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Military Power + Military Ethics = Information Operations

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Abstract:

Traditionally, nation states, and for that matter non-state actors as well, have used military power as the primary means of furthering their political interests. I argue that the application of military power must be in harmony with one's information narrative. If military and paramilitary personnel violate codes of behavior, then the information message is diminished. If I am correct then perhaps we should reframe and teach military ethics as part of the information campaign.

Key words: states, military power, ethics, politics, leaders.

1. Discussion

Traditionally speaking military power has been defined as the armed forces, both military and paramilitary, of a state. And, throughout history military power has been the primary political instrument nations have used to control and dominate each other.¹ Armed force can be defined as the application of military power to achieve a state's political objectives. This narrow definition of military power, however, is quite outdated. Today insurgent organizations, terrorist groups, and to a lesser degree international organized criminal cartels also have some degree of military power. Clausewitz states that war, or armed conflict, is an act of force by which a state compels an enemy to do its will.² He then goes on to say “that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means.”³ Insurgents, terrorist groups, and organized crime cartels do this as well. The Madrid subway bombing in March 2004 just days before the Spanish elections and the March 2010 suicide bombings by Chechen separatists in Moscow are but two examples. Thomas Schelling, Alexander George, and Robert Pape contend that the mere threat of the use of armed force can coerce an adversary to alter its behavior. Yet, such threats do not satisfactorily apply in today's international environment.⁴

M.V. Frunze, the foremost Soviet military theorist and an admirer of Clausewitz, believed that Clausewitz missed the mark. Frunze believed that the relationship of politics to war (military power) has three aspects. First the employment of military power is not only a continuation of politics, but is dependent upon politics as well. Second, he held that the determining role of politics and that everything pertaining to waging war (employing

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military force) is subordinate to political leadership. Finally, he noted there is an inverse dependence of politics upon war.⁵

This point is easily illustrated with regard to the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts. Frequently US military leaders have stated that if the politicians had let them fight the Korean Conflict the way it should have been fought there would not be a divided Korea today. Other American military leaders have argued that had the politicians allowed the military to fight with ‘their gloves off’ in Vietnam, the US would have won the war. US Air Force officers in particular contend that had the Air Force been allowed to conduct *Operation Linebacker* in 1965 as opposed to *Rolling Thunder*, the Air Force would have single handedly won the war. Such statements not only indicate that military leaders fail to understand that military power is but one instrument of national power.

As just noted military power is not the only instrument of power available to further a government’s foreign policy objectives. Co-equal to military power is diplomatic, informational, and economic power. Even non-traditional actors, such as those mentioned previously, possess and use these powers to further their political objectives. The degree to which these powers vary among the actors is a factor of many variables. Today an argument could be made to include cyber power as a separate category of power rather than to continue housing it under the information domain. The reality is that all these powers interact with each other and if they are not in harmony, problems will arise usually resulting in the failure to achieve the political objectives being sought.

Political leaders of all the previously mentioned entities establish “foreign” policy objectives for dealing with other nation states, organizations, groups, etc. They use their diplomatic, informational, military, and economic powers (DIME), no matter how strong or weak, as conduits for exercising their policies. These four conduits, or five if you consider cyber power as a separate category of power, are not used in a vacuum. They are always used together in some way, shape, or form. All too frequently, however, the leaders of these different “power agencies” fail to remember that they are only one entity in a nation’s overall power structure. When this happens the ability of a nation to successfully pursue its political policy is greatly diminished.

Take for example the reconstruction period after the invasion of Iraq, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. The inability of Presidential Envoy to Iraq, Paul Bremer the diplomatic leader, and Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the military leader, is well known. Their combined failure, because of personal issues, to carry out the political objectives of Washington during this post-invasion period was a major factor in the failure of US foreign policy in that country. The repercussions of that failure continue to reverberate today.

James Graham states that “Throughout history military power has been paramount and economic power a luxury.” This has slowly changed to the point that the two roles have been reversed.⁶ This may be true, but I want to suggest that we consider all aspects of the Information instrument of power and how all the other political instruments either enhance or weaken a nation’s application of it. I content that if the other instruments of power are not in harmony with the exercise of information power, the effects on policy objectives can be quite destructive. Ethics, particularly military ethics, I argue, can be a critical information power factor as a nation, insurgent organization, or terrorist group works to further its political objectives.

Military ethics is much more than simply adhering to the rules and customs of armed conflict. For officers and NCOs it extends to taking care of their people as well as

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their families. Military ethics is also an informational tool soldiers can use to alter the behavior of adversaries. Let me now explain each of these three in greater detail.

The misconduct of American soldiers with the mission of guarding prisoners at the Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq in 2004 had far reaching adverse effects on US operations in Iraq. Unfortunately, those effects did not end there. Peoples around the world were shocked! Many Americans asked how US soldiers could commit such heinous acts. Senior leaders had failed to properly exercise their supervisory responsibilities. Although it may be an example at the more extreme end of the spectrum, it does illustrate how lack of military ethics, especially when it occurs at many levels simultaneously, can and does damage a nation's information power. The adverse effects of this incident to American foreign policy objectives in Iraq and elsewhere are incalculable. Abu Ghraib continues to be used by Islamist groups in their information campaigns against US interests.

