

Winning in multi-domains is not enough: thoughts on the new doctrine and the gray zone conflicts

No basta con vencer en múltiples dominios: conjeturas sobre la nueva doctrina del Ejército de los Estados Unidos y los conflictos en la zona gris

Abstract: This article offers a brief analysis of the new challenges imposed on the U.S. Armed Forces to facing enemies with similar combat power. An orthodox approach to the new Army doctrine called Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) might contribute to political and strategic failure while ensuring tactical victories in the battlefield.

Keywords: Multi-domain Operations. Grey zone. Hybrid Warfare.

Resumen: El presente artículo ofrece un breve análisis de los nuevos desafíos impuestos a las fuerzas armadas de los EUA, ante enemigos dotados de poderío bélico análogo. Un enfoque ortodoxo de la nueva doctrina del Ejército norteamericano, denominada Operaciones en Múltiples Dominios, puede contribuir para el fracaso en los niveles político y estratégico, aunque les asegure la victoria táctica en el campo de batalla.

Palabras clave: Operaciones en múltiples dominios. Conflicto en la zona gris. Guerra Híbrida.

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After the long, arduous and, apparently, fruitless Global War on Terrorism, the United States Army (USA) is engaged in a legitimate effort to regenerate and expand the capacities related to large-scale ground combat¹. The emerging doctrine, called “Multiple Domain Operations,” is the theoretical tool with which the Army intends to equip sophisticated and interdependent joint maneuvers, in order to overcome threats with warlike power equivalent or almost equivalent.

While the Army is genuinely engaged in the search for solutions to the battle, especially at the tactical and operational levels, it is necessary to reflect on its interface with American national strategy and policy. Although doctrine is not a strategy, there is an undeniable relationship between them. A clear alignment must be built now and not after the full development of capacities based on Multiple Domain Operations or any other concept, otherwise there will be irreparable inconsistencies. In other words, the question should not remain limited to “*how will the Army win the next battle.*” The heart of the problem is “*how the nation will win the next war.*” The study of US military history, more than any other country, proves that, despite the ingrained Clausewitzian logic, one thing does not necessarily lead to the other.

The latest edition of the *FM 3-0 Operations* manual wisely recognizes that an offensive based on conventional military might, however successful it may be, does not represent the decisive act of a military campaign. After all, tactical success wins battles, but it is not enough to win wars (UNITED STATES, 2017a, p. 1-39, 7-58). The very idea implied in the expression “winning the war” goes far beyond the mere imposition of national will on a militarily subjugated enemy. In this sense, it is worth recalling the statement made by General William Sherman, for whom “the legitimate objective of war is perfect peace” (FULLER, 1966, p. 100).

The United States undoubtedly needs to be prepared to win an eventual attrition battle waged by large-scale regular forces. However, American military leaders must assess whether the desired solutions at the operational and tactical levels will expand or reduce

1 Despite the virtual destruction of Al Qaeda and the remarkable proficiency displayed by the US armed forces on the battlefields of the Middle East and Central Asia, the immediate results of the Global War on Terrorism were unsatisfactory and its costs were exorbitant. Furthermore, from a political and strategic point of view, both campaigns, in Iraq and Afghanistan, represented a real disaster. According to John Arquilla (2018), in 2001, there were about 2,000 incidents that could be qualified as terrorist attacks worldwide. These actions left a balance of approximately 14,000 dead and injured. In 2015, the statistics suggested a significant worsening in the global security situation: the total number of attacks reached 15,000 and the number of victims reached the figure of 80,000 people. In fact, US-led military initiatives in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks have destabilized and conflicted the entire volatile Middle East, with the naive presumption of spreading Western democracy. The popular uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring soon degenerated into a fratricidal struggle promoting the outbreak of civil wars in some countries. Waves of refugees, stemming from the conflicts in Libya and Syria, flooded Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and, to a lesser extent, Europe. In addition to revealing the humanitarian tragedy, the migratory flow to Europe has caused a huge demographic, cultural, political and economic impact, whose consequences cannot be correctly assessed so far. Furthermore, the imbroglio created by the ephemeral rise of the Islamic State and the survival of the battered regime of the dictator Bashar al-Assad, in Damascus, allowed the reintegration of Russia as a prominent actor in the region, in addition to providing significant advantages to Moscow, such as the lease from the port of Tartus, in the Mediterranean Sea, for the next 48 years (something surprising even for the ambitions of Tsar Peter the Great). To the perplexity of the Americans, Russia's gains in Syria required an incredibly low resource commitment. As if that were not enough, the US's main rival in the Middle East, Iran, has become the largest beneficiary of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After all, what was achieved in fact with both interventions was the deposition of radical anti-Shiite autocracies in Kabul and Baghdad, restoring the historic area of influence of the Persian Empire. Consequently, actors that were antagonistic to the USA began to exert greater influence over the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the south of the Red Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, contrary to the Carter Doctrine, whose premise is to mitigate the risks to oil supplies from the Middle East.

flexibility at the political and strategic levels, preserving the link between ends and means – skills that their potential enemies have displayed with remarkable proficiency.

When Edward Wynkoop or John Paul Vann made plausible criticisms of the use of the “American Way of War,” for example, it was too late for the Army to resort to less orthodox strategies, as they simply did not exist². Therefore, this article offers a brief analysis of the challenges that the historical context and the current strategic environment impose on the most powerful armed forces on the planet, as they prepare themselves to primarily face enemies with equated combat power. It should be noted that this text contains excerpts from other works previously published by the author, as shown in the bibliographic references.

1 Change of Era

The world has always been in constant transformation, driven by the creative genius of human beings. The domain of fire, the Neolithic Revolution, the advent of writing and the wheel, the emergence of bronze metallurgy, the unrestrained advances in science and the creation of sophisticated political and social institutions, for example, demonstrate that great changes are inherent in the history of humanity (VISACRO, 2019a, p. 49).

However, about 200 years ago, with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, societies began to experience changes at a pace, whose intensity, speed, breadth and depth have challenged the adaptive capacity of even the most elaborate human groupings. Not by chance, the epicenter of these changes, Europe, almost found its own destruction, in the first half of the 20th century, with two world wars, political chaos, disintegration of empires, revolutions, nationalist conflicts, ethnic tensions, dissemination of radical ideologies, rise of totalitarian regimes, genocides, prolonged economic crisis, epidemic and hunger (KERSHAW, 2016, p. 19-25).

