

## BRINGING A METHOD TO THE STRATEGY MADNESS

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COMMENTARY

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Almost 10 years ago I penned a [strategy article](#) inspiring *ad hominem* attacks, the suggestion by former colleagues that I had written something akin to [The Anarchist Cookbook](#), and otherwise causing “[profound disappointment](#)” and “[alarm](#)” in the defense community. My target at the time was the now classic formula for strategy as the sum of ends, ways, and means. I argued this tended to transform strategic thinking into a means-based (resource-based) planning exercise. My answer to this problem was to define strategy as a “theory of success,” in the hopes of

drawing strategists' attention to the job of causing success rather than allocating resources. This phrasing was not exactly unique, though it was certainly different from how most were defining strategy at the time. While I think we are better off now with more strategists conceptualizing strategy as theory, I have also been told the phrasing “theory of success” has become another meaningless buzzword in defense planning circles.

What would it take to really get serious about fundamentally rethinking strategy? We need a method and I offer one here. It is a simple framework useful for creating, analyzing, and assessing strategy. Its three parts are a theory of the challenge, a theory of success, and a theory of failure.

This framework is a “challenge-based” approach. It starts by seeing strategy as inherently about addressing challenges or solving problems. While others approach strategy by thinking about interests or goals first, I find this to mostly be a futile exercise. Goals or interests unconnected to real-world challenges are usually vague, impractical, and highly subjective. Strategy documents like the *National Security Strategy* released by every U.S. presidential administration go into detail about national interests and describe “grandiose ambitions and laundry lists of priorities,” but the list of interests and goals are routinely disconnected from the actual strategy.

Why does theory feature so heavily in my framework? The main value of using theory as the defining heuristic of strategy is its practical effects. Yes, it is true, theory is eminently practical. Theory, defined as a “causal explanation,” fits well with what we expect from strategy, telling us how to cause a preferred outcome. Rebecca Lissner insightfully draws attention to this with her question: “Of what effects is grand strategy the cause?” Drawing on philosophy of science and social science methods scholarship, we have many techniques for developing and testing theories. This means we have some ability, albeit highly imperfect, for assessment, accountability, and improvement in strategies, even before they are implemented. For example, we can assess the internal and external validity of a strategy to at

least partially assess the likelihood of success. Critics may see this as an effort to make strategy more science and less art, but science is a highly creative enterprise — was Isaac Newton simply a number cruncher? — and I have yet to encounter a serious examination or defense of what strategy as art would look like. Until there is a better way to think practically and effectively about strategy, the following framework should be considered as a useful way to think about it.

Below I illustrate my concepts and claims with examples. Many of you will disagree with my interpretations. This is healthy and appropriate. To me the point is not that any method generates correct interpretations, but instead that it forces people to reveal their biases, assumptions, and errors, brings them out to the light, and forces them to defend their positions explicitly. The examples show how the method can be applied and allow readers to decide for themselves whether my approach inspires better ways of thinking.

