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THE ROAD FROM DAMASCUS: HOW FUTURE MILITARY STRATEGY CAN BE INFORMED BY THE US APPROACH TO SYRIA

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JCSP 45

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 45 – PCEMI 45
MAY 2019 – MAI 2019

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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THE ROAD FROM DAMASCUS: HOW FUTURE MILITARY STRATEGY CAN BE INFORMED BY THE US APPROACH TO SYRIA

I shall remain the faithful brother and comrade who will walk with his people and lead them to build the Syria we love, the Syria we are proud of, the Syria which is invincible to its enemies.

– Bashar al-Assad, *Speech at the People's Assembly, 30 March 2011*

There is no question that the Syrian war is the greatest catastrophe of the post-Cold War world, with hundreds of thousands killed, millions of refugees, states disintegrating, and extremists filling the vacuum. But there is a question about what American can and should do about it, and whether Obama's approach reflects a sensible balance of competing interests and a healthy recognition of limits, or whether it simply derives from timidity and defeatism.

– Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*

In March 2011, schoolchildren in Dar'a in southern Syria wrote graffiti criticising the Syrian regime. Peaceful protests in response to their detention by security forces “gradually but steadily” spread through the country, with protesters “calling for the downfall of the regime, echoing slogans that [had] been heard elsewhere in the region.”¹ These comparisons led some, reportedly including President Obama, to believe that this was the beginning of another phase of the ‘Arab Spring’ and thus that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad’s fall was imminent.² However, violence beget violence: regime attempts violently to suppress the protests led to the rise of the armed opposition, and then increasing involvement of “regional as well as extra regional powers . . . to enhance their own interests.”³ Eight years later, the Syrian civil war continues.⁴

¹ United Nations (UN), Security Council, S/PV.6524, *The Situation in the Middle East* (New York: UN, 27 April 2011), 2.

² Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 317, no. 3 (2016): 72.

³ Saman Zulfqar, “Competing Interests of Major Powers in the Middle East: The Case Study of Syria and its Implications for Regional Stability,” *Perceptions* 23, no. 1 (2018): 134.

⁴ See, for example, Syrian Arab News Agency, “Army retaliates to terrorists’ breaches through intensive operations against their positions in countryside of Idleb and Hama,” last accessed 6 May 2019, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=165057>.

The United States (US) has been involved in the Syrian crisis almost from the outset. Six weeks after the initial protests, as Syrian security forces used increasingly violent tactics against the protesters, President Obama condemned “in the strongest possible terms the use of force by the Syrian government against demonstrators.”⁵ Initial US action used diplomatic and economic levers of power: calling for a negotiated settlement, with President Assad’s departure as a pre-condition;⁶ economic sanctions;⁷ and humanitarian assistance.⁸ However, as the crisis developed, the US strategy began to include military options.

Given the duration, intensity, and evolving nature of the Syrian conflict, it provides a useful prism through which to study US military strategy. This paper will begin by exploring the definition of strategy in general, and military strategy in particular. Three vignettes will then be used to study US military strategy in Syria: attempts to deter Syria from using chemical weapons; attempts to coerce regime change; and action against Da’esh.⁹ In each case, the paper will seek to set out what the US military strategy was, how effectively it worked, and what other options could have been pursued.

⁵ US, White House, “A Statement by President Obama on Syria,” 22 April 2011, last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/22/statement-president-obama-syria>.

⁶ US, White House, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” 18 August 2011, last accessed 26 April 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

⁷ US, White House, “Executive Order 13582 – Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Syria,” 18 August 2011, last accessed 26 April 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/executive-order-13582-blocking-property-government-syria-and-prohibiting>.

⁸ US, Agency for International Development, “Syria Complex Emergency: Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year 2012,” last accessed 5 May 2019, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACW456.pdf.

⁹ This paper will use Da’esh throughout, except in the titles of other works which may use Islamic State, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The final part of the paper will seek to bring the threads of these three different cases back together to synthesise deductions for US military strategy in the future. This section will analyse two competing hypotheses: first, that it is not possible to have decisive effect without decisive commitment; and second, that limited force can be sufficient to contain a conflict until a “Ripe Moment”¹⁰ for a negotiated settlement is reached. The paper will conclude that context is crucial. In particular, it must be remembered that military strategy, like strategy in general, is competitive. Where the means allocated by actors with similar ends are sufficient, and their ways do not contradict each other, the ends may be reached even with a limited commitment by each actor. However, where ends are not in accord, an indecisive commitment is more likely to lengthen rather than resolve a conflict.

WHAT IS MILITARY STRATEGY?