As Michael Phillips (2009, p. 95) warned, “our greatest hazard is not the changing global environment, but our reaction to it.” “After all, human collectives incur natural (and sometimes disastrous) mistakes when interpreting the transformations that affect the basic principles that rule the organization and functioning of society, demanding, on some occasions, an excessive time to readjust to new contexts” (VISACRO, 2019a, p. 49). When postulating that knowledge became the main factor of production in the 21st century, overcoming in importance the availability of land, capital, labor, energy and raw materials together, Professor Marcos Cavalcanti, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, assured that “We do not live today in an era of change [...] On the contrary, we are experiencing an authentic change of era, which is something completely different” (CAVALCANTI, 2009, n.p.). In fact, the use of the term “era of change” suggests a *continuum* of transformations over which

2 Edward W. Wynkoop (1836-1891) served as an army officer and head of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Agency during the Indian Wars, opposing the annihilation campaigns launched against non-hostile tribes. Lieutenant colonel John Paul Vann (1924-1972) became famous for his criticism of American strategy during the Vietnam War.

we can exercise a degree of control. On the other hand, the expression “change of era” presupposes a paradigmatic rupture that affects the foundations of society, making models and standards obsolete.

Before being a political phenomenon in the Clausewitz’s strict sense, war is a social phenomenon. “Despite all the protagonism attributed to soldiers on the battlefield, it is the societies, and not the armies or their generals, that produce the wars. This assertion allows us to conclude that changes in the conduct of war result primarily from sociological changes. The moment humanity leaves the industrial era to enter a new one, undergoing rapid and profound changes, it is necessary to seek to understand, objectively, how these changes affect the nature of armed conflicts” (VISACRO, 2018, p 25-27).

The rapid incorporation of technological innovations, in addition to being clearly perceptible, is inevitable, crucial and urgent. Autonomous weapon systems, artificial intelligence and quantum computing, for example, are expected to have a significant impact on the very nature of war. However, the complex demands of the 21st century are not restricted to the mere acquisition of new disruptive technologies. The risks of using outdated models to manage new resources and interpret new dynamics are enormous. According to Peter Drucker (1980, n.p.), “the greatest danger in turbulent times is not turbulence itself, but acting with the logic of the past.” The sequence of events that led to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 illustrates this. “World leaders, in particular, should always keep this in mind, in order to avoid that an unnecessary succession of mistakes, justified by the intensification of global competition, may once again define the course of history” (VISACRO, 2019a, p. 51).

Furthermore, the fascination exerted by the “steel shock in the decisive battle,” still significantly affects the judgment about the use of force. Episodes such as Gettysburg (1863), Sadowa (1866), Sedan (1870), Tsushima (1905), Tannenberg (1914), Midway (1942), El Alamein (1942), Guadalcanal (1943), Stalingrad (1943) or Golan (1973), for example, constitute archetypes that support orthodox thinking. Although traditional forms of belligerence cannot be dismissed or neglected, they must be considered within a new and broader context. After all, new strategic approaches and social dynamics have relativized the use of the military instrument.

2 In Search of Alternatives to Challenge North American Hegemony

National states, as political entities, still compete fiercely with each other, guided by the traditional *raison d'état* and by the realistic precepts of the Hans Morgenthau school (BITTENCOURT, 2017, p. 4). “However, they have diversified their ways of coping and sought to reduce the visibility of their strategic actions, in the face of an increasingly intolerant and impatient public opinion, less willing to bear the costs of a total war” (VISACRO, 2018, p. 167). Although the principles of political realism outlined by Morgenthau in his most famous work, *Politics among nations*, remain valid, the resources and alternatives with which States pursue their interests seem to have expanded.

In particular, Russia, China and Iran have been developing less orthodox strategies in order to counter American military hegemony. Spectators of the surprising

display of warlike power during the 1991 Gulf War, these countries became convinced that the United States had become virtually unbeatable on a conventional battlefield. No other armed force on the planet could confront them, venturing into a direct pitched struggle, conducted in accordance with the “paradigm of industrial war between states” (SMITH, 2008, p. 49-139).

Years later, in February 1999, two Chinese Air Force officers, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published a book that would become famous, entitled “The War Beyond the Limits: conjectures about war and tactics in the age of globalization.” The work proposed actions and procedures that went beyond the usual military tactics, aiming to compensate for the military inferiority of emerging countries, such as China in particular, in the event of a conflict involving high-tech means. According to the authors:

The war as we knew it, described in glorious and dominant terms, until the conclusion of the recent conflict, marking a peak in military history, ceased to be considered one of the most important events on the world stage, and became the importance of a secondary actor. [...] The point is that multinational forces led by the United States, operating in the desert region of Kuwait, marked the end of a period, thus ushering in a new era. [...] All of this is still undetermined. The only certain conclusion is that, from now on, the war will no longer be as it has always been. [...] The war, which has undergone changes in modern technology and the market system, will be unleashed in even more unusual ways. In other words, while witnessing a relative reduction in military violence, we are definitely showing an increase in political, economic and technological violence (LIANG; XIANGSUI, 1999, p. 4-6).

The current Chief of Staff of Russia, General Valery Gerasimov, has repeatedly mentioned the adoption of more eclectic strategies, not based exclusively on the use of conventional warlike power (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 21). Interestingly, he draws on his personal interpretation of US diplomatic, informational, military and economic tools to support his case. The tone of his ideas has shaped what analysts call the “Gerasimov Doctrine” or, to paraphrase the general himself, the Russian “New Generation War”:

The emphasis in the content of methods of confrontation is shifting in the direction of extensive employment of political, economic, diplomatic, information, and other nonmilitary measures, implemented with the involvement of the protest potential of a population. Nonmilitary forms and means of struggle have received unprecedented development and have acquired a dangerous, sometimes violent nature. (GERASIMOV, 2017, p. 25).

In addition, the make-up of participants in military conflicts is broadening. Together with regular forces, the internal protest potential of the population is

being used, as are terrorist and extremist formations [...] There has been a shift from sequential and concentrated operations to continuous and dispersed operations conducted simultaneously in all spheres of confrontation and in remote theaters of military operations (GERASIMOV, 2019, p. 132).

In this way, the new strategies outlined by the governments of Moscow, Beijing and Tehran, over the past few decades, have been subordinated to three premises, namely:

- I. A direct strike against the armed forces of the United States would be extremely disadvantageous and risky, therefore, it should be avoided;
- II. Other means, other than traditional military alternatives, should be employed to achieve national goals; this would mean placing greater emphasis on political, diplomatic, geoeconomic and informational actions, to the detriment of actions in the military field, as well as developing other indirect methods of engagement, such as, for example, unconventional warfare, information operations and cyber warfare; and
- III. To have conventional warlike power that, although it was not enough to assure them a definitive military victory over the United States, would alter the cost-benefit of an eventual North American intervention, making it disadvantageous, in order to create a strategic impasse from which could take advantage, exploring the ambiguities and contradictions of the international system (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 22).