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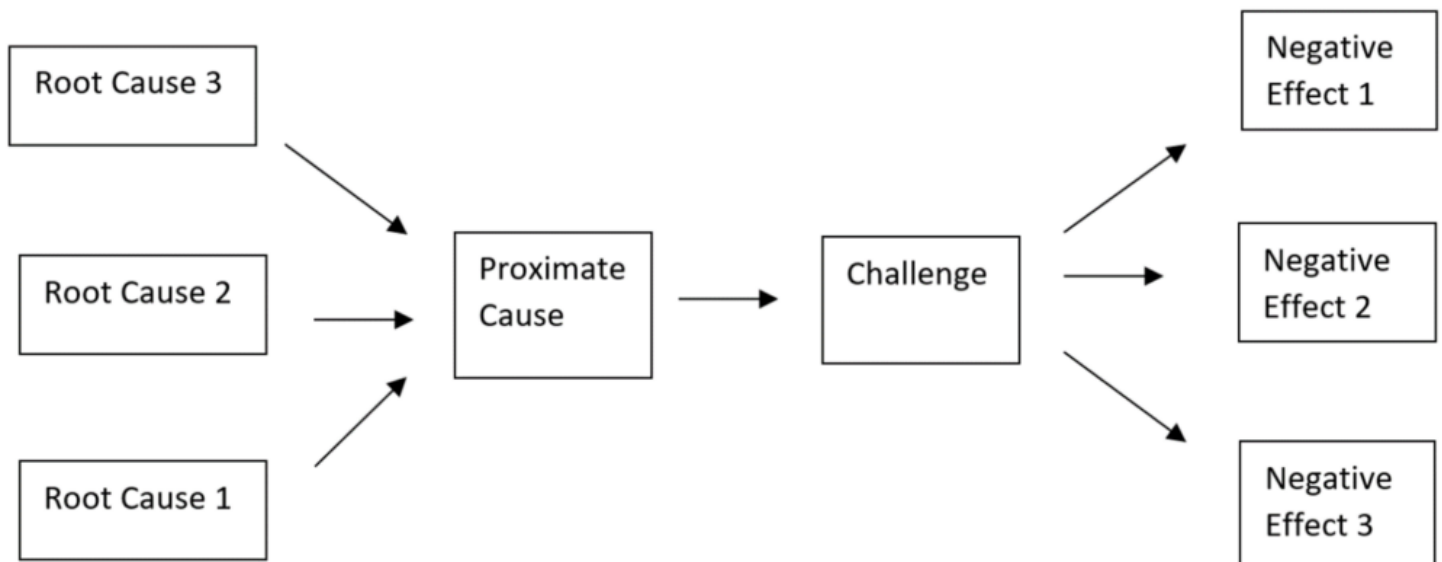
## **Theory of the Challenge**

The first step in creating or analyzing strategy is defining a theory of the challenge. For the strategist, the point of defining the challenge is to examine the situation to determine where effort should be focused. Others call this step the “diagnosis” or “problem framing.” The importance of this step, as noted in the U.S. Marine Corps design and planning process, is that the definition of the challenge “points directly to possible solutions.”

There are a variety of ways to define the challenge. This framework suggests articulating the challenge as a theory or “causal explanation” with the challenge situated at the center of a process that starts with the causes of the challenge and

ends with its negative effects (Figure 1). In defining these elements of the challenge, there are likely to be root causes and proximate causes, as well as multiple negative effects. The purpose of situating the challenge in the middle of the causal process illustrated in Figure 1 is to demonstrate the possibility of creating a strategy response on either side of the challenge (or both). On the left side, strategies of interdiction can eliminate or lessen the magnitude of the challenge. On the right side, strategies of mitigation can influence the negative effects of the challenge.

**Figure 1.**



There are several reasons for conceptualizing the problem in this form. First, conceptualizing a challenge as a causal process gives the strategist a clear method for focusing attention on potential points of intervention. The basic logic is that a challenge exists because of other phenomena that cause it and therefore interrupting that causal process can eliminate, limit, or transform the challenge. Visualizing the challenge as an arrow diagram is also a method, or part of a method, of determining how to intervene in a challenge.

Mapping out the challenge creates analytical leverage by making it easier to identify potential intervention points. For example, intervention can be made at

the point of root causes, proximate causes, the challenge itself, and the effects. Effort can also be oriented on breaking the links between the various factors. Identifying potential intervention points is the beginning of formulating strategy. Second, by enabling a visual representation, this approach makes it easier to understand the theory of causation. When using words, there are many ways to suggest causation without fully committing oneself. Diagramming the argument gives no place to hide. As Stephen Van Evera argues in his classic work on [political science methods](#), “A ‘theory’ that cannot be arrow-diagrammed is not a theory.”