There are many today who practise strategy without realising it . . . it is more difficult to produce good strategy than write good prose; this is all the more true in that, though the word strategy may be used often enough, comparatively few people know what it actually means.

– Général d’Armée André Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy*

Strategy has traditionally been defined in military terms: the word derives from the Greek *strategía*, meaning generalship.¹¹ It has always meant more than simply military action, though: rather, it was traditionally the art of the general in applying military force to achieve political ends.¹² However, while the military may have been the

¹⁰ I William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (September 2001): 8-18.

¹¹ Antulio Echevarria, *Military Strategy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

¹² Michael Howard, “The Influence of Clausewitz”, in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 28.

principal lever of state power in Machiavelli's time,¹³ and Clausewitz's definition of strategy remained entirely focused on war,¹⁴ the reality of modern era confrontations has led to a broader definition being adopted.

Professor Sir Michael Howard argues that successful strategies must take account of operational, logistical, social, and technological dimensions.¹⁵ However, while including social aspects, his argument remains largely framed in military terms. More contemporary definitions of strategy recognise that a nation state has other levers of power to achieve its policy ends: for example, the US Department of Defense defines strategy as "a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve . . . objectives."¹⁶ At a minimum, these levers include diplomacy, information and economic actions, in addition to military. However, it has been argued that financial, intelligence and law enforcement actions can also play a part in achieving strategic aims.¹⁷ Military strategy has therefore been recognised as a sub-set of grand, overall, total or national strategy.¹⁸

While the evolution of the machinery of the National Security Council may have increased the level of coordination between the various levels of national power: between diplomatic, informational, military and economic strategies;¹⁹ there remains a crucial

¹³ Machiavelli was himself quoting Tacitus. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1961), 46-47.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War* . . . , 128.

¹⁵ Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 5 (Summer 1979): 978.

¹⁶ US, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I-5.

¹⁷ US, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2006), 31.

¹⁸ André Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy: With Particular Reference to Problems of Defence, Politics, Economics, and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age*, trans. R H Barry (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 30-31.

¹⁹ James Jones and William Handel, "American Power at Home and Abroad: Successes, Failures, and Challenges in U.S. National Security," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2013): 208.

lacuna during peacetime in their integration into a true grand strategy.²⁰ This has sought to be addressed by initiatives variously termed interagency cooperation, whole of government, comprehensive approach, integrated approach and fusion doctrine. This proliferation of new initiatives with similar aims indicates that the challenges of “moving from doctrine to delivery” remain unresolved.²¹

Focusing on the military level, Echevarria proposes that there are eight principal choices of military strategy: “annihilation, dislocation, attrition, exhaustion, coercion, deterrence, terror and terrorism, and decapitation and targeted killing.”²² Annihilation and dislocation seek quickly to reduce an adversary’s capacity and willingness to fight, respectively. Attrition and exhaustion, conversely, focus on a gradual wearing down of capacity and willingness to fight. Coercion and deterrence are also paired: seeking to compel or prevent adversary action. “Terror and terrorism endeavour to succeed by leveraging fear.” Finally, decapitation and targeting killing focus on the removal an adversary’s leadership or attrition of its personnel, respectively.²³

Lykke’s taxonomy of ends, ways and means has become a common prism through which strategies are communicated and analysed, particularly by the military.²⁴ The ends are those set by policy; the means are the resources allocated; and the ways are the methods adopted in pursuit of the ends. This framing is consistent with Colin Gray’s

²⁰ Frances Duffy, “Interagency Cooperation and the Future of Intervention Policy,” *American Diplomacy* (30 April 2018): 2-3.

²¹ Ewan Lawson, “The UK National Security Capability Review and the Fusion Doctrine,” last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://rusi.org/commentary/uk-national-security-capability-review-and-fusion-doctrine>.

²² Echevarria, *Military Strategy: A Very Short Introduction* . . . , 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

²⁴ Arthur Lykke, “Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy,” in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1989), 179.

view of strategy as the bridge between practice and policy:²⁵ and thus with the traditional concept of strategy as action in pursuit of political ends. If the ends, ways and means are not in balance, most likely because insufficient means have been allocated to pursue the desired ends through the chosen ways, Lykke argues that this will induce risk into the strategy.²⁶

However, Lykke's framework is not universally accepted. Meiser finds it reductive, and argues instead that strategy should be considered as "a theory of success, a solution to a problem, an explanation of how obstacles can be overcome. A good strategy creates opportunities, magnifies existing resources, or creates new resources."²⁷ Betts agrees that an effective strategy should "provide value added to resources [and] function as a force multiplier": although he cautions that such a strategy "is not impossible, but it is usually difficult and risky, and what works in one case may not in another than seems similar."²⁸

In analysing the likely effectiveness of a strategy, Meiser contends that it must be considered alongside alternatives, since it "is impossible to know how good a strategy is unless it is compared to other strategies."²⁹ While Meiser is arguing that this comparison should be to other strategies which could be adopted by the US, it is crucial to recognise that the adversary also has a part to play in the effectiveness of a strategy. As Beaufre states explicitly, but other theorists imply, strategy is competitive: his definition of

²⁵ Colin Gray, "Strategic Thoughts for Defence Planners," *Survival* 52, no. 3 (2010): 167.