Since then, the political and strategic options outlined by Russia, China and Iran have developed, in general lines, according to the following logical sequence:

1st) **“Aggressive” use of non-military means, supported by non-kinetic (non-lethal) military alternatives, especially information operations and cyber war.** This allows them to shape the environment in their favor, progressively reducing the United States’ influence and interference power in a given geographical area, while ensuring that they expand their own presence at the regional level. The geoeconomic initiatives undertaken by the Chinese in Africa and Latin America serve as an example, as well as the Russian information campaigns in Europe and the political actions carried out by Tehran with the Shiite leaders in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 22).

2nd) **Employment of military means to achieve strategic objectives, without however provoking an American intervention.** This means admitting a violent escalation of the conflict to a limit that precedes decisive action by the Washington government. In this phase, it is possible to observe the limited use of conventional forces, combined with the skillful use of diplomatic and informational tools, in addition to unconventional war practices, above all, the intense use of *proxies*, as the Russians have done, sponsoring separatists in the eastern Ukraine or through Shiite militias and the *Wagner Group*, a private military company serving the Kremlin, in the Syrian civil war (ARANHA, 2018)

As well as Iran through *Hezbollah*; and China promoting paramilitary activities on the Senkaku Islands (MORRIS et al., 2019, p. 95), for example. Lastly:

3rd) **Possible use of anti-access and area denial capabilities** (A2-AD, of the acronym in English), using sophisticated air, naval and anti-missile defense means, including anti-satellite weapons, supported by information operations, cyber activities and electronic warfare in order to restrict the entry of US forces into the theater of operations (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 22).

As the establishment of robust Chinese military bases on artificial reefs suggests in the area delimited by the “Line of Nine Traits” in the South China Sea (ARQUILLA, 2018, p. 118), in addition to the test, carried out in 2007, which resulted in the destruction of a Chinese meteorological satellite by a kinetic attack missile launched from the Earth’s surface (DESCHENES, 2019, p. 110).

According to General Joseph Dunford: Russia, China and Iran employ “economic coercion, political influence, unconventional warfare information ops, [and] cyber ops to advance their interests and they do it in a way that they know we don’t have an effective response. They, unlike us, are able to integrate the full range of capabilities their states possess to advance their interests” (MORRIS et al., 2019, p. 2).

In face of this reality, the concepts of *Hybrid Warfare* and *Conflict in the Grey Zone* have received great prominence in the specialized literature³. According to an analysis by the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC):

Irregular operations, often in concert with proxies, terrorist, or criminal activities, operating within a “Gray Zone” short of war, will challenge our ability to come to grips with the enemy and perhaps present an unfavorable cost-benefit equation to our political leaders [...] State and non-state actors compete for power and control, often below the threshold of traditional armed conflict – or shield and protect their activities under the aegis of escalatory WMD, cyber, or long-range [fires] conventional options and doctrines (UNITED STATES. 2017b, p. 5, 13).

Numerous official documents, such as “*The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*” prepared by TRADOC in 2018, clearly describe the operational context (UNITED STATES, 2018). The *FM 3-0 Operations* campaign manual recognizes that opponents in the United States prefer to achieve their goals without directly engaging

3 According to Colonel Paulo Cesar Leal (2010, p. 10), of the Brazilian Army, hybrid warfare uses a wide range of resources, combining conventional and unconventional warfare tools, namely: regular and irregular forces, special forces, support to local demonstrations, information warfare, diplomacy, cyber attacks and economic warfare. According to Hal Brands (apud ARQUILLA, 2018, p. 121), the conflict in the grey zone “[...] is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict.” In other words, “the Gray Zone is characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war” (VOTEL et al., 2016, p. 102).

their forces in combat. And it goes further: opposing forces portray enemies equipped with modern technology to generate combinations of conventional, irregular and disruptive threats in each of the five domains and in the informational environment (UNITED STATES, 2017a, p. 1-9, 2-54, 3-4).

The alternative strategic approaches, developed by the powers that challenge the American hegemony, have allowed them to move towards the achievement of their national objectives, while significant investments are directed to their respective military forces, aiming to generate a gradual increase in conventional warlike power. China, for example, expanded defense spending by 665% in the period between 1996 and 2017 (HEGINBOTHAM; SAMUELS, 2018); in the first half of 2019 alone, 16 new warships were launched into the sea and its navy is already the largest in the world in number of vessels (GALANTE, 2019). However, in view of the good results obtained, it seems unlikely that, in the near future, these heterodox methods will simply be abandoned to promote an obtuse return to traditional forms of direct confrontation. Perhaps, General Rocha Paiva, of the Brazilian Army, is correct in paraphrasing Clausewitz in a personal message to this author, dated August 29, 2019: *“peace has become the continuation of war by other means.”*

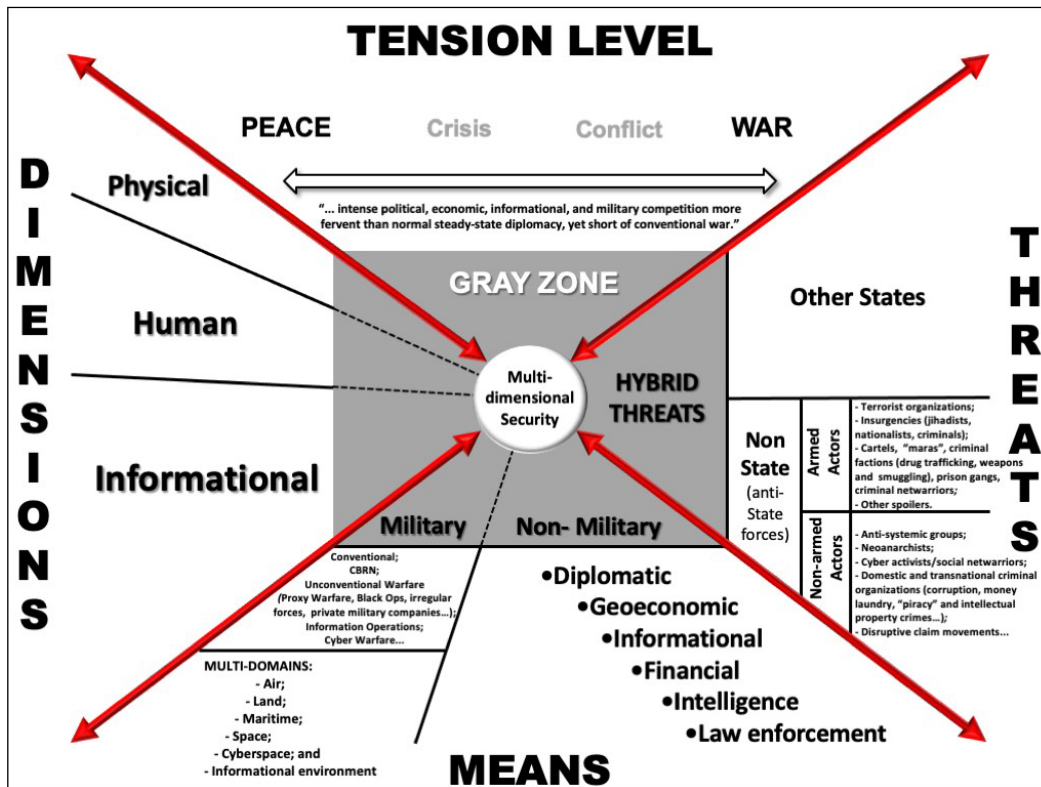
3 A New Dynamics Leads to the Stiffening of Strategic Competition