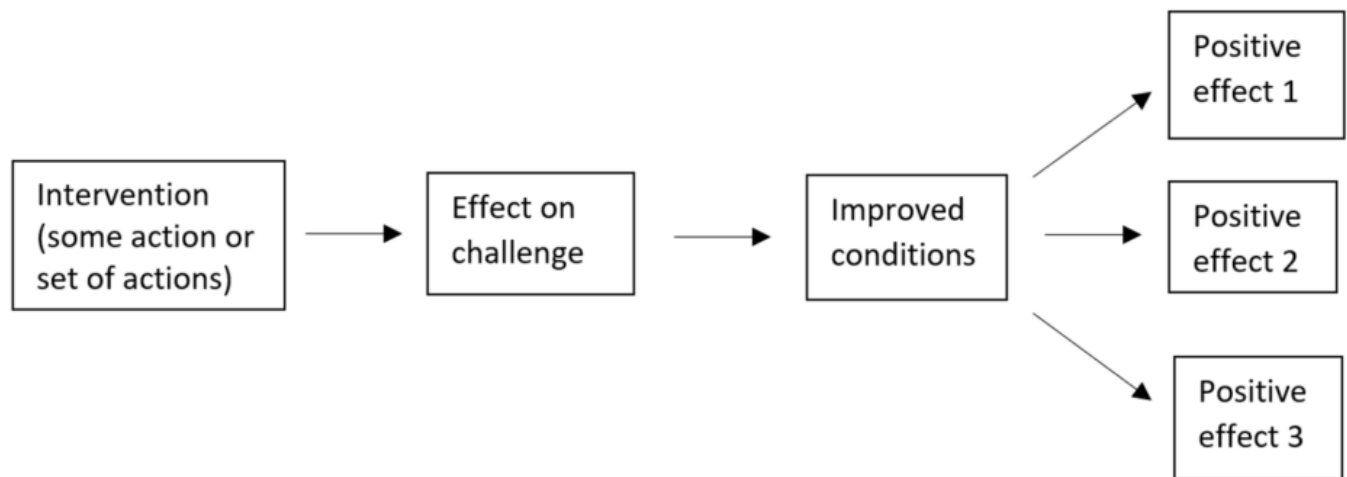
## **Theory of Success**

A theory of the challenge is not a strategy and is not part of a strategy. It is the basis for creating strategy. A strategy is a theory of success or a theory of response to the challenge. A strategy ought to explain what actions will be taken to achieve what goals and why we should think that causal relationship is accurate. This conceptualization allows for theory testing, which can identify bad assumptions and, most importantly, bring more scrutiny to claims of causal effect. Strategy is about causing preferred effects — most deficiencies in strategy result from a poor understanding (usually an overestimation) of the causal effects of actions.

A strategy or theory of success should be conceptualized as an intervention in the causal process of the challenge (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.**





A strategy is meant to affect the challenge in an advantageous manner thereby causing improved conditions. There are a variety of ways to do this, all of which involve directing effort toward some part of the causal process identified by the theory of the challenge, including focusing effort on root causes, proximate causes, the challenge itself, and the negative effects of the challenge. For example, a counter-terrorism strategy directed toward root causes will attempt to eliminate or diminish the root causes of terrorism. Looking back to the early years of the Global War on Terrorism, there was much discussion of root causes, including economic and political dysfunction in the Middle East. Some effort was directed toward affecting those root causes, and the desire to eliminate or lessen the influence of those root causes in part inspired the invasion of Iraq. As this example suggests, identifying and affecting root causes is difficult (and sometimes misguided) because they tend to be deep structural factors that are difficult to manipulate. However, since they are deeply rooted, having any sort of positive effect on root causes would, in theory at least, have a considerable effect on the challenge. The immense effort expended by the United States on regime change in Iraq is a cautionary tale about the difficulty of affecting root causes. A more positive example of a root cause approach to strategy might be the Marshall Plan implemented after World War II. The United States was worried about the spread of communism in Western Europe and saw the root cause as basic quality-of-life issues like hunger, disease, and poverty. The economic aid through the Marshall

Plan was meant to affect these root causes. Arguably, the Marshall Plan caused a cascade of positive effects that would have been unachievable by narrower, short-term initiatives.

Another type of intervention focuses on proximate causes, which are likely to be less deeply entrenched and therefore more malleable than root causes. However, affecting a proximate cause is also likely to have a weaker effect on the challenge. In the language of social science, the proximate cause is an intervening variable linking the root causes to the challenge. If we take the rise of China as an example, a proximate cause of China's rise is its entry into the World Trade Organization and institutionalization of most favored nation status in the global trade regime. China's ability to gain access to technology and intellectual property to fuel industrialization was likely a significant proximate cause of its current level of economic power. An intervention on this proximate cause would suggest an approach similar to the "de-coupling" or "de-risking" efforts currently being implemented. This example illustrates both the possible virtues of addressing proximate rather than root causes, and suggests the usefulness of this approach to help better understand the variety of possible policy interventions.

