

A Rant about Poorly Written “Strategies”

Students of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME)¹ curricula learn that a good working definition of strategy is *the way that means are employed to achieve desired ends, while considering risk*.² The **ends** describe what is to be achieved and provide a baseline for determining if the strategy is on track and is ultimately successful. The **ways** describe how resources will be employed, and how activities will be ordered and synchronized. The **means** are the resources to be employed. **Risk** provides an opportunity to examine what happens if the **ends** can't be achieved, or the **means** aren't available, or the **ways** aren't effective, etc.

Ends, ways, means and risk – it seems pretty simple; you would think that writers of strategy would be able to follow this construct. You would be wrong.

¹ JPME is not just for military officers; it is open to government officials as well, and many of them, from Congressional staffers to members of the National Security Council (NSC) Staff have taken JPME courses.

² The Joint definition of “strategy”, taken from *The DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, is “A prudent idea or set of ideas <ways> for employing the instruments of national power <means> in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives <ends>”. The Naval War College (NWC) likes to add “while considering risk”, which seems eminently practical to me.

Take, for example, the recently released *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*.³ After some scene-setting introductory material, it starts promisingly enough, by stating:

“The United States is committed to an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.”

That’s a fairly high-level statement of a desired end state, but at least it’s an end state. That is immediately followed by:

“To realize that future, the United States will strengthen our own role while reinforcing the region itself.”

Again, a very high-level statement, even less well-defined than the statement of “ends”, but it implies a way of accomplishing the stated ends. That statement is followed by:

“The essential feature of this approach is that it cannot be accomplished alone: changing strategic circumstances and historic challenges require unprecedented cooperation with those who share in this vision.”

Here we are drifting even farther from the concrete, but being in a forgiving mood, one can see that it implies that the United States will rely on its alliances – certainly a type of “means” – to accomplish its strategic goals.

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-indo-pacific-strategy-of-the-united-states/>

Having given us what appears to be an executive-level preview of a strategy - *we will achieve a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific region by strengthening our own role and calling upon and working through our allies* - the document then spends a paragraph praising said allies, before launching into a more detailed description of the exact objectives <ends> to be achieved:

“The United States will pursue five objectives in the Indo-Pacific—each in concert with our allies and partners, as well as with regional institutions. We will:

- ADVANCE A FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC
- BUILD CONNECTIONS WITHIN AND BEYOND THE REGION
- DRIVE REGIONAL PROSPERITY
- BOLSTER INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY
- BUILD REGIONAL RESILIENCE TO TRANS-NATIONAL THREATS”

And here the “strategy” goes irretrievably off the rails...

Note that the "objectives" all begin with verbs: the U.S. is going to “advance”, “build”, “drive”, “bolster”, and “build”. According to this document, what the U.S. will achieve, if the strategy is successful, is *doing* something. Is it really the U.S "objective" to *DO* something, rather than to *ACHIEVE* something? Apparently.

The authors try and overcome this shortcoming by providing a sidebar entitled "INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY ELEMENTS," with sections for "ends", "ways" and "means." However, you will notice that again the "ends" section begins with - you guessed it – a verb!

It is a shame to pick on this particular document, the *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. After all, most government-produced “strategies” suffer similar problems, and as a policy document it serves as a useful statement of Administration intent – it’s just not a strategy. Policy makers do this because they don’t want to be held to the promise of achieving specific outcomes, especially by their political opponents. That’s understandable – just don’t call it a strategy, because by definition, it is not one!

To make it a strategy document, the following recommendations are provided:⁴

- Re-state the Objectives as true, measurable objectives.
- Eliminate pages 8-14.
- Re-work the Lines of Effort (LOE) section to link LOEs to specific Objectives, and highlight the *way* that *means* will be employed within each LOE.
- Add a discussion of risk. For example, what happens if the strategy fails and one or more of the desired end states are not achieved? How serious a blow would it be to national

⁴ The other solution, of course, is to simply retitle the document (“U.S. Policy for the Indo-Pacific Region”) and eliminate the embarrassing ends/ways/means sidebar.

interests if certain end states are not achieved? Is there a hierarchy to the desired end states, where maybe some are existential but others are far less consequential?

Certainly, statements of U.S. policy are valuable, and obviously important – but so, too, are strategies. Strategies can be quantified, measured, tracked, adjusted. What we have in this document is a statement of U.S. policy as it relates to the Indo-Pacific region; what we continue to lack is a strategy that begins by spelling out, in quantifiable detail, what we hope to achieve in the region.