²⁶ Lykke, "Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy," . . . , 182-183.

²⁷ Jeffrey Meiser, "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016-17): 90.

²⁸ Richard Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 6, 48.

²⁹ Meiser, "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," . . . : 90

strategy is “the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute.”³⁰

THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS RED LINE

We have been very clear to the [Assad] regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.

– President Obama, *News Conference, 20 August 2012*

As the above quotation from President Obama clearly demonstrates, the US strategy to reinforce the international norm against the use of chemical weapons³¹ was one of deterrence. Having established that the use of chemical weapons would constitute a ‘red line’, as evidence of their use mounted, the US strategy shifted from diplomatic and informational pressure to more overt military deterrence: US Navy vessels capable of firing Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles were deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean.³²

US military doctrine reinforces Clausewitz’s assessment that deterrence must be credible if it is to be effective.³³ Part of this credibility is communication: while the US or its allies may have had the capability to strike Syria by submarine or air launched

³⁰ Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy* . . . , 22, 34.

³¹ The Syrian Arab Republic acceded to the 1925 Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare on 17 December 1968. UN, Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Syrian Arab Republic: Accession to 1925 Geneva Protocol,” last accessed 5 May 2019, <http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/a/1925/syrianarabrepublic/acc/paris>. While Syria did not accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention until 14 September 2013, the Convention was then in force in 190 other states and can thus be regarded as a strong international norm. Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), “Evolution of the Status of Participation in the Convention,” last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.opcw.org/evolution-status-participation-convention>; Anders Henriksen, “Trump’s Missile Strike on Syria and the Legality of using Force to Deter Chemical Warfare,” *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 23, no. 1 (2018): 40-43.

³² US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria*, 113th Congress, 1st session, 3 September 2013, 7, 12, 66.

³³ US, Strategic Command, *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept*, (Offutt, NE: US Strategic Command, 2006), 8; Clausewitz, *On War* . . . , 97.

missiles, the deployment of surface strike vessels to the Eastern Mediterranean was a clear signal to Syria that the US military was readying itself to strike.

However, while these actions may have contributed to the credibility of the military strategy of deterrence, the narrative of limited strikes was arguably eroding this credibility.³⁴ In an attempt to persuade domestic constituencies that Syria was not Libya, and that strikes to deter further use of chemical weapons were not intended to cause regime change, both American and allied politicians emphasised that any strikes would be limited in nature.³⁵ This narrative of restraint was ultimately unsuccessful in convincing the UK parliament to support military action,³⁶ and President Obama feared the same outcome if Congress voted on the proposed action.³⁷ However, the very reason why this approach failed domestically may explain why it partially succeeded internationally: quite simply, it was not believed.³⁸

It has been argued that, to be credible, the action threatened would have needed to be sufficient to change “the battlefield balance of power” sufficiently that the regime’s survival would become more difficult.³⁹ However, despite the narrative of limited action, reports from Damascus suggest that the city was prepared for a significant US strike.⁴⁰

³⁴ Eric Sterner, “Dictators and Deterrence: Syria's Assad, Chemical Weapons, and the Threat of U.S. Military Action,” *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 5 (2014): 412.

³⁵ US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria* . . . , 10, 12.

³⁶ United Kingdom, House of Commons, “Syria and the Use of Chemical Weapons,” *House of Commons Hansard Debates* 566 (29 August 2013): 1555-1556.

³⁷ Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 466.

³⁸ Jason Ralph, Jack Holland, and Kalina Zhekova, “Before the Vote: UK Foreign Policy Discourse on Syria 2011-13,” *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (December 2017): 895. While this analysis is focused on the UK, the same questioning of whether limited strikes to deter further use of chemical weapons would be a prelude to a wider campaign aimed at regime change is evident in the questions of a number of senators in US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria* . . .

³⁹ Sterner, “Dictators and Deterrence . . .,” 413-414.

⁴⁰ Charles Glass, “Tell Me how this Ends,” *Harper’s Magazine* 338, no. 2025 (2019): 55.