Ethical misconduct can also affect the information campaign of terrorist groups as well. Al-Qaeda used to film and then have televised the beheadings of their enemies. They were seen all around the world and were initially thought to be quite beneficial to that organization's policy objectives. That is until the beheading execution of the American journalist Daniel Pearl. What happened? By the time of this incident the sensitivities of Muslims around the world had been breached and the resulting backlash had a tremendous impact on al-Qaeda's operations and recruitment. In the end it was an information campaign gone bad.

In his book *Divining Victory Airpower in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War* William Arkin discusses the information power of competing adversaries. He indicates that the Israelis destroyed significant parts of Lebanon's infrastructure.⁷ Although most of the targets were legitimate under the rules and customs of war, the destruction of some violated the principles of military ethics. Hezbollah was quick to point such incidents out to international media. As a result Israel's information power was eclipsed by that of Hezbollah.

Today the United States is using unmanned aircraft to liquidate terrorist leaders, primarily in Pakistan. These attacks are conducted by pilots operating from remote locations. Sometimes the pilots are in theater but frequently they are at air bases in the continental United States. The cross-border attacks are not coordinated with the host government. All too often innocent men, women, and children are killed as a result of these attacks and are referred to as 'collateral damage'.^{8,9} Military necessity and collateral damage are over used terms used to cover failures of ethical behavior. For a time the government of Pakistan closed down the only land-based resupply route for US and NATO personnel in Afghanistan to protest these attacks.

Soldiers can also use the principles of military ethics to change the behavior of their adversaries. At the 2nd Annual EURO-ISME Conference in Shrivenham, UK French General Benoit Royal told the story of how a French NCO at a checkpoint on one end of a bridge affected the behavior of a rebel commander stationed at the rebel checkpoint at the other end of the same bridge. The issue was a young female family member was detained by the rebels while the rest of her family was allowed to cross the bridge. The French NCO knew he had to do something to convince the rebels to release the young girl. He did this by sending a letter to the commander of the rebel checkpoint reminding him of the ethical responsibilities of professional soldiers.¹⁰

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Consideration

Without boring the reader with endless examples, I trust that I have made my point, specifically that what soldiers do is related to a nation's information power.¹¹ When military ethical standards have been violated it can have a negative effect on a nation's information campaign/power. The adverse, meaning positive effect is obviously true. We must also realize that all nation states as well as other organizations previously mentioned teach their combatants some form of ethics. These ethics, I argue, are culturally, religiously, and politically determined. Even so, the international community directly or indirectly is always an audience when it comes to information operations.

If the reader accepts my argument then perhaps we ought to consider framing the notion of military ethics quite differently. My suggestion is to teach ethics as an information campaign. Walzer notes that all soldiers believe that their cause is right¹² and that they are fighting in accordance with the ethical principles established by their cultural heritage.

My question is: If we teach the principles of just war and military ethics as an element of information operations, would we then reframe the principles we want to convey in a much more understandable format? If my argument is sound then we can ask soldiers to consider their actions from a different perspective such as: 'if someone was to do (such and such) to your community back home how would you feel?' If your answer is that it would tick you off, then maybe you ought to select a different course of action. I am confident that training scenarios can be developed and soldiers trained to consider the implications of their actions on their own communities. I am convinced that even in highly charged situations soldiers would pause long enough to consider the consequences of their actions on a much larger audience such as 'what would my mom think?'

I am convinced that we can reduce the incidence of violations of ethical behavior by taking this approach. What do you think?

¹ VanHise, James. "Military Power" located at <http://www.fragmentsweb.org/fourts/milpowtx.html> and downloaded on 1 August 2012.

² Clausewitz, Carl von (1984). *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press. p. 75.

³ *ibid.* p 87.

⁴ Wijk, Rob de (2001). "The Limits of Military Power" located at <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/chapters/0262621797chapm1.pdf> and downloaded on 16 August 2012.

⁵ Gareev, Col. Gen. Makhmut Akhmetovich (1988). *M.V. Frunze, Military Theorist*. Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, inc. p.86.

⁶ Graham, James (no date). "Military Power vs Economic Power in History". Located at <http://www.historyorb.com/world/power.php> and downloaded on 11 August 2012.

⁷ Arkin, William M. (2006). *Divining Victory Airpower in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War*. Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press.

⁸ See Sluka, Jeffrey A. "Death from Above UAVs and Losing Hearts and Minds" in *Military Review*, vol. XCI, No. 3, pp. 70-76.

⁹ For an interesting legal discussion see O'Connell, Mary Ellen. "When are drone killings illegal?" Located at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/15/opinion/oconnell-targeted-killing/index.html> and downloaded on 16 August 2012.

¹⁰ This is a very interesting story and I am happy to send it to anyone who requests a copy of the story (2 pages). I think it could be used as a case study.

¹¹ See Sidgwick, Henry (2005, originally published in 1891) *The Elements of Politics*. New York: Cosimo Classics. p. 256.

¹² Walzer, Michael (2000). *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. New York: Basic Books. p. 127.