In addition to the impact of disruptive technologies, humanity faces an unprecedented flow of people, ideas, services, goods and capital. Changes in migratory patterns, demographic pressures, uncontrolled urbanization and environmental degradation are added to political changes, global economic transformations and, above all, profound changes in expectations, values and social norms (NAÍM, 2013, p. 33). Hyperconnectivity and interdependence impose logic of convergence and hybridization (MATFESS; MIKLAUCIC, 2016, p. X), leading to a redefinition of what we understood as *time, distance and power*. Amid the crisis of legitimacy of representative democracy (HOBBSAWN, 2007, p. 97-115), new challenges to the traditional Westphalian order arise, such as the rise of non-state actors and endemic government bankruptcy, for example. The increasingly common overlap of “hot spots” and “black spots”⁴ suggests the advent of a Neo-feudal order in some important geographic areas around the planet.

State and non-state actors act frantically, showing increasing autonomy. However, they remain closely connected to form hybrid threats that permeate complex adaptive systems. There is an enormous multiplicity of means (military and non-military) employed in conducting the war, where actions in the political, economic and psychosocial fields overlap with efforts in the military field. It is also noteworthy the ascendancy of the human and, mainly, informational dimensions about the traditional confrontation in the physical domain. This scenario requires the adoption of a multi-component strategy (MORRIS et al., 2019, p. XVIII), in addition to a systemic and multidimensional conception of security, which transcends the ingrained Westphalian paradigm of national defense *stricto sensu* (figure 1).

⁴ Usually, the conflagrated areas are known as “hot spots.” Bartosz Hieronim Stanislawski coined the term “black spot” to designate ungoverned areas within a State, capable of generating and spreading insecurity (SOUZA, 2012).

Figure 1 – Conflict in the Grey Zone



Source: Visacro (2019b, p. 59).

In the face of such facts, we must admit that hybrid war and conflict in the gray zone, perhaps, are not merely mere strategic options within the reach of US opponents. In fact, it is a natural consequence of the 21st century conflict environment. An analysis recently prepared by the *RAND Corporation* emphasizes that "the first and most important strategic principle [that should guide the North American stance] is that the *United States should not merely seek to mitigate losses in the gray zone but also aim to gain strategic advantage* [in this type of environment]" (MORRIS et al., 2019, p. 130).

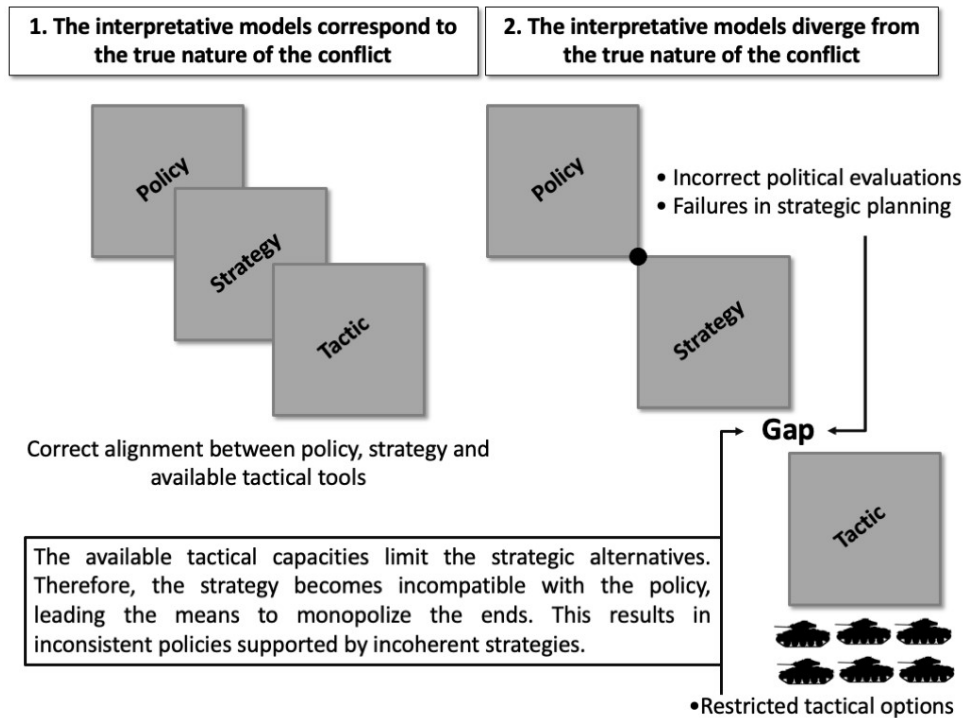
According to John Troxell (2018, p. 6), "information warfare, cyberwarfare, and international economic competition are not necessarily new approaches or methods for states to pursue national security objectives, but the context in which they are being applied and the prominence that they have assumed is significantly new" What we have, in fact, is the traditional exercise of *the* realpolitik with a more diversified portfolio of means and, perhaps, with fewer moral ties. Geopolitical disputes between sovereign states have always been compared to a game of chess. However, there seem to be new rules in a globalized world and deeply affected by the digital revolution, in which distances and time have been virtually abolished (HOBSBAWN, 2007, p. 37) and power has been significantly degraded (NAÍM, 2013). Let us imagine, then, a board that holds more than two opponents at the same time. Some pieces are autonomous, have a will of their own, moving independently. The game profile of the pieces undergoes changes

during the game – the rook advances diagonally like a bishop, and a pawn moves backwards by several squares! Players are free to move around without respecting the time allotted to other opponents. Possibly, this analogy more appropriately portrays the complex challenges of the 21st century (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 23).

