

# Winning Indefinite Conflicts: Achieving Strategic Success against Ideologically Motivated Violent Non-State Actors<sup>1</sup>

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In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and many other countries around the globe, violent non-state actors, motivated by religious, political, and ethnic ideas, have been remarkably resilient, perseverant, and influential. With broad, ambiguous strategic objectives, and an indefinite, changing path to strategic success, the United States has struggled to define, much less achieve, strategic success. Traditional military victory in such conflicts is not sufficient against an ideology-based movement. Rather, the military must support a holistic strategy that defeats the ideology with a better idea. This article, based on a cooperative study by the U.S. and Israeli militaries, examines this challenge and offers ideas and recommendations on how the United States might address it. Strategic success against such actors requires a long-term, comprehensive, and indirect approach with the United States serving as a patron to encourage and support regional partners, who in turn directly enable local partners to holistically address their local populations' basic needs in terms of security, legitimate governance, and sustainable services. The better idea that will enable strategic success in countering or defeating an ideology-driven violent non-state actor (VNSA) must be formed and legitimized by tangible actions and measured by concrete results at the local level.



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## Elusive Success

If, as President Obama asserted in July 6, 2015, ideologies are defeated not by guns, but by better ideas (White House 2015), then how should the U.S. military be used to help achieve strategic success in the growing number of protracted, irregular conflicts with ideologically motivated VNSAs? In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and many more countries around the globe, VNSAs,

motivated by religious, political, ethnic, and other status-quo-challenging ideas, have been remarkably resilient, perseverant, and influential. By surviving and rapidly recovering from punishing attacks by the United States and its partners—while continuing to carry out violent agendas against local, regional, and even global adversaries—these VNSAs can credibly claim that they are succeeding strategically. With broad, ambiguous long-term strategic objectives, and an open-ended, evolving path to strategic success, the United States has generally conducted limited military operations intended to disrupt and degrade such VNSAs, followed by the hopeful but indefinite objective of ultimately defeating them. In view of the VNSAs' resilience, persistence, and ideological basis for conflict, the path to strategic success for the United States has remained elusive.

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### Accelerating Treadmill

U.S. intelligence capabilities are ill suited for irregular conflicts with VNSAs, which tend to take place in complex, uncertain foreign operational environments. These environments are dynamic ecosystems containing a multitude of actors, each with unique tribal, religious, national, and ethnic identities that produce complex relationships based on myriad factors, all of which combine to make it impossible to predict system-wide effects of an action against any part of the system. In such unfamiliar environments, threat actors are conducting protracted, ideological conflicts,

blending into populations, urban areas, and complex terrain. The U.S. military inevitably enters conflicts with a lack of local knowledge, language abilities, and cultural experience. Planners struggle to accurately understand and frame the operational problem, leading to flawed campaign design and planning.

The U.S. military generally lacks the essential support, both among the local population in a conflict zone and at home, to sustain its direct involvement in a protracted conflict with VNSAs. Local populations will naturally distrust the motives and long-term commitment of external forces, especially extra-regional forces with no tie to the local land or its people. As a foreign force in such conflicts, the U.S. military will naturally struggle to gain and maintain the local legitimacy required for successful direct involvement in a protracted campaign. Likewise, the sustained support of the U.S. public for direct involvement in such conflicts is unlikely unless political leaders can communicate a clear and

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compelling argument for U.S. interests. The protracted nature of conflicts with VNSAs, the huge cost of military operations, and the public's reluctance to accept casualties, make the substantial and long-term commitment of ground combat forces problematic for the United States.

In the face of complex and uncertain conflicts, U.S. leaders are challenged to describe specific long-term strategic objectives that align with those of U.S. partners. As a result, leaders initially provide broad, ambiguous objectives that may be insufficient to enable national or coalition unity of effort. Without specific strategic objectives, it is unclear whether U.S. operations are making progress toward strategic success.

Besides ambiguous strategic objectives, military operations against VNSAs generally suffer from a lack of effective strategic and operational orchestration. As a result, a series of tactically or operationally successful operations may not be integrated with interagency or other partners' lines of effort, and they may not contribute to strategic success. Without clear strategic objectives that find common ground with partners' various and competing objectives, U.S. operational planning will be unable to establish the integrating framework necessary to unify effort among all contributing actors.

