Gaming the 21st Century: What to Game?

Center for Applied Strategic Learning

Easily the most frequently asked question of gamers is how we select topics. Fairly often, we pick topics by asking "what if" questions about the hotspot regions of the world. What if the leader of a nuclear state, for instance, should be assassinated and it is unknown who has control of the national arsenal? What if another state should trigger energy supply disruptions to meet its own political goals? What if nonstate actors' capacities for cross-border violence grow to the extent that they can incite conflict between national governments? In the Center for Applied Strategic Learning at the National Defense University and elsewhere, these "what ifs" are explored at length by policy analysts and senior government leaders.

But is this the best way to pick topics? Moreover, is it the best way to identify the topics that could dominate the future? In *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (1st Quarter, 2009), we posited that qualitatively specified exercises (political-military or tabletop exercises) are not good at finding the solution to some broad, ill-defined, strategic-level dilemma. But they are extremely effective tools for identifying, weighing, and even assigning importance to the factors and constraints that shape the strategic arena in which policymakers make decisions. This process of concept validation is important because it is prerequisite for good subsequent analyses and, eventually, doctrine design. This suggests that the important question for defining games concerning strategic-level problems is not "What if this event happens?" but rather "What's going on here?" and exploring what factors create a problem.

The issues most often identified as national security challenges are political fundamentalism, transnational terrorism, populist nationalism, proliferation, utility and costs of international courts and law, or food crises. Sometimes these issues coincide with a geographic area, but just as often their boundary-less nature is what makes them so hard to address. These issues are frequently characterized by a core set of issues or trends that make them a discrete, coherent problem that could be transformed into game themes and variables. At best, countries or regions are really case studies of these more fundamental trends, which it may make more sense to focus on directly.

What should we be doing when crafting strategic-level, qualitatively specified games from which we can gather the most knowledge and conduct the best analyses? As we brainstorm topics, we should be asking, "What's going on here?" and write games that explore the answer to this question. Indeed, we are overfocused on games that elicit policy recommendations and on crisis simulations. For better insight, however, we should pay more attention to the work of mainstream social science research, which has devoted more serious attention than the policy analytic community to how to do good qualitative research. A greater engagement with rigorous social science could be useful in identifying specific topics as well as new ways to examine old ones. Basic concepts as diverse as public goods theory, the two-level game, and social capital could tell us interesting things about contemporary problems such as the challenges of crafting international agreements to counter transnational terrorism, what domestic factors help democracy succeed in some places and not others, and the implications of variations in different institutional arrangements.

Topics to Consider

Elements of and Obstacles to Stability and Reconstruction. Stability, security, transition, and reconstruction (SSTR) issues are an interesting topic because among Iraq, Afghanistan, and teetering governments elsewhere in the world, how to (re)build or shore up governments and civic institutions and the impact of their success on U.S. national security interests is set to be one of the top issues for the foreseeable future. Most nationbuilding now occurs at what game theorists have called a two-level game—that is, there is both a domestic process through which agreements must be reached as well as an international level of negotiations. An interesting thing about SSTR issues is that the same actors are usually simultaneously playing both games. Whether supporters or obstacles to the process, they are negotiating (or challenging) international agreements and roles for a nascent state at the same time as they build domestic institutions, trying to advance their preferred vision at both levels simultaneously. External actors, whether partners or spoilers, frequently intervene in both domestic and international processes, providing security support to the government and procuring international funding for it, or providing assistance to an insurgency or the opposition.

Transnational Terrorism. This issue is salient and likely to dominate the policy community in coming years. There are several sub-issues arising from it that could make for an interesting set of questions to examine. One example is the exigencies of constructing a transnational response. One of the difficult things about combating terrorism is that terrorists and their assets move easily across international boundaries, while nation-states still need to develop their responses and coordinate them with other national partners who have multiple priorities and an interest in getting the best outcome at least cost. In short, terrorists' interests are concentrated and their targets' interests are diffuse. Disrupting and deterring terrorist activity are costly. Moreover, any efforts that one state takes to promote security or deter activity will benefit other states, even if the states do not contribute to the effort. Basically, transnational terrorism creates a classic collective action problem: the best, most secure outcome is achieved by broad cooperation, but it is individually rational for countries not to cooperate, since they will get the benefits of any consequent decrease in terrorism anyway. Difficulty reaching agreement on a range of issues having to do with disruption and deterrence is due not, therefore, to lack of "will" or "concern" but to a concrete matter of incentives.

Failing States and Nuclear Weapons. The risk of governments that already possess nuclear weapons failing and losing control of existing arsenals constitutes an important subset of nonproliferation issues. An exercise that examined not the consequences of

but the risk factors for this scenario would be timely and relevant.

International Law and the Internationalization of Norms. Tabletop exercises are particularly good at scrutinizing "the rules of the game" and assessing their impact on strategic choices, meaning that a focus on legal issues could be immensely valuable. Social scientists have long looked at law, not so much in the normative sense of advocating better or differently articulated human rights law, for instance, but as the contractual infrastructure that aids in making and executing agreements with partners and creates incentives that structure those agreements. Law as procedural politics would be amenable to exploration in game format (with law, itself, being the paradigmatic, qualitatively specified constraint). At the domestic level, law and procedural politics are fairly settled, but there are several international and transnational spaces where the rules of the game are rather in flux, sparse, or problematic even where the substance of a policy goal may be much less contested and where examining the implications of varying legal structures would be very interesting.

Current methods of topic selection, then, are adequate. It is not difficult to identify a handful of topics that should be relevant in the short- to mid-term. If we construct scenarios representing fairly short time spans, we can plausibly describe events that might come to pass. What this does not do is elicit particularly useful strategic insights or help us to better conceptualize problems. Conventional approaches yield little but conventional wisdom.

To identity strategic issues that will be of mid- to long-term import, we must actively seek out problems or try to find trends or situations not quite understood. If qualitatively specified games are better at identifying important factors and concept validation than solving problems per se, it is preferable to choose topics and formulate scenarios that provide a basis for generalizing about trends rather than just posing "what if" questions. It would be a useful evolution in game topic selection to focus on issues, rather than regions, and on using gaming to build bridges with social science research and seek to concretize useful but sometimes technical and abstract developments in the field. **JFQ**

Joint Doctrine and Irregular Warfare

By **JEROME M. LYNES**

During a recent conference at the National Defense University (NDU), an attendee expressed concern that joint doctrine has failed to adequately address irregular warfare (IW). This is not exactly so, but the charge has circulated with such frequency of late that I wish to continue the discussion.

The arc of IW, as it has been intellectually identified and expressed, is a product of the last Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The component pieces of IW were detailed therein, and the ensuing IW Roadmap put the Department of Defense on the path to institutionalizing irregular warfare in order to better balance warfighting capacity at both ends of the conflict intensity spectrum. I agree that we have not reached that goal yet, but I do have professional insight as to how we have endeavored to capture it in joint doctrine.

Before jumping into this discussion, it is relevant to talk about the distinction between concepts and doctrine. These two areas are frequently confused with one another, but have very different natures. *Doctrine* is the body of recorded wisdom about current capabilities; it has to be real or we cannot record it. Doctrine is the box that holds our wisdom about "what we think we already know." *Concepts* are very different. They are "out of the box" ideas that may or may not work. The confusion over the distinction between the two is rampant in regard to IW, as independent concept and doctrine development work has been going on simultaneously. In a perfect schema, concept work starts with both a real problem and what we think we already know (doctrine). This linkage begins the journey to solutions that are ultimately recorded as doctrinal wisdom. Alternatively, doctrine should "wait" for concept work to come to fruition via the winding road of spiral development and field testing. In the "concepts to capabilities" journey, doctrine is after the *equals* sign.

Returning now to the question of IW in joint doctrine, first and foremost, Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (May 17, 2007[1]), establishes the definition of IW and places it in clear contrast with our traditional view of war. It does this primarily in chapter 1, "Foundations," beginning in paragraph 1, "Fundamentals," on page 1. The discussion continues in depth a few pages later in paragraph 2, "The Strategic Security Environment" (I–6 and I–7). JP 1 is the Capstone publication in the joint doctrine hierarchy, and it sets conditions for subordinate joint and Service doctrine publications.

The QDR deconstructed IW into a number of separate aspects. Here follows a list of them, with a number indicating how many different joint doctrine publications address the subject:

- insurgency and counterinsurgency (14 JPs), including the new JP being written on counterinsurgency
- terrorism and counterterrorism (16 JPs), including the new JP being written on counterterrorism
- stability operations (16 JPs), including the new JP being written on the subject
- unconventional warfare (21 JPs)
- foreign internal defense (23 JPs), including security force assistance
- information operations (46 JPs)
- psychological operations (41 JPs)
- intelligence and counterintelligence (40 JPs)
- civil-military operations (38 JPs).

Doctrine is continuously updated and revised, and what happens in this iterative process is a sharpening of our focus and treatment of IW to obtain an "equal footing" with traditional war. A major revision of both JP 3–0, *Operations*, and JP 5–0, *Planning*, will occur this year. These are significant opportunities to meet the QDR's expressed goal, and these publications are "first among equals" below JP 1, influencing broad swaths of the joint doctrine hierarchy.