“It is likely the Syrian government understood that . . . [the US] had sufficient military force . . . to impose whatever costs [it] chose.”⁴¹ Therefore, if the cynicism of US and British politicians over the real *ends* of any strikes was shared by the Syrian regime, this could have resulted in military deterrence remaining credible: a factor which could explain the alacrity with which Russia and then Syria seized upon Kerry’s ad hoc offer of security in return for chemical disarmament.⁴²

Since deterrence was a military strategy adopted in support of the grand strategic *end* of preventing Syrian use of chemical weapons, it must be judged at least partially successful. The impact of this strategy on the US’ broader *end* of regime change will be discussed below but, focusing purely on the declared *end* for this deterrence strategy, the elimination of Syria’s declared weapons appears a useful outcome. Subsequent events have suggested that Syria has retained a non-declared chemical weapons capability, including some capability to deploy Schedule 1 chemicals.⁴³ However, the elimination of Syria’s declared chemical weapons has nevertheless resulted, at least, in a reduction in the quantities which could either be deployed by the regime or fall into the hands of non-state actors. It has also reinforced the international norm against *possession* (in addition to use) of chemical weapons.

⁴¹ Sterner, “Dictators and Deterrence . . .,” 408.

⁴² Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World*, New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2016, 18-19.

⁴³ Schedule 1 chemicals are those which have no purpose other than chemical warfare, such as Sarin, which was assessed to have been used by the regime at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April 2017. UN, Security Council, *Seventh report of the OPCW – UN Joint Investigative Mechanism*, S/2017/904 (New York: United Nations, 2017), 10. In addition, multiple incidents of the use of toxic industrial chemicals such as chlorine as weapons have been reported. See, for example, OPCW, *Report of the fact-finding mission regarding the incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018*, S/1731/2019 (The Hague: OPCW, 2019), 4.

Apart from deterrence, were other military strategies open to the US? Coercion would have been possible: in a sense, this would have followed from an admission that deterrence had failed, had Congress backed military action. While some senators were unconvinced that limited military action would be successful in coercing Syria to desist from further use of chemical weapons,⁴⁴ even a limited strike would have confirmed the credibility of US threats of military action. The US having crossed this rubicon, the Syrian regime would then have been placed in an invidious position: either desisting from further chemical attacks, or calling the Americans' bluff.

Alternatively, the US could have pursued a strategy of attrition: the enforced destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal. However, for this to be a credible military strategy, it must have the possibility of domestic political support. It has been estimated that such a strategy would have required 75,000 troops on the ground in Syria:⁴⁵ which would itself have required air superiority over these sites and thus the defeat of Syria's integrated air defence system. Given that the US Congress was poised to deny approval for the administration to conduct limited stand-off strikes in Syria, which would have put few if any US service personnel at risk, it is almost inconceivable that such a strategy would have met with Congressional approval.⁴⁶ It cannot therefore realistically be considered a feasible alternative.

⁴⁴ US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria* . . . , 30, 47, 51, 56-57, 63.

⁴⁵ Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 12.

⁴⁶ For example, Senator Corker (Republican): "While we all feel the actions by the Assad regime are reprehensible, I do not think there are any of us here that are willing to support the possibility of having combat boots on the ground." US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria* . . . , 19.

ASSAD MUST GO

The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.

– President Obama, *Statement on the Situation in Syria*, 18 August 2011

Although President Obama’s initial call for President Assad to step aside came before the 2012 Chemical Weapons crisis,⁴⁷ it was only in June 2013 that the US government acknowledged that the military lever was being used in pursuit of Assad’s departure.⁴⁸ The military strategy adopted was training and equipping the Syrian armed opposition.⁴⁹ Train and equip is perhaps more strictly a *way*, since the *end* remained ‘Assad must go’ and the *means* developed from an clandestine CIA programme, through a covert SOF programme, to overt use of conventional forces.⁵⁰ However, it is notable that, even when the *ways* and *means* adopted were clearly failing to deliver the desired *ends*, the US did not escalate to a direct use of military force.

Military actions taken to deter Syrian use of chemical weapons must therefore be set in this context. As argued above, the threat of strikes may have contributed to Syria’s decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention and agree to the elimination of its declared chemical weapons. However, once the international community had accepted

⁴⁷ US, White House, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” 18 August 2011 . . .

⁴⁸ US, White House, “Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use,” last accessed 8 April 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

⁴⁹ Joseph Votel, and Eero Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2018): 43.