However, it is worth remembering that the Chinese strategy game is Go (or *Wei-Chi*) and not chess – of Persian origin. This subtle difference may hide quite different strategic conceptions between Clausewitz's West and Sun Tzu's East. According to Major Jamie Schwandt, of the United States Army: "In chess, the underlying philosophy is winning through decisive victory with a clear objective in capturing the enemy king and destroying enemy forces. Chess is a linear game with a simple center of gravity (COG)—the king. We initiate a game of chess with all the pieces on the board, seeking then to move forward linearly in a war of attrition." (SCHWANDT, 2018, p. 21). In Go, the victory depends on the accumulation of pieces that leads to the board control, that is, the game acquires a constructive character. A chess game, on the other hand, reproduces an eminently destructive strategic-military process, supported by the elimination of the opponent's pieces and alternatives (MCNEILLY, 2003, p. 37).

While its opponents are guided by amoral realism, US diplomacy combines the defense of national interests with the promotion of values and ideas that American society understands as universal (KISSINGER, 2012, p. 13). Not infrequently, when the Washington government tries to reconcile real politics and the balance of power with the protection of these values, it finds itself stuck in its own contradictions, creating ambiguities that its opponents know how to exploit with mastery, above all, in the human and informational dimensions. Washington's insistence on using the military instrument to pursue unattainable political goals explains much of the setbacks suffered by the United States, despite the remarkable proficiency of its armed forces on the battlefield. On the other hand, soldiers almost always attribute the causes of failure in war only to wrong political decisions and failures in strategic planning, without admitting their own ineptitude in the face of any conflict that is not in full conformity with the model of industrial war between states (figure 2).

Figure 2 – Alignment and Gap – For didactic purposes, this illustration implies the operational level as the theater of operations strategy.



Source: the author (2020).

The fact that Russia, China and Iran defy American hegemony portrays a multipolar dynamic very close to the scenario predicted by Samuel Huntington (1998) in his controversial work “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 18). Managing this dynamic does not necessarily mean promoting the intensification of strategic competition in an inconsequential way. The obsession with points of attrition and points of divergence can eclipse the many opportunities for distension, in addition to inducing opponents to cooperate with each other (TRENIN, 2019).

According to political scientist Graham Allison, in the past 500 years, an emerging power has defied the dominant power’s *status quo* 16 times. In 12 cases, the dispute resulted in armed conflict – almost always triggered by a secondary event, associated with a minor actor, such as the murder of Austrian archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914, for example (ALLISON, 2018). Thus, the “Thucydides trap” cannot be ignored in the current geopolitical context, especially if we consider that the decline in American hegemony is accompanied by a significant increase in the number of “proxy wars,” renewed emphasis on conventional warlike power and increasingly daring initiatives in the “gray zone” that precedes a formal confrontation between states.

Having armed forces with significant deterrent power remains essential, but it is not enough. The military instrument must also be able to offer more flexible alternatives, which support the achievement of national political objectives, while promoting an

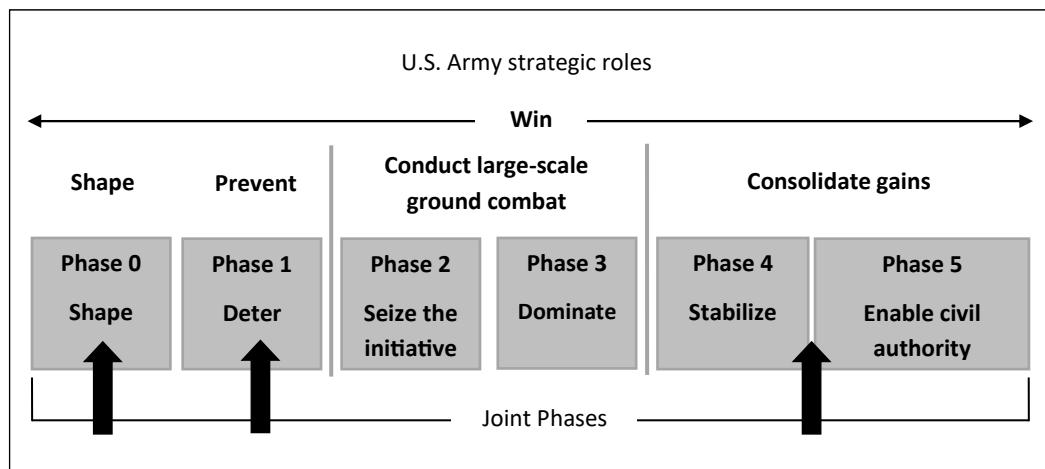
escalation of the conflict. In this sense, the special operation forces, the US security force assistance brigades and the 6th “hybrid war” division of the United Kingdom, for example, can prove to be quite useful (SENGUPTA, 2019).

4 Hegemonic Power Paradox

It is expected that the next combats will be marked by engagements in Earth’s orbit, hypersonic speed and fires of greater range, precision and lethality. The fight will be fought, simultaneously, by state and non-state actors, in international waters, in the cyber domain and in megacities, where hordes of young people and children, confined in densely populated segregated spaces, will be co-opted by abject violence practices, in an environment chaos, anomie and barbarism. Irregular forces, mercenaries and autonomous military robots, in the midst of innocent civilians, will take part in the next battles, to the detriment of the huge contingents of “citizen soldiers” that were legacies of the French Revolution and that characterized the main wars of the 20th century.

US military forces are likely to be required to play an important strategic role in the phases leading up to the outbreak of total war or in the post-conflict period. Certainly, sophisticated skills will be required in multiple domains contested by opponents with comparable war power. But, very rarely, they will engage in a full-scale conventional combat in all its fullness, as advocated by Clausewitz’s most orthodox disciples (VISACRO, 2019c, p. 23). See Figure 3:

Figure 3 – Relationship between the Army’s strategic roles and the joint phases.



