security Council should require stabilization force commitments prior to passing resolutions authorizing intervention or use of force. Libya provides a solid example of the danger of military intervention without post-combat stabilization. The 2011 well intentioned intervention in Libya was initially declared a resounding success. Libya has since devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths in civil conflict have increased and it is now a safe haven for both al Qaeda and ISIS.[24] Thoughtful conflict termination is critical to future conflict prevention.

When a system is shaken by force, it is destabilized. If left alone, over time, it will eventually return to a steady state; however, this process can be significantly compressed by firmly grasping the shaken system and steadying it. Likewise in the international system, if a state or region is shaken by force, once combat ends, military and political efforts are necessary to stabilize the region and see the conflict resolved in a way that achieves the political objectives for which it was fought. Gideon Rose, editor of Foreign Affairs Magazine and author of "How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle" states that "the American military and the

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[23] The following are examples of possible conditions to participate in negotiations and future government for Salafi-jihadi groups currently fighting ISIS: break with al Nusra and ISIS, accept the principle of a pluralistic and unitary Syrian state, reject violent jihad, commit to disarming to a policing and defensive level, and commit to the establishment of political institution based governance vice Sharia court system.

[24] Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle." *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, (March/April 2015). https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/obamas-libya-debacle.

country at large think of war mainly as combat but beating up the bad guy is only half the story. The other half is positive or constructive and is all about politics. This is the part too frequently overlooked or misunderstood."[25] Stability operations are an essential component of the positive and constructive side of war which may grow into full blown state building if required. Historical examples such as World War I and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) illustrate how decisive military victories can fail to win the peace if not linked to plans for a sustainable postwar political settlement. Stability operations are the military means of translating combat success into political end states. Military forces must be prepared to immediately commence stability operations following combat operations or even concurrently. Soldiers must be trained in this function prior to deployment and prepared for the sometimes dramatic transition in roles. A factor with significant potential to destabilize a post combat situation is the treatment of opposing military members and prisoners of war/detainees. Establishing a clear policy on the handling of opposing forces must be an interagency priority in conflict termination planning. If demobilization of a large force is to be undertaken, it should be accompanied with an alternative employment plan. For example, following WW2, demobilization of the Japanese military was supported by land redistribution providing soldiers with alternate employment in the agriculture sector.[26] This stands in stark contrast to the de-Baathification policy following OIF which excluded qualified personal with desperately needed expertise in running the country and disenfranchised thousands of trained, armed soldiers rapidly seeding an insurgency. According to a US official in Baghdad:

> All of a sudden we had about 30,000 to 50,000 Ba'athists that had gone underground. We had about 200,000 armed soldiers that had gone underground. And we had no Iraqi face

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[25]Gideon Rose, "How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle,"…, 54

[26]David P. Cavaleri, *Easier Said Than Done: Making the Transition Between Combat Operations and Stability Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2005).

to tell the Iraqi people what was happening. Within a couple weeks, the insurgency began to rise and it kept rising.[27]

Conflict termination should not be approached with punishment as a goal. Excessive lustration policies can prove highly detrimental. They also risk leaving a force without a credible local face to communicate and legitimize its message to the population. Stabilization forces must be appropriately resourced with robust logistic and engineering assets to facilitate humanitarian aid and restoration of services. Locals responsible for managing services should be identified prior to cessation of hostilities and leveraged in the restoration process. The military should take an active role with interagency partners in security sector reform and capacity building. The final element of stabilization planning as part of conflict termination is the handover to civilian control, a UN or regional peacekeeping force or local authorities.

Assuming that the west generally envisions a transition from a wartime belligerent regime to a stable, democratic post war government as part of the end state, stability operations and state building pose ethical dilemmas based on their intrusion into the domestic affairs of countries. The idea of occupation has a negative conation particularly when the stated aim of combat operations is to liberate a society. The legitimacy of an occupying force will often be questioned. This is particularly difficult when cultural considerations factor in, for example, western troops in Muslim countries. "State building operations set aside democratic principles such as self-determination, participation and accountability temporarily in order to promote a viable and stable democracy in the long run."[28] The consequences of not trying to stabilize a war-torn country may be worse. It is essential to consider what will make the mission legitimate and moral in the eyes of the population and that operations not be undertaken for the benefit of

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[27]*Ibid,* 69.

[28]Mona Fixdal, *Just Peace: How Wars Should End…,* 138

the intervening state. Multilateral or UN operations, consultation and scaling back as local

capacities develop are means of increasing legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Planning for conflict termination is not solely a political responsibility just as military

operations must be conducted with regard to the peace desired.[29] Both have political and military

dimensions and black and white attempts to divide the responsibilities are doomed to failure

leaving vulnerable seams for exploitation. At the operational level, the military has an important

role to play in setting the conditions for an enduring peace. Operational commanders must be

proactive in framing the complex problem and pursue active dialogue with the political level and

other agencies to clarify a vision for how the war should end. From there, they must avoid the

temptation to focus solely on combat operations and plan thoroughly and continuously for

conflict termination. Members of the headquarters should be dedicated to this purpose.

Operations must always be conducted with consideration of conflict termination goals.

Being prepared to rapidly transition to stability operations with an appropriate plan and

resources will improve the probability of successful termination. Thoughtful conflict termination

is a critical form of conflict prevention. Modern enemies are based in a combination of violence

and root causes. Failure to create a better peace at the end of a conflict will not sufficiently

reduce the will to fight to a point that it does not drive the adaptation and resumption of conflict.

Within military staff colleges, conflict termination should receive greater focus while

studying operational planning. Students should be forced to develop plans for conflict

termination in conjunction with plans for combat operations. Dismissing the challenges in

training and educational institutions encourages the dismissal of the problem when planning for

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[29]Linda A. Legier-Topp,"War Termination: Setting Conditions for Peace" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2009).

real operations. It is easy to dismiss planning for conflict termination as the next bound or somebody else's problem.

Determining how a war should end is perhaps the most complex of all planning tasks. It is time it received the attention it merits as the consequences of neglect are painfully visible today. Syria presents us with an overwhelming challenge and opportunity to get it right.

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