⁵⁰ Note that there is some overlap between this vignette and the next: as Da’esh emerged as a significant threat in 2014, the focus of the train and equip programme switched from forces opposing Assad to those countering Da’esh. Anthony Paphiti, and Sascha-Dominik Bachmann, “Syria: A Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure,” *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 2 (2018): 139-140; Glass, “Tell Me how this Ends,” . . . : 56-58; Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 142.

the plan for decommissioning chemical weapons,⁵¹ the Syrian government became an essential partner. Even had there not been practical limits on the ability to train and equip the opposition to Assad,⁵² political limits would therefore have been needed to ensure sufficient regime capacity to deliver its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In assessing this train and equip strategy, the measures of performance, that is, the extent to which the *ways* were implemented, are poor. For example, Commander Central Command admitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee that a \$500M programme to train and equip the moderate opposition had led to only 60 fighters deploying into Syria by July 2015, of whom only four or five remained active by September 2015.⁵³ Measures of effectiveness, or the extent to which the desired *ends* were achieved, are equally dismal. Assad remains in power; and it had become so difficult to distinguish between the moderate and jihadist opposition to Assad that the Department of Defence train and equip programme was cancelled in 2017.⁵⁴

This failure should not be surprising. President Obama commissioned a study of the effectiveness of proxy programmes which reportedly judged the chances of their success very low.⁵⁵ This correlates with an academic analysis by Seyom Brown, which concludes that “relying on proxies as prime agents for the conduct of military operations

⁵¹ UN, Security Council, *Resolution 2118 (2013)*, S/RES/2118 (New York: UN, 2013).

⁵² David Remnick, “Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama,” *The New Yorker*, 19 January 2014, last accessed 8 April 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

⁵³ US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on US Military Operations to Counter ISIL*, 114th Congress, 1st session, 16 September 2015, 35; Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 142-143.

⁵⁴ This was the programme which had begun in support of the opposition to Assad and morphed into a counter Da’esh programme. The next vignette will discuss wider train and equip programmes to counter Da’esh, largely through Kurdish groups. Glass, “Tell Me how this Ends,” . . . : 59.

⁵⁵ Remnick, “Going the Distance . . .”.

is . . . fraught with risks of serious unintended consequences.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, given that “massive investments of time, resources, and troops to train forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have delivered mixed results at best,” the chances of success in Syria with “a far more modest investment under more limiting circumstances” were slender.⁵⁷

Were alternative military strategies available? The US could have intervened militarily to force regime change. This arguably remained a credible option until September 2015, when the overt deployment of Russian forces beyond their bases in Syria would have risked a direct US / Russian conflict.⁵⁸ However, before this date, the US had sufficient military superiority over Syrian forces to have mounted either a full spectrum campaign similar to that in Iraq in 2003, or a more limited campaign such as Libya in 2011.⁵⁹ However, while such a campaign might have been possible militarily, it would have been difficult politically. The legacy of Iraq made any proponenty of deploying ground troops politically toxic, while the emerging complexity of post-Ghaddafi Libya made even a more limited air campaign in support of a proxy land component politically difficult.⁶⁰ The administration was therefore constrained as much by concern over what would follow any intervention to force regime change as it was by the military logic of the intervention itself:⁶¹ implying that the real *ends* sought were not just regime change, but also a stable Syria.

⁵⁶ Seyom Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 255.

⁵⁷ Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 145-147.

⁵⁸ Rod Thornton, “Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and its Strategic Deterrence Role,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 1 (2019): 2.

⁵⁹ US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on US Military Operations to Counter ISIL*, . . . , 29; Sterner, “Dictators and Deterrence . . .,” 408.

⁶⁰ Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 137; Ralph et al, “Before the Vote . . .,” 892.

⁶¹ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” . . . : 89.

COUNTER DA'ESH

Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, [Da'esh] through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.

– President Obama, *Statement on [Da'esh]*, 10 September 2014

The rise of Da'esh fundamentally shifted overall US strategy in Iraq and Syria. Following Da'esh's seizure of Mosul and rapid advance south towards Baghdad, preventing the fall of the Iraqi government became a significantly higher priority than pursuing the fall of the Syrian government. As Da'esh operated seamlessly between Syria and Iraq, so too the US strategy to counter Da'esh covered both countries.⁶²

The military strategy adopted has been characterised as “aggressive containment.”⁶³ It again included training and equipping local forces fighting against Da'esh: principally the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish groups in both Iraq (the Peshmerga) and Syria (known as the Syrian Democratic Forces).⁶⁴ However, the level of support given to proxies fighting Da'esh was significantly greater than that provided to the opposition to Assad. US and allied special forces went beyond training: conducting advise, assist and accompany missions with the selected proxies. Meanwhile, air power was used both for targeted strikes against Da'esh leadership, and in support of proxies: joint action with a proxy land component, as seen in Libya.⁶⁵

⁶² Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 149.