Arrows indicate the highest probability of using US forces

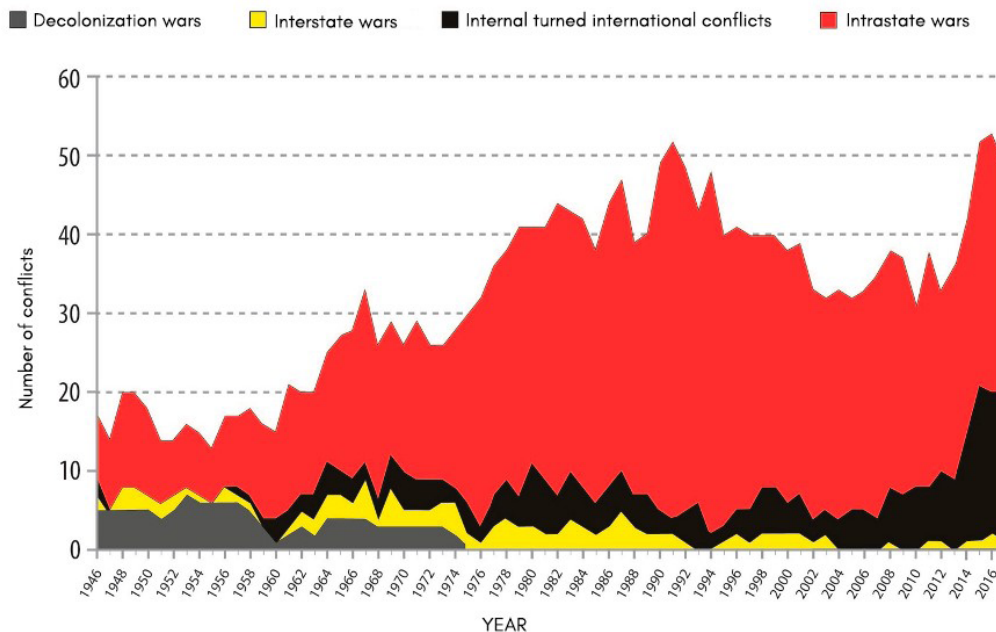
Source: Adapted from United States (2017a).

According to David Kilcullen (2013, p. 103):

[...] state-on-state conflict has always been relatively rare, and is getting rarer. At the same time, irregular warfare has historically been and will probably continue to be the main form of organized violence across the planet [...]. In Iraq and Afghanistan wind down would only reinforce this tendency, since America's unprecedented military supremacy means that no enemy in its right mind would choose to fight United States conventionally, and this pushes all potential adversaries – state or nonstate – in the direction of irregular methods [...]. In particular, governments that acquire nuclear weapons, which will allow them to deter conventional attacks, may be emboldened to use proxy warfare against an opponent.

The significant increase in irregular conflicts, in the decades that followed the end of World War 2, supports Kilcullen's statement. As a result of the frantic arms race between NATO forces and the Warsaw Pact, a strategic impasse was reached, defined according to the theory of "Mutual Assured Destruction" – suggestively known by the acronym MAD. In other words, the balance of the vast atomic arsenals of both superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, raised the risks of a direct confrontation in Europe to simply unacceptable levels, making the Third World the real battlefield of the Cold War, as shown in figure 4 (VISACRO, 2009, p. 23-25).

Figure 4 – Nature of armed conflicts between 1946 and 2017.



Source: Pettersson and Eck (2018).

According to General Álvaro de Souza Pinheiro (2008, n.p.), of the Brazilian Army, “the probability of more intense conflicts between developed national states is significantly decreasing; even if the realistic possibility of the outbreak of armed confrontations between state actors is accepted, they are more likely to employ asymmetric methods of war.” In an article for the *Washington Post*, columnist Max Boot was even more emphatic, assuring that the United States is simply preparing to fight the wrong war (BOOT, 2018).

In fact, American soldiers find themselves trapped in a paradox, which we could call the “hegemonic power paradox.” That is, the United States is obliged to make significant efforts and investments in order to obtain an indisputable military superiority, which only gives them the certainty that they will fight in conflicts located below the specter of total war. After all, as noted by British General Rupert Smith (2008, p. 10), “the opponent tends to play with our weaknesses and not with our strengths.” In a way, General Michael Lundy and Colonel Richard Creed (2018, p. 21) admit this apparent contradiction by stating that “Army forces do not have the luxury of focusing solely on large-scale land combat at the expense of the other missions the Nation requires them to do, but at the same time, they cannot afford to be unprepared for those kinds of operations in an increasingly unstable world.”

The greatest danger, in this context, lies in the possibility that American leaders will allow themselves to be attracted to a technological, geopolitical, and arms dispute, the intensity and breadth of which lead to the overextension and virtual depletion of US resources and capabilities, as it happened to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Russia and China know this and are betting on the pace of the competition, in addition to the continuous North American engagement around the planet, as a means to gradually exhaust their western opponent.

It is also reckless that professional soldiers give in to the temptation to dedicate themselves exclusively (or almost exclusively) to large-scale combat operations, to the detriment of other capabilities, such as unconventional war and counterinsurgency, for example. In fact, an army that is prepared only for the great battles of attrition will represent more of an obstacle than an asset in the face of the “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous” 21st century scenarios. In other words, the US Army must necessarily be able to make a quick transition between conflicts that present varying levels of intensity, fighting in one or more theaters of operations simultaneously. But in addition, they must demonstrate the aptitude to fight regular and irregular wars in the same place, at the same time and with the same proficiency, as determined by the Army Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley (MILLEY; SPER, 2018a, 2018b). This requires that the competencies necessary to overcome state and non-state opponents be, simultaneously, developed throughout the process of professional preparation of the Force and not in a segregated manner, as it has been usual.

Although the *FM 3-0 Operations* manual explicitly places emphasis on conventional combat between larger-scale regular forces, the doctrine expressed in its pages does not segregate “war” and “non-war” operations, admitting the possibility that the Army, in the performance of all its strategic roles (figure 3), will engage in counterinsurgency

operations, humanitarian aid, military assistance, among others, in the context of broader stability operations.

5 O.K. Corral

The concept of Multiple Domain Operations has as its central idea the development of capabilities that allow Army forces to penetrate and disintegrate, when necessary, enemy A2-D2 systems and then explore the resulting freedom of maneuver in order to achieve strategic objectives (UNITED STATES, 2018, p. VII). This conception tends to emphasize, above all, the importance of victory in the first battle as a prerequisite for the permanence of forces inside the theater of operations.

The time factor is also crucial. Low-intensity conflicts can persist for many decades inconclusively, but public opinion's acquiescence in relation to the massive use of military might rests, among other things, in the perspective of a short campaign. In addition, hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, cyber attacks, instant information and other technological innovations give a rhythm to events much higher than the human reaction time, exponentially increasing the speed of engagements (UNITED STATES, 2017b, p. 15). Certainly, traditional bureaucracies will not be agile enough to keep up with the dynamics of combat.

