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When Tactics and Strategy Collide

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Military Thought and the Essence of War

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When Tactics and Strategy Collide

On October 3, 1993, a task force of 100 U.S. Army Rangers and Delta Force operators was dropped by helicopter into the heart of Mogadishu, Somalia. Their task was to find and capture two lieutenants of Mohamed Farrah Aidid, a Somali warlord. The mission, originally expected to take about one hour, lasted more than 24, with the task force pinned down overnight by thousands of heavily armed Somalis. When the battle was finally over, 18 Americans were dead, more than 70 were injured, and the targets had not been captured.¹

This battle is interesting for its tactical challenges and the numerous instances of bravery among the soldiers involved. However, it is also historically significant because this battle caused President Clinton to change U.S. strategic policy and begin the process to withdraw U.S. forces from Somalia. Why did this tactical event in Somalia have such a profound effect on strategic policy when other tactical events did not? What is the relationship between tactical events and strategic policy and decisions? There have been many examples of tactical events in war, with greater death and destruction than was witnessed in Mogadishu on October 3, 1993, that had no effect on strategic policy. Why did it matter in Somalia?

I want to argue that in certain circumstances, there is a stronger relationship than we might expect between tactical events and strategic policy. The relationship can be described in terms of the urgency of the national interests involved, costs of the ways and means to achieve those interests, and the mix of strategic, operational, and tactical tasks necessary to implement strategic policy. In Somalia, in October 1993, the circumstances were right for a tactical event to directly influence our strategic policy.

¹ Bowden, Mark. *Blackhawk Down*. Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1999, p. 3

Somalia had been developing into a humanitarian crisis for more than a year before U.S. intervention. Armed clansmen had taken over food production and distribution, and the internal government had ceased to function. Nearly one million Somalis were forced into exile in neighboring countries and an additional one million flocked to urban centers where NGOs such as the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent Society attempted in vain to stabilize the situation and provide food and other humanitarian assistance.² The UN established a 50-man mission (UNOSOM) in Somalia to handle food distribution but it could not overcome the vast food distribution problems imposed by the warring factions. During the summer months of 1992, international pressure from NGOs, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the League of Arab States as well as the U.N. secretary-general was growing for the Western powers and the Bush administration to do something.³

At that same time, Congress began to develop an interest and the media increased their reporting of events in Somalia. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* began reporting on the suffering and death of Somalis. Television network pictures of starving children caught the public's attention. Pundits began to describe the "CNN factor," observing that it wasn't until the nightly news reporters began their vivid portrayal of events in Somalia that the American people seemed to take notice and demand humanitarian action.⁴

President Bush soon authorized airlift support, but by mid-November, massive distribution problems on the ground still remained. The clans were hoarding the

² Lofland, Valerie J., "Somalia: U.S. Intervention and Operation Restore Hope," Air War College, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/pmi/somalia1.pdf>. (25 October 2003)

³ Lofland, p.56

⁴ Lofland, p.56

humanitarian supplies and there was extensive looting once supplies left the ports. The clans were using food and humanitarian supplies as weapons. As a result, there was widespread violence and the famine continued.⁵

In the fall of 1992, the U.S. proposed to the U.N. a large-scale relief effort to be led by the U.S. military. The U.N. Security Council approved the United States' proposal, and U.S. defense officials named the effort Operation Restore Hope (authorized under U.N. Security Council Resolution 794). The Council approved the resolution on 3 December and the first U.S. Marines landed on Mogadishu beaches on 9 December.⁶ The limited objectives announced for the operation were to "open supply routes, get food moving, and prepare the way for a UN peacekeeping force." Clearly, we had a mission in 1992 that the American people strongly supported, and that was to keep a million people or more from starving to death.⁷

By April of 1993, by most accounts, Operation Restore Hope was a success. Fighting in the capital city of Mogadishu was reduced. Food deliveries were made in the country-side and starvation was greatly reduced. American troop strength peaked at 25,600. Financial and human costs were coming in high, however. Eight Americans had been killed during the five months of Operation Restore Hope. According to the Pentagon, the financial cost of its operations in Somalia through 1993 was about \$760 million. Estimates for the subsequent U.N. operation, in which the United States participated and partially funded, were over a billion and a half dollars.⁸

⁵ Lofland, p.58

⁶ Lofland, p.61

⁷ Center for Defense Information, "The U.S. and U.N. in Somalia," Show Transcript, December 12, 1993 www.cdi.org/adm/713/ (24 October 2003)

⁸ Center for Defense Information

By the summer of 1993, the U.S. presence was reduced to about 4,500 troops who were providing logistics support to United Nations personnel, plus a separate Quick Reaction Force that remained under U.S. command. Army Rangers, also under U.S. command, were engaged in trying to hunt down the warlord Aideed. The mission to hunt and capture warlords was adopted as the result of the United Nations Security Council resolutions that expanded the mission from one of humanitarian intervention to stop the famine to a mission that included peacekeeping, nation-building and capture of warlords.⁹ Then in October, the Rangers staged the fateful mission that would change U.S. national strategy in Somalia and put in motion the process that would withdraw all US forces by the spring of 1994.