⁶³ Alexander Ohlers, “Operation Inherent Resolve and the Islamic State: Assessing “Aggressive Containment”,” *Orbis* 61, no. 2 (2017): 195-196.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶⁵ Ewelina Waško-Owsiejczuk, “The American Military Strategy to Combat the ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria: Assumptions, Tactics and Effectiveness,” *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 45, no. 1 (2016): 326-327; Votel and Keravouri, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” . . . : 43.

Victory over Da'esh in Iraq was announced by the Iraqi prime minister on 9 December 2017;⁶⁶ and in Syria by President Trump on 23 March 2019.⁶⁷ While the territory held by Da'esh has been eliminated, the President acknowledged that an insurgency continues in Syria and Iraq, and through Da'esh-affiliated groups elsewhere.⁶⁸ It could be argued that this shift in Da'esh military strategy represents its defeat as a conventional force: the physical component of Da'esh combat power has certainly been significantly degraded. This is perhaps the limit of how far military strategy can contribute to the ambitious grand strategic *end* of the ultimate destruction of Da'esh. If it is possible to destroy what is now best described as a franchise ideology, this will need to be done by presenting a more legitimate alternative: through political and economic support to build better governance in states where Da'esh franchises are operating.⁶⁹ Given Da'esh's diminished conventional capability, the residual military role is likely to be limited to "temporarily creat[ing] time and space to stabilize the environment by capturing or destroying terrorist leadership."⁷⁰

The Russian strategy was arguably more sophisticated than that of the US. Trusting the US to attack the irreconcilable jihadists, Russian forces instead concentrated their strikes on the more secular opposition to Assad.⁷¹ This resulted in the opposition

⁶⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation, "Iraq declares war with Islamic State is over," 9 December 2017, last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42291985>.

⁶⁷ US, White House, "Statement from the President on the Liberation of ISIS-Controlled Territory," 23 March 2019, last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-liberation-isis-controlled-territory/>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Ohlers, "Operation Inherent Resolve and the Islamic State . . .," 211; Nada Bakos, "Beyond Kinetic Operations: A Road Map to Success in Syria and Iraq," *Orbis* 62, no. 3 (2018): 481-482.

⁷⁰ Bakos, "Beyond Kinetic Operations . . .," 476.

⁷¹ Michael Kofman, "The misadventures of Russia and the United States in Syria: complete strategy implosion edition," 11 October 2016, last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-misadventures-of-russia-and-the-united-states-in-syria-complete-strategy-implosion-edition/>.

becoming steadily more Islamist, as the mainstream elements were degraded and, as discussed in the previous vignette, a gradual abandonment of any action towards the US grand strategic *end* of ‘Assad must go.’ This strategy can be compared to the US use of offshore balancing during the cold war:⁷² but, since Russia was engaged on the ground, is perhaps better termed ‘onshore balancing.’

What alternatives were open to the US? Setting aside the counter-factual argument that significantly enhanced support to the moderate Syrian opposition could have prevented the emergence of Da’esh,⁷³ there appear to have been two alternative choices. First, the US could have relied less on proxies and more on an allied land component. This would have given the coalition greater control over the outcome and could have enabled greater capability to be used against Da’esh earlier: although allied deployment timelines need to be set against the time required to train proxies to an acceptable standard; and “over 100,000 US combat troops could not prevent the rise of the early incarnation of [Da’esh], al-Qaeda in Iraq.”⁷⁴ However, the level of casualties reportedly suffered by Iraqi forces alone are an order of magnitude greater than those suffered by coalition forces in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ It therefore seems unlikely that deployment of a US land component would have been politically feasible; and, even had its deployment been possible, its operations would have faced significant constraints to ensure that excess casualties did not obviate domestic support. As well as slowing

⁷² Paul Pillar, “The Forgotten Benefits of Offshore Balancing,” 27 January 2016, last accessed 22 April 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/the-forgotten-benefits-offshore-balancing-15035>.

⁷³ David Ignatius, “How ISIS Spread in the Middle East – And how to stop it,” 29 October 2015, last accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>.

⁷⁴ Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 152.

⁷⁵ Leith Aboufadel, “Over 26,000 Iraqi soldiers killed in 4 year war with ISIS,” 13 December 2017, last accessed 26 April 2019, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/26000-iraqi-soldiers-killed-4-year-war-isis/>.

progress, these constraints could also have led to further increases in civilian casualties: coupled with the resumed presence of significant coalition land forces in Iraq, this may have led to a reduction in popular support for forces fighting Da'esh (if not to increased support for Da'esh itself).

