

Ecological Stable Climaxes Parallels in Human Social Systems: Implications for Military Operations

Fighting wars in foreign lands is difficult. This is true of "simple" wars of attrition when only considering conventional combat operations. However, operations and efforts to remold society and rewrite cultural norms to assimilate "Western" practices and values has proven close to impossible. Efforts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq all met with failure, due in part to a misunderstanding of culture and the general population's ability and willingness to acculturate to newly imposed social norms. Human social systems function similarly to environmental ecological systems. Various components, systems within systems, cooperate (e.g. evolve together) to maintain balance, a stable climax. Disruption to one sub-system or component can result in ecological disaster. This is true of human social systems as well. Failing to understand how all the components and sub-systems function together to achieve social stability, while inserting new norms or expectations, often results in opposition, both armed and unarmed, and mission failure. Understanding how external forces and ideas influence social stability is imperative to any successful foreign policy or combat operation.

Ecosystem Parallel

The Emerald Ash Borer, a beetle originating in Asia, arrived in the United States in early 2002. Since its arrival, this invasive species has damaged or killed over seventeen million ash trees across twenty-five states. It is estimated that repairing or replacing the damaged trees would cost over ten billion dollars. The Ash Borer has also caused close to another billion dollars of household and property damage. The many species of ash trees throughout the United States play a vital ecosystem role as they provide shade for understory plant species, sustenance for deer, beavers, porcupines, and rabbits and have historically been important to the culture of various North American Indigenous peoples.¹

In 1953, the United States backed a coup in Iran which solidified the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. To maintain power, the Shah allowed the Iranian secret police to suppress dissent through means which led to backlash against the regime. Furthermore, the Shah's western inclinations and reforms led to religious opposition. Underprivileged people's dissatisfaction with corruption in the Shah's regime and religious condemnation of the Shah's western ideals led to the 1979 revolution which brought Ruhollah Khomeini to power and created the theocratic regime which still rules today. ²

In 1926, the United States Department of the Interior, in coordination with government representatives and local ranchers, killed off the last pack of wolves living in Yellowstone National Park. While there were reports of single wolves, Yellowstone National Park existed without a real wolf population for almost seventy years until they were reintroduced in the 1990s. Human expansion into the West had severely reduced the populations of key wolf prey. Consequently, wolves began to prey on domesticated ranch animals. Ranchers complained and the Department of the Interior sanctioned the eradication of wolves from the park. However, once wolves were gone, elk populations exploded. The elk overgrazed the land leading to the death of willow and aspen forests. Without the trees, songbirds left, and beavers could not build dams. Without dams, streams eroded traditional forests lands and without shade, water temperatures rose and cold-water fish died-off. Ecosystem degradation followed. ³

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and removed President Saddam Hussein, who had held power since 1979 and banned his Ba'ath Political Party. The Ba'ath party, to include Saddam Hussein, consisted primarily of minority Iraqi Sunni Muslims. The Shia, long repressed under Hussein, rose to power following the U.S. invasion. This shift in power ultimately led to the bloody Sunni Uprising and the emergence of the Islamic State whose influence, although

diminished, has spread, fostering radicalism globally.⁴ Additionally, the Iraqi government strengthened ties with its Shia compatriots in Iran further destabilizing the balance of power in the Middle East.

For the past seventy years the United States' ideologically motivated foreign policy and military operations have been largely unsuccessful. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States fought the spread of communism in Korea and Vietnam. While South Korea has evolved into a successful democratic nation, North Korea has only become more dangerous, with advancements in missile and nuclear technology and more destabilizing as it has supported U.S. competitors, such as Russia in its recent invasion of Ukraine.⁵ The outcome in Vietnam was even more drastic as the whole country was subsumed into a singular communist nation. Ideologically driven operations in Guatemala led to a forty-year civil war.⁶ Political intervention in Iran, although not the sole cause, led to a repressive adversarial regime which has fostered violence and hung like a shadow over all U.S. efforts in the Middle East for the past forty-five years.

Arguable, the United States has been unduly influenced by the successes of two twentieth century world wars: particularly the Second World War. Winning that war against a clear enemy through the mobilization and weaponization of a large industrial base blinded the United States to the complexities of conflicts which it has faced since. Although there is extensive literature addressing the nuances of "small wars,"⁷ the U.S. military still acts as if determination and mass are sufficient to win any conflict. The United States has continually failed to grasp that each nation, or more specifically each unique group of people, is a unique ecosystem that has achieved balance through cultural and social evolution. Removing social structures or introducing novel ideas often leads to ecosystem (i.e., socio-cultural) imbalance and collapse. U.S. foreign policy and military operations are often akin to an invasive species.

A Stable Climax

One constant within the natural environment is change. Even rocks and mountains eventually erode under the pressures exerted by wind and water. This constant change is a driving force in evolutionary adaptation. Within biological evolution, random mutations result in the survival and persistence of species, both animal and plant, suited to the current environmental state. Species do not survive because they are stronger or better. They survive because they achieve balance with the environment in which they exist.

The balance of biological species to the environment is the basis of an ecological system. The success, or survival, of an ecosystem is dependent on the concurrent adaptation of all species to the pace of change. The previously given examples illustrate that the exclusion of a primary ecosystem component, such as a predator, or the inclusion of a foreign element, such as an invasive species, can result in serious ecological degradation or eventual collapse. Within ecological studies, this concept of balance is referred to as a stable climax.⁸ If all species in an ecosystem evolve at sustainable rates, stability is achieved. The evolutionary climax is consistently changing, but if all ecosystem components adapt together, the climax remains stable, thus a stable climax.

Culture and Society as a System

Anthropologists and ethnographers spend their careers dissecting the minutia of culture. While there is scientific validity and value in these pursuits, for the purposes of this discussion it is appropriate to define culture with a perhaps overly simplistic mnemonic device. Actions plus beliefs equal culture (Fig 1). This may be a simple device, but upon consideration, it is evident that all aspects of culture can be properly categorized within these two broad bins: action or belief.

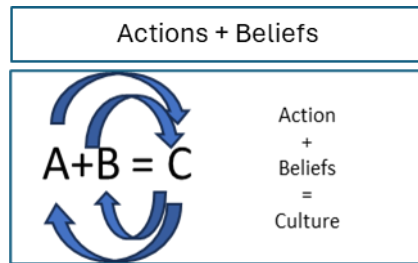


Figure 1

Within the context of systems theory, it is helpful to think of culture as a chaotic open loop system. It is an open loop because culture feeds on itself. Actions create beliefs. And beliefs create action. However, culture is also a chaotic system because there are various unquantifiable or unidentified inputs which influence the system.

However, similarly to the ecosystems already discussed, the components of culture also must achieve balance for a society to survive and achieve stability. The components of culture are polyvariant but include language, religion, ethnicity, interpersonal relationships, social strata, and leadership hierarchies.⁹ This list is not exhaustive, but it exemplifies the complexity of human culture. Additionally, as with an ecosystem, human society must exist and find balance within its natural environment. Aridity, access to water, and