All of this leads one to believe that an eventual conflict of greater magnitude in the near future will not admit "a new defeat in the step of Kasserine"⁵. In other words, the first confrontation may be decisive due to its strategic implications. Therefore, it is natural that this set of circumstances contributes to the development of a "*duel at O.K. Corral*"⁶ mentality – a culture oriented towards an ephemeral, ultimate and definitive struggle between the forces of good and evil. In a way, the terminology in use already expresses some of this belief. Referring to the usual attrition battle as "decisive action," for example, can subliminally induce the unwary to privilege their tactical needs at the expense of more relevant political and strategic considerations.

However, there are two major problems embedded in this logic.

First, the obsession with victory in the initial battle can precipitate it. In the period before 1914, for example, the European military was convinced that the first nation to order the mobilization of its armies would have a decisive strategic advantage over its opponents. Thus, the generals, with their mobilization spreadsheets, contributed enormously to the war outbreak, advocating strategic plans that compressed the time margins available to make crucial decisions at the political level (KISSINGER, 2012, p. 177).

5 Defeat imposed in 1943 by Afrika Korps on the United States Army in Tunisia. In the previous year, allied troops landed in North Africa and, until then, the campaign's progress was satisfactory. The victory obtained by Rommel and his experienced soldiers showed that American troops, at the beginning of their participation in the war against Nazi Germany, still lacked better tactical performance.

6 Famous shooting in the US state of Arizona in 1881, involving police officers (notably the three Earp brothers) and a small group of outlaw cowboys. This episode of the "old west" has been improperly portrayed in the popular imagination as the archetype of the ultimate struggle between good and evil.

Second, the enemy may be able to refute a “duel with the Earp brothers” or accept to confront them repeatedly. In 1812, General Kutuzov’s refusal to offer Napoleon a decisive battle was the key to Russian success. In 1941, despite the Red Army’s inability to curb the Wehrmacht’s initial advance, none of the numerous defeats suffered was decisive. The Soviet power to indefinitely prolong a campaign of unimaginable proportions, while Nazi Germany’s military resources inevitably ran out, resulted in Stalin’s victory. In the end, the qualitative superiority of Hitler’s Army mattered little. During the conflict in Vietnam, even though it lost almost all battles, Hanoi was able to sustain its enormous war effort indefinitely. Meanwhile, Washington’s political capital was waning and American national cohesion was being put to the test. Such aspects must be taken into account in the face of a China endowed with apparently infinite human and material resources, in addition to national leaders who, unlike volatile democracies, remain obstinately focused on longer-term political and strategic goals.

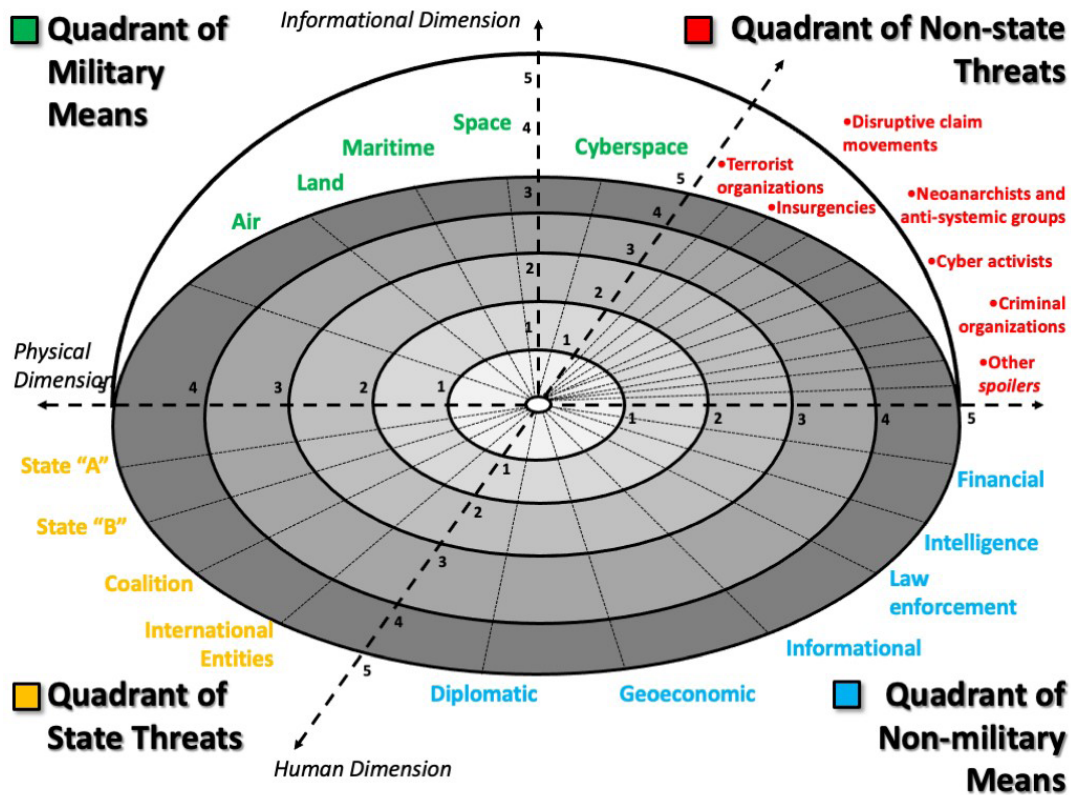
6 “Information Drives Operations”

The *FM 3-0 Operations* manual admits that “[...] in modern conflict, information has become as important as lethal action in determining the outcome of operations” (UNITED STATES, 2017a, p. 2-23). However, it is natural that when prioritizing training for large-scale combat soldiers attach greater importance to kinetic actions. This emphasis, often undue, tends to prevail on the battlefield as well. As Wilson Blythe and Luke Calhoun warn (2019, p. 17), “The days of securing campaign success solely through traditional combat operations are over. Victories on the twenty-first century’s physical battlefields will be fleeting unless tied to an integrated information operations campaign”. “Certainly, armies will continue to use lethal force – often, applying enormous destructive capabilities. However, if they aim to achieve victory, they must do so according to a new set of purposes. It is a redefinition of the focus, transposing it from the “physical kinetic” to the “informational strategy” (VISACRO, 2019b, p. 66).