A second alternative could have been to cooperate more closely with other forces countering Da'esh, including the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies.⁷⁶ While coalition forces did in some cases deconflict operations with these actors, cooperation could have led to synergistic gains by enabling synchronised action against Da'esh by all forces arrayed against it. However, given the constraints of the 'Assad must go' narrative, deconfliction was arguably the only feasible option: more active cooperation would have risked significant domestic political criticism.

CAN PRACTICE INFORM THEORY?

Strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends. This can happen because the wrong means are chosen or because the ends are too ambitious or slippery. Strategy can be salvaged more often if peacetime planning gives as much consideration to limiting the range of ends as to expanding the menu of means.

– Richard Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security*

As was argued in the first section of the paper, strategy is inherently competitive. US strategy was (at least partially) successful when it was coherent with the strategies of other actors. This was the case in two of the vignettes studied.

The norm against the use of chemical weapons has stood and indeed strengthened since the end of the First World War.⁷⁷ With the exception of the Syrian regime itself, which arguably perceived moral equivalence between use of chemical weapons and its

⁷⁶ Paphiti, and Bachmann, "Syria: A Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure," . . . : 153.

⁷⁷ US, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Authorization Of The Use Of Force In Syria*, . . . , 8.

wider disregard of *jus in bello*, the majority of actors in the Syrian conflict can therefore be expected to have supported the *end* of preventing Syrian use of chemical weapons, if not the *ways* of military deterrence or coercion. When there was an opportunity to achieve the end by an alternative *way*, Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the elimination of its chemical weapons, it is therefore unsurprising that this found international support including through the UN Security Council.

A similar situation occurred with respect to Da'esh: except, in this case, even the Syrian regime supported the *end* of degrading Da'esh. The Russian strategy was arguably more sophisticated than that of the US: using what has been termed 'onshore balancing' to degrade more moderate elements of the opposition while the US and coalition focused on Da'esh. However, the acquiescence of all actors in Syria to coalition air strikes and ground manoeuvre against Da'esh demonstrates the wide acceptance of both the *end* and the *ways* employed by the coalition.⁷⁸ Of course, once the common enemy is defeated, it is unlikely that this cooperation will last.

These two vignettes arguably demonstrate that a limited military strategy can contribute effectively to the achievement of grand strategic *ends*. However, this is only the case where the overall balance of international effort is in line with the *ends* sought. It must be remembered that strategy is a competitive endeavour: the 'Assad must go' vignette demonstrates the futility of economy of force when faced with stronger opposition. In this case, the combined *means* of the regime and its Russian,⁷⁹ Iranian and

⁷⁸ Chollet, *The Long Game* . . . , 153.

⁷⁹ Glass, "Tell Me how this Ends," . . . , 59.

Hezbollah⁸⁰ were sufficient to outweigh the limited *means* applied by the US and its allies. In this case, limited Western military intervention in the form of training and equipping proxies has arguably prolonged the conflict⁸¹ and thus, at least in part, contributed to the provision of space which allowed Da'esh to emerge.⁸²

Zartman argues that conflict resolution requires a “Ripe Moment.” Such a moment requires both parties to perceive a “Mutually Hurting Stalemate” which leads to pursuing peace becoming more attractive than continued fighting; and the possibility of a negotiated “Way Out”.⁸³ This could be argued to justify limited military engagement to contain the situation while waiting for the Ripe Moment to achieve maximal strategic *ends*. However, in the case of Syria, neither a Mutually Hurting Stalemate nor a Way Out was apparent. In the first case, the multiplicity of external support to both the regime and opposition led both sides to perceive that, even if they had lost momentum, their backers would provide increased support to redress the balance: any temporary stalemates were therefore not mutually hurting. Meanwhile, the declared *end* of ‘Assad must go’ skewed the regime’s cost / benefit analysis such that a Way Out became almost impossible. If the cost of defeat is death, continued fighting will almost inevitably be the more attractive option.

The above analysis supports Lykke’s thesis that *ends*, *ways* and *means* must remain in balance.⁸⁴ However, there is an important addendum: other actors *ways* and *means*, including those of apparent adversaries, can provide an important contribution if

⁸⁰ Kim Cragin, “Semi-Proxy Wars and U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 5 (2015): 319.

⁸¹ Edward Luttwak, “Give War a Chance,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (Jul / Aug 1999): 44.

⁸² Bakos, “Beyond Kinetic Operations . . .,” 475; Glass, “Tell Me how this Ends,” . . ., 59; Paphiti, and Bachmann, “Syria: A Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure,” . . .: 153.