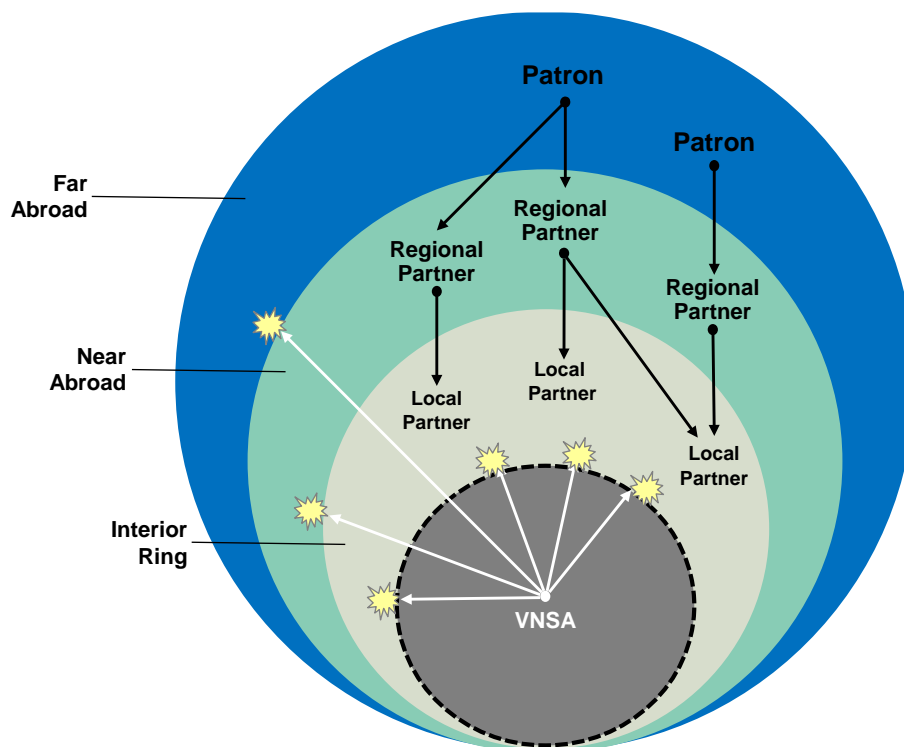
In 2005, while the United States was struggling to design and execute successful campaigns against VNSAs in Iraq and Afghanistan, Douglas Feith, then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, warned that if the nation's efforts were limited to "protecting the homeland and attacking and disrupting terrorist networks, you're on a treadmill that is likely to get faster and faster..." (Schmitt and Shanker 2005). Twelve years later, the United States is arguably still on the accelerating treadmill, asking what strategic success looks like against such adversaries, what its role should be, and how its military should be used.

## **Comprehensive and Indirect Approach**

Fundamentally, political leaders should not conflate military success with strategic success, particularly in complex conflicts with VNSAs. Although military and police operations play a critical security and stability role in a comprehensive approach, their contributions cannot be strategically decisive. Addressing the foundations of a conflict with VNSAs requires a tailored, integrated, strategic approach that comprehensively applies all elements of national and coalition partner power.

To enable a sustainable, long-term campaign that gains and maintains public support, the U.S. military must employ an indirect approach. This approach requires a sustainable patron-regional partner-local partner relationship that will enable a long-term campaign to succeed (Figure 1). To enable such a partnership, trust and cooperation based on an alignment of strategic objectives regarding the VNSA adversary must be sustained. The key ideas behind the indirect approach result from two complementary concepts: a top-down go-local concept and a bottom-up grassroots concept. As an external patron, the

United States goes local by encouraging and supporting regional partner states with a direct stake in the conflict and historical ties to the vulnerable territory and its local populations, who, in turn, encourage and enable local actors to be committed partners that holistically address their populations' needs. This means that vetted local partners—who are intrinsically committed to and inherently knowledgeable of the local population's needs—must be identified and enabled with sustainable support during a protracted conflict. In turn, the empowered local actors use a bottom-up grassroots approach to establish local security, legitimate governance, economic opportunity, and sustainable services, tailored to their constituent populations.



Notes: ISIS is framing a strategy to expand across three geographic rings referred to as interior, near abroad, and far abroad. Patrons in the far abroad ring enable local partners' success through regional partners in the near abroad ring. Regional partners enable sustained support to local partners in the interior ring. Local partners contain the VNSA, establish local security, oversee legitimate governance, and spur economic development.