Nothing should lead us to underestimate the importance of applying conventional military power to obtain decisive results. However, we need to recognize that “the usual tactical actions with a kinetic effect in the physical dimension will only be useful to the extent that they are oriented towards the achievement of a psychological goal that can be widely explored and enhanced by advertising at the political and strategic levels, being part of a broader informational context. Therefore, it is essential to add psychological value to the forceful actions typical of conventional combat. Otherwise, such actions will prove to be counterproductive and, therefore, unnecessary” (VISACRO, 2018, p. 138). “Winning the war before the battle is fought through information operations will become an imperative, and land forces will need to contribute to perception management in the cognitive dimension as a core element of military operations” (UNITED STATES, 2017b, p. 16).

Figure 5 allows to identify graphically how limited the tactical actions of kinetic effect in the physical dimension become, if they are dissociated from the whole spectrum of conflict. Let us take as an example an action that has as its sole objective the degradation of the combat power of an opposing regular force. It would present a linear profile devoid of a deeper spatial perspective, as it would be restricted to the horizontal axis of the quadrant of military means. In other words, without a broader systemic view, any effort, even if essential, tends to become meager.

Figure 5 – Spectrum of the conflict



Source: Adapted from Visacro and Doktorczyk (apud VISACRO, 2019b, p. 65).

Synchronizing combat functions across multiple domains can lead to the destruction of the enemy’s military forces in the battle of attrition. However, victory in war depends on the skillful combination of kinetic and non-kinetic actions in the physical, human and informational dimensions, in order to contribute to the achievement of a tangible political objective.

7 Conclusion

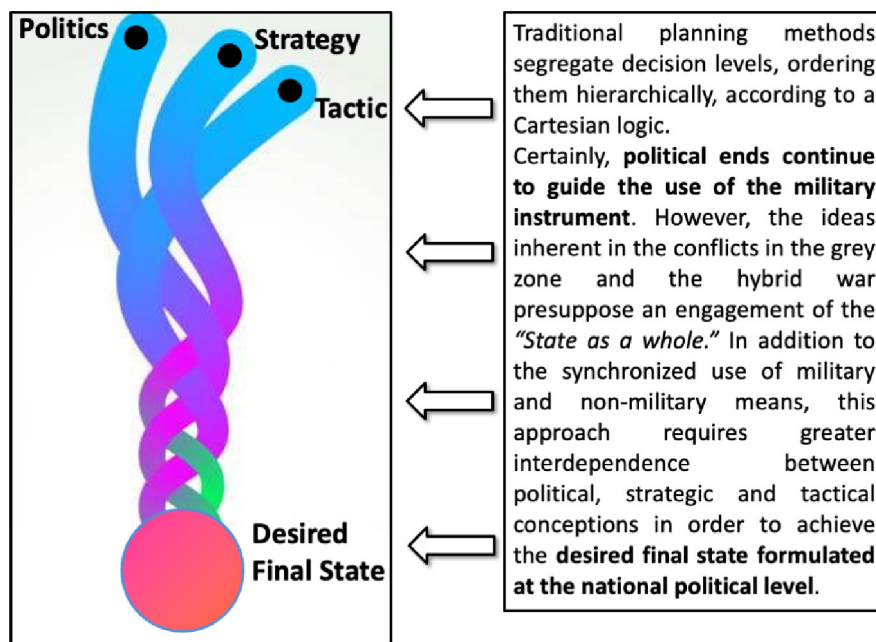
Feasible policy goals should guide strategic planning. As obvious as this statement may seem, history offers countless examples of statesmen who have vainly

committed the nation’s resources, pursuing contradictory or unattainable goals. Also, it is not uncommon for cases in which the strategy employed proved to be incompatible with the political purpose.

The intensification of global competition nowadays occurs at an unprecedented pace, breadth and reach. Certainly, the Gap of Suwalki is not a mere substitute for the Fulda Gap. That is, the complexity inherent to each regional problem, at present, suggests the limited effectiveness of solutions from the last century – including the current international order.

Therefore, it is necessary to be cautious both in the formulation of State policies and in the search for new strategic arrangements. At the same time, the portfolio of alternatives offered by the military instrument should increase flexibility at the national political level – not limit it (compare figures 2 and 6). In opposing the 2003 invasion of Iraq, General Wesley Clark warned of the risks of creating exaggerated expectations about the use of conventional warpower, in the absence of more versatile and less orthodox strategies. Referring to the writer Mark Twain, he stated: “when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem tends to be treated like a nail” (CLARK, 2019, n.p.)

Figure 6 – Integrated political, strategic and tactical design



Source: the author (2020).

Undoubtedly, the US Army must be ready to prevail over its opponents, reaffirming its superiority in conventional large-scale combat. It is also undeniable that this capacity has been progressively contested by powers determined to challenge the *status quo*, in regional and global terms. Therefore, the concern with the worsening of a crisis that could lead to total war is lawful and, therefore, does not allow negligence. However, it cannot eclipse what TRADOC considers the first operational problem:

how will the joint force play its role in a proactive, adaptable and effective way in the fierce competition that remains below the conflict line? (UNITED STATES, 2018, p. VIII).

The “zero phase” (mold) actions will be decisive for the outcome of the crisis, regardless of the proportions that it may acquire over time. Even if the rise in hostilities cannot be contained and culminates in an open confrontation, strategic actions undertaken below the specter of total war will not stop entirely. Likewise, initiatives associated with “earnings consolidation” must permeate all of the Army’s strategic roles, not being limited to the post-conflict (UNITED STATES, 2017a, figure 1-13, p. 1-12). This requires enormous versatility of the military instrument, in addition to the extreme competence and genius of the commanders in the field.

Showing war superiority in multiple domains is fundamental, but it will not be enough to support the complex geopolitical game that lies ahead:

The most urgent requirements today are to view this range of challenges as a coherent and integrated set and develop an overall strategic concept to guide long-term U.S. and partner responses. Specific responses undertaken outside the context of a strategic concept could waste resources and produce counterproductive results. More than developing any specific capability or undertaking any particular action, the United States will be fully positioned for this intense competition below the threshold of [total] war only when it truly organizes itself - its thinking, its whole-of-government coordination, and its regional implementation - for the challenge. (MORRIS et al., 2019, p. 187)

Therefore, the doctrinal formulation process must prevent the emergence of a dangerous conceptual *gap* between the strategic and the tactical, as it has been in the past. After a brief period of blind exaltation of “large-scale combat operations” (LSCO), many analysts already recognize that, although essential, the mere emphasis on the regeneration and expansion of conventional war capabilities will not bring the answers for complex contemporary strategic challenges. The ingenuity, creativity and determination characteristic of the US soldier will certainly lead them to victory in the next battle. However, a heterodox approach to Multiple Domain Operations may be the key to their victory in the next war.

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