A third type of intervention is on the challenge itself. Often this takes the form of directly affecting the nature of the challenge. On the positive side, the effects of a direct strategy could be more predictable because there is no need to consider how to cause some positive cascade of effects along some hypothesized process. On the negative side, there is less promise of magnifying the causal effect of your efforts, making it more difficult to craft a strategy that creates leverage or power. For example, social distancing policy responses to COVID-19 acted directly on the challenge, which was the spread of the illness through close contact. Studies suggest social distancing did work in slowing the spread of COVID-19, but of course this also severely disrupted the economy, education, and quality of life. Vaccines offered more leverage by addressing the proximate cause of virus production in infected humans.

Fourth, strategists can target effort at the negative effects of the challenge. These are mitigation strategies targeted at limiting the magnitude, duration, and scope of the negative effects. If the challenge of the Global War on Terrorism was the emergence of the Salafi-jihadi movement, one of its negative effects could be seen as the operationalization of Salafi-jihadism in the form of groups acting on the ideology. One way to mitigate that negative effect is to apply effort to limiting the magnitude, duration, and scope of groups like al-Qaeda. Arguably, the United States finally settled on this type of strategy during the Obama administration with its focus on targeted killing through drone strikes. Israel's "mowing the grass" approach could also be seen as a type of mitigation strategy, while also possibly revealing the limitations.

A final approach is to apply effort to interrupt the causal process generating the challenge and/or its negative effects. In the early phases of the Global War on Terrorism, various scholars and government officials began to see the challenge as something akin to a "global insurgency" whereby local and regional Salafi-jihadi groups could globalize to draw on support (funding, manpower, etc.) from around the world. David Kilcullen's "disaggregation" strategy sought to break the connection between the groups and their international base of support by applying effort to regional groups that acted as nodes allowing for the globalization of conflict. This could be seen as a strategy based on disrupting the causal connection between a proximate cause of the challenge and the challenge itself. If root causes generate grievances in Muslim populations, and those populations can be used to empower Salafi-jihadi groups, and the process that links the aggrieved Muslims to the terrorist groups is the intervention of regional Salafi-jihadi groups, then "de-linking" is a strategy meant to interrupt the causal process.

## **Theory of Failure**

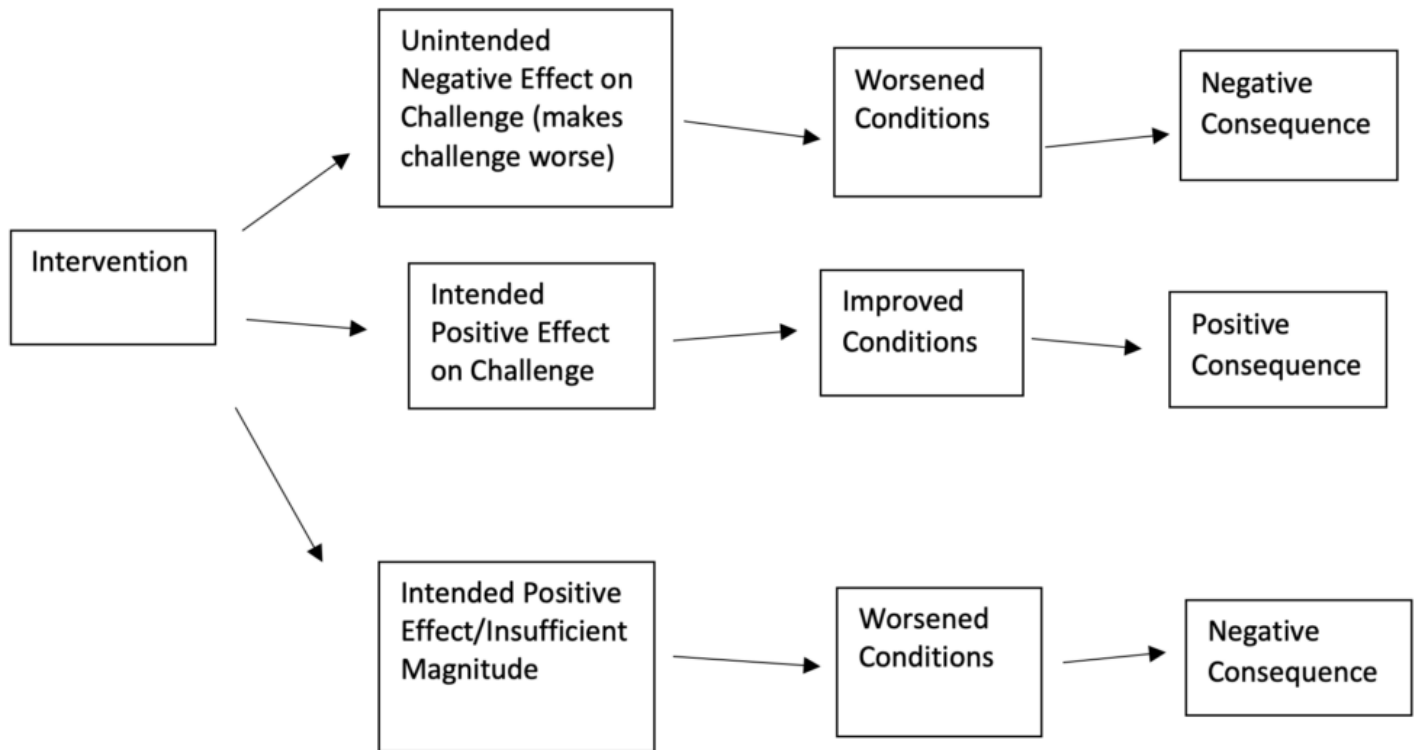
As many strategists know, analyzing and understanding risk is integral to the strategy process. While some see risk as the result of a misalignment of goals and



resources, often articulated as an ends-means mismatch, I see things differently. The real source of risk is almost always a misunderstanding of causal effects, which is characteristic of a flawed theory of success. Strategists think action X will cause result Y and they are wrong. Sometimes there are insufficient resources to fully implement action X, but that is not always the case. Instead of focusing on resources, it is much better to think thoroughly about causal effects. The risk analysis problem for the strategist is how to know ahead of time the type and magnitude of causal effects that will be created by the proposed actions. The level of uncertainty over causal effects creates risk. The best method for understanding risk is to derive theories of failure.

The point of thinking in terms of a theory of failure is to consider ahead of time what the points of failure may be in a strategy so that during the implementation phase you can understand your failure — why and how you failed — and respond accordingly. Often theories of failure will involve thinking through what might happen if your hypothesized causal effect is less than you think (see Figure 3). Other theories of failure will explore unintended negative consequences and think through whether action X might cause A or B instead of Y. It is never possible to think through all possibilities, and surprise is a constant, but there is no good substitute for thinking through what might go wrong and how to respond. In essence, this is a structured approach for performing a “pre-mortem.”

**Figure 3.**



To give a concrete example, the Biden administration developed a theory of success for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. A key part of the strategy was the hypothesis that a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces would minimize U.S. casualties and have no immediate effect on the stability of Afghanistan. What were the potential theories of failure and would they have helped? One theory of failure is that rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces would cause instability and rapid collapse of Afghan forces. If the Biden administration had considered this theory of failure, they could have considered ahead of time whether they would consider taking alternative actions like slowing the withdrawal, investing in more support for the Afghan security forces, or going even faster on the withdrawal and evacuation. Second, they might have realized their theory of failure was at least as likely as their theory of success. This might have caused them to rethink their whole approach to the withdrawal and reconsider their timeline and investments. This example, and others above, demonstrate the reality that strategy requires tradeoffs. Intervening in complex challenges will consistently result in unintended consequences and strategists are better off when they have a

structured, thoughtful method for thinking through these consequences ahead of time.

What is the payoff of using this framework? I make two claims. First, this approach helps us better understand how people create and implement strategy. Current and past strategies are more explicable looking through the lens provided here. Using the “theories of strategy” framework, we can categorize types of strategy (e.g., de-coupling as a proximate cause strategy) and better understand their strengths and weaknesses (e.g., the tradeoffs between leverage and directness). Strategy flaws are also more explicable (e.g., misunderstanding causal effects). Second, this approach can improve strategy-making and strategy analysis. While I believe many strategists intuitively follow a method similar to what this article describes, they do so implicitly and therefore do not gain the full benefits that could come from understanding what they are doing and being intentional about it.

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