**Figure I. Indirect Approach Model to Enable Regional and Local Partners**

The primary conditions for strategic and operational success are security, legitimacy, and sustainability. Trained by regional partners, and equipped, supported, and coordinated by external patrons, local police and militia forces establish and maintain security. Likewise, local leaders are best suited to establish legitimate governance of local population groups. Local leaders have the obvious and essential advantage of intrinsically understanding the

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governance and other basic needs—security, economic, social, services—of their constituents. If legitimacy is a result of their success in addressing the population’s needs, then local leaders have the best opportunity to gain and maintain the population’s legitimacy and support. Local leaders are directly enabled by regional partners, who leverage their historical relationships with the local populations to gain trust and legitimate influence, while external patrons with international legitimacy and influence indirectly support them through their regional partners. Finally and critically, a campaign is sustainable when each actor (local, regional, and external), in consideration of its interests and likely long-term levels of public and political support, commits time, manpower, and resources to achieve its objectives.

### **Comprehensive Containment and a Better Idea**

Harleen Gambhir summarized ISIS’s strategy, writing that “ISIS intends to expand its Caliphate and eventually incite a global apocalyptic war. In order to do so, ISIS is framing a strategy to remain and expand across three geographic rings: the Interior Ring, the Near Abroad, and the Far Abroad” (Gambhir 2015, 9). How would a comprehensive and indirect approach be applied to contain such a threat?

Containment operations include complementary military and civilian lines of effort to build and manage a coalition, to halt VNSA territorial expansion, to prevent VNSA recruits from entering a regional partner’s territory, to support local governance and economic opportunity, and to deny VNSA access to weapons, funds, and resources. A containment operation is a defensive approach unlikely to be decisive on its own, but it could provide a stable basis for follow-on offensive operations. Thus, containment should be considered as an intermediate objective in a broader campaign designed to ultimately succeed operationally against a VNSA. Such an operation might be employed early in a campaign to prevent expansion and to stabilize and protect vulnerable regional and local partners.

While territorially containing a threat is essential, the idea must be extended beyond the physical to comprehensively contain the influence of VNSAs that embody and promote violent ideologies. As James Dorsey observed, “[c]ontainment addresses the immediate problem but ignores factors that fuel radicalization far from the warring state’s borders and make jihadism attractive to the disaffected across the globe” (Dorsey 2015). Addressing the spread of violent ideas and associated violent acts requires a different approach. This challenge returns us to President Obama’s statement, which begs the practical question of how can a better idea be applied to defeat a violent, ideologically-motivated VNSA, or more specifically, to attain the key conditions of security, legitimacy, and sustainability?

Better ideas are more than information operations or persuasive philosophies; better ideas require a fusion of compelling messages and congruent actions. To counter or defeat an ideology-driven VNSA, better ideas must be formed and

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legitimized by tangible actions and measured by concrete results. These ideas and actions must address the fundamental issues that produced and supported the VNSA, and they must be tailored to achieve the key conditions of security, legitimacy, and sustainability for each relevant local population. Only then, will the United States and its regional and local partners demonstrate the idea's credibility, the integrity of which can then be used to influence other relevant populations and to proliferate the idea. As the idea is successfully implemented, using the indirect approach described earlier, it could then be spread incrementally via a cellular approach that first establishes an outer defensive containment ring of local security forces that consolidates their gains by establishing legitimate governance and sustainable services. As the containment ring succeeds, the idea and supporting actions could be extended to contract the VNSA territory and counter the credibility of its ideology, ultimately to achieve the necessary security, legitimacy, and sustainability conditions.

### **Implications for the U.S. Military**

While the U.S. military needs to be able to fight and win major wars, it also needs the ready capabilities and capacity to sustain and eventually achieve strategic success in long-term campaigns against VNSAs.

To improve its ability to achieve strategic success in such conflicts, the military first needs improved intelligence capabilities to better understand local and regional populations, to assess root-cause issues, and to enable effective campaign design, planning, execution, and assessment. The U.S. military should consider developing more tailorable command and control capabilities to better enable a unified planning and execution effort with U.S. Government agencies, and across a broad coalition of patron states, regional partners, and myriad local partners.

To sustain its support to partners, the U.S. military requires sufficient regionally focused personnel with language and cultural training to rotate forces and sustain trusting relationships for the duration of a long-term campaign. Given the specialized nature of U.S. enabling operations, the military needs special operations forces and other high-demand forces that can directly engage with partners. They must have the language skills and cultural knowledge to adequately understand the situation, and to gain and maintain influence. While special operations forces are best suited for these roles, many of the traditional intelligence, communications, joint fires, and logistics support functions reside in the conventional forces. Likewise, in view of persistent, region-wide conflicts, the military requires the capability to rapidly and effectively organize, train, and deploy conventional forces to expand its special operations forces' capabilities and capacity without breaking the conventional force.

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