To understand how this tactical event could so significantly affect strategic policy, we need to begin with a description of the urgency of the national interests involved. In the summer of 1993, there was widespread support throughout the U.S. and in Congress for some sort of action to address the humanitarian tragedy. However, this support was clearly a *humanitarian* call to arms; no one seriously argued that there were critical national interests in Somalia. Our “national interest” in Somalia was a generalized moral imperative to help starving children that was far removed from a critical national interest such as national survival. From this we can see that the national interests that drive our national strategy can have varying degrees of importance or urgency; some are more critical than others. For my discussion, I will use a framework that describes national interests in terms of four levels of urgency (in the real world there certainly would be more).

⁹ Center for Defense Information

Urgency of National Interests

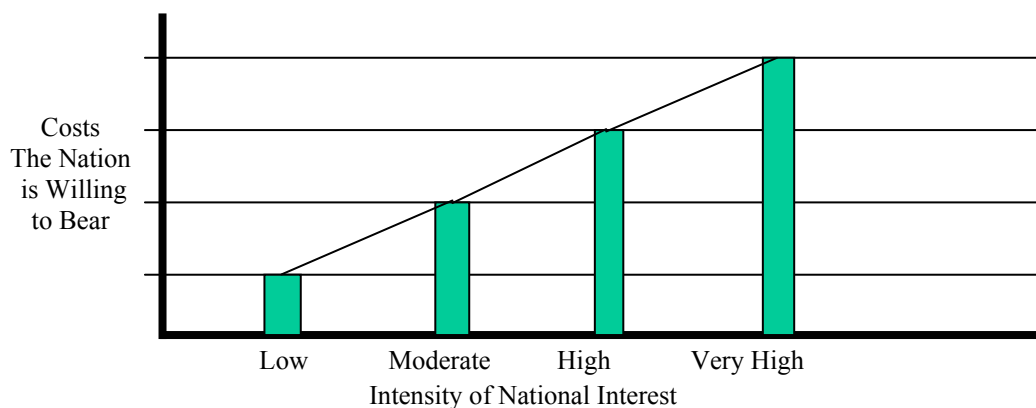
Very High: This national interest is for the very survival of the nation; all elements of national power are mobilized.

High: This national interest is critical, but something less than survival. It may involve some degree of national self defense, defense of certain close allies, defense of strategic resources, etc.

Moderate: This national interest is important, but probably does not involve direct threats to the nation. It may involve defense of allies, defense of important but not critical resources, etc.

Low: These national interests do not involve threats to the nation or to allies. This may involve humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, low intensity conflicts between other nations, etc.

The cost the nation is willing to bear to achieve these national interests corresponds to the urgency of the national interest. In most cases, the more urgent the national interest, the greater the cost the nation will be willing to pay to achieve that interest. In this context, the “costs” are all the tasks that must occur, and resources that must be spent, to achieve the national interest. The “costs” to achieve a national interest include people, deaths, injuries, time, money, equipment, resources, diplomacy, economic aid, political prestige, etc. We can depict this concept graphically:

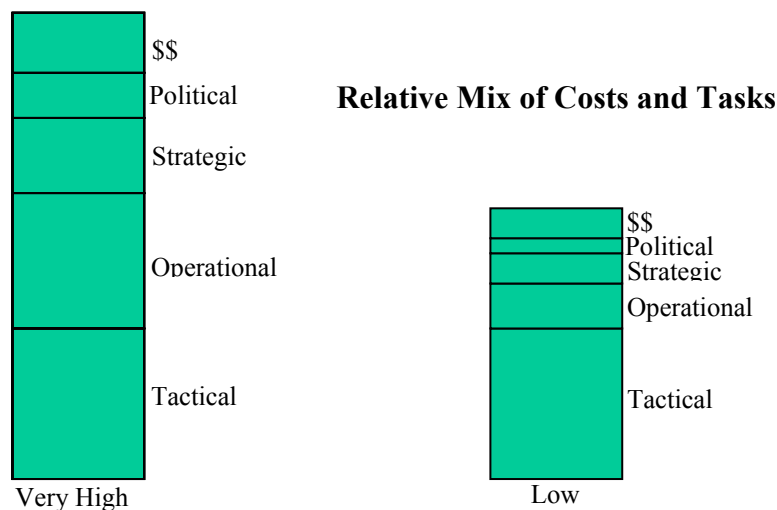


In this framework, each of the vertical bars represents the theoretical sum of all the tasks and resources that are necessary to achieve that national interest. When the national interest is more urgent, the cost to achieve it will be greater and more complex. Very high urgency national interests, such as winning WWII, will have enormous complexity and very high costs (both in tasks and resources). The nation will be willing to accept these higher costs, however, because of the greater urgency of the national interest. Low urgency national interests will have relatively less complexity and relatively lower costs. It is also valuable to think of these costs as a mix of strategic, operational, and tactical tasks and resources necessary to achieve the national interest. For an operation like WWII, there will great numbers of tasks at the tactical level, but also huge requirements at the operational and strategic level to mobilize the country, coordinate coalitions, and operate in multiple theaters around the world, etc. Low urgency national interests will require fewer strategic and operational costs, but usually more costs (tasks and resources) at the tactical level.

Operation Restore Hope in Somalia was a national interest with low urgency. The nation saw the mission as filling an important humanitarian need, but not one that justified a cost on the scale of defending national survival. Therefore, the tasks the nation was willing to undertake, and the resources it was willing to spend, were significantly less than required for national interests of high or very high urgency. In cases like Somalia, there is also a greater ratio of tactical costs relative to both strategic and operational costs. At the strategic and operational levels, the intervention in Somalia was relatively low cost: it was not politically controversial, U.N. support was easily obtained, the amount of troops involved was relatively small (25,000 compared to 200,000 in Iraq

and over 12 million in WWII), the financial resources were relatively low (\$1.5 billion compared to an estimated \$100 billion in Iraq) and strategic and operational planning were not overly complicated.

At the tactical level, however, Somalia required a great number tasks and resources to organize operations on the ground, coordinate food movements, provide security, and logistically support U.S. forces. The tactical cost set became even more complex when the hunting of warlords was added to the mission, although this caused very little change in the strategic and operational requirements. Somalia demonstrates that in pursuing low urgency national interests, tactical costs will often constitute a greater proportion of the total cost than the strategic and operational costs.



The combination of a low cost threshold that the nation is willing to pay for a low urgency national interest, coupled with the higher proportion of tactical level tasks and resources required to achieve a low urgency national interest, makes it possible for an individual tactical event to cause the total cost to exceed the acceptable cost threshold for

that national interest. When this happens, the costs to pursue that national interest are greater than the nation is willing to pay, and the citizens, Congress, the media, etc. begin to exert pressure on national leaders to change or abandon that national interest.

This is what happened in Somalia. The costs of that single tactical event, in particular the 18 dead and over 70 wounded, were sufficient to raise the costs of pursuing the humanitarian mission above what the nation was willing to pay. The costs incurred during this single tactical event were sufficient to profoundly change national policy.

Although it is possible for tactical events to directly affect high urgency national interests, it is much less likely that they will. In the case of high urgency and very high urgency national interests, the acceptable cost threshold is much higher and the proportion of tactical level costs relative to all costs is much lower. Individual tactical events will have less impact on the total cost, and thus are less likely, in and of themselves, to cause major changes in strategic policy.

For this reason, one must be very careful not to assume that because a tactical event caused a change in strategic policy in pursuit of one national interest, that a similar event will cause a change in policy in pursuit of other national interests. Many people have interpreted the events in Somalia as demonstrating that the U.S. is “casualty-averse,” i.e., at the first taste of casualties the U.S. will abandon its policy. However, my discussion here suggests that tactical events, such as the taking of casualties, must be evaluated in the context of the national interest being pursued before we can determine whether the event is likely to cause a change in strategic policy.

Carl von Clausewitz argued that, “Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices

to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”¹⁰ In Somalia, we saw a confirmation of this principle. The costs of the tactical event on October 3, in terms of lives lost, injuries sustained, political embarrassment, etc. pushed the total cost higher than the cost threshold that was acceptable to the nation for the degree of urgency of that national interest. It is in this way that tactical events can directly affect national strategic policy.

¹⁰ Howard, Michael and Peter Paret. eds. *Carl von Clausewitz, On War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). p.92

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