⁸³ Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives . . .”

⁸⁴ Lykke, “Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy,” . . ., 182-183.

ends are aligned. Conversely, if *ends* are misaligned, friendly *ways* and *means* must be sufficient entirely to overmatch those of the adversary.

CONCLUSION

Within the continents as well as globally, hardly any countries are unidirectionally aligned in their major international relationships. Allies on one issue . . . may be adversaries on others . . . and today's partner may be tomorrow's rival and vice versa, depending on the issue at hand.

– Seyom Brown, *Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis*

Clausewitz argued that *means* were a crucial element in a successful strategy: “a prince or a general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much nor too little.”⁸⁵ The analysis of US military strategy in Syria reinforces this point, but adds a nuance. Even where only limited *means* can be applied, it remains possible for *ends* to be achieved where these are shared with other actors, and where these actors are prepared to contribute *means* to coherent *ways*. This was certainly the case in the fight against Da’esh, and was arguably so once UNSCR 2118 had been signed to remove Assad’s chemical weapons capability. However, where *ends* are not aligned, as was the case with ‘Assad must go’, sufficient *means* must be applied to overcome not just the immediate adversary (Syria) but also its allies (Russia, Iran and its proxies). The US and its allies were unwilling to do this in the case of Syria: hence the failure of strategy to deliver the *end* of ‘Assad must go.’

This paper began by exploring what military strategy is. Returning to Beaufre’s definition of strategy as “the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute”,⁸⁶ it arguably does not fully grasp the reality of 21st century conflict. While Beaufre acknowledged that many actors have always been involved in

⁸⁵ Clausewitz, *On War* . . . , 177.

⁸⁶ Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy* . . . , 22.

conflicts,⁸⁷ the evolution of US military strategy in Syria has shown just how important this is in the 21st century. A more contemporary definition might be that ‘strategy is the art of the dialectic of many competing wills, all seeking to align sufficient *means* and coherent *ways* to achieve their desired *ends*.’

Further research could usefully verify these conclusions through analysis of other recent conflicts; particularly those in other Theatres involving different groups of actors. Those militaries which “are constantly deployed and have to prove themselves in conflict” have the opportunity to re-evaluate their strategy and tactics against those of their enemies, and evolve to increase their chances of success:⁸⁸ it would therefore also be useful to research the extent to which this process of evolution does result in better strategy, rather than the uncritical transfer of lessons to inapplicable contexts.⁸⁹

In a period where Western states can appear to be struggling to define effective military strategies,⁹⁰ and some, like Canada, are pursuing a strategy of contribution warfare,⁹¹ it is hoped that this paper may contribute to that discussion. This is not an argument against the utility of force: “whenever a situation is bad enough that combat comes into consideration, there will be costs from inaction.”⁹² However, it is a salutary reminder that those considering using the military lever must conduct a holistic analysis

⁸⁷ “It must be remembered that the dialectic struggle between two opponents will be further complicated by the fact that it will be played out on an international stage. Pressure by allies or even neutrals may prove decisive . . . A correct of the influence of the international situation upon our own liberty of action is therefore a vital element of strategy.” *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁸⁸ Marus Keupp, *Militärökonomie*, trans. by Google (Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2019), 66.

⁸⁹ Antulio Echevarria, “Rediscovering US Military Strategy: A Role for Doctrine,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016): 241.

⁹⁰ Ben Barry, “Conclusion,” in “Harsh Lessons: Iraq, Afghanistan and the Changing Character of War,” *Adelphi Series* 56, no 461 (2016): 152; Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, *No such thing as a quick fix: The aspiration-capabilities gap in British remote warfare* (London: Oxford Research Group, 2018), 25.

⁹¹ Col Jonathan Vance, “Tactics Without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign,” in *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives Context and Concepts*, edited by Allan English et al (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005): 273.

⁹² Richard Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” . . . : 48.

of all actors' strategies, including their own, before committing forces: "whatever the costs of refraining from war may be, they can seldom be greater than those from killing without strategy."⁹³

Rather than "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles,"⁹⁴ Sun Tzu's aphorism might therefore be stated more broadly and modestly for the present day as 'if you know the enemy, yourself, and the other actors in the conflict; you stand an increased chance of success.'

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. by Lionel Giles (Leicester: Allandale, 2000), 11.

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⁹⁵ Note that while this is an unofficial website, the transcript of the speech is quoted as having been released by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). The transcript no longer appears on the SANA website, but is reproduced on other websites which quote SANA (rather than www.presidentassad.net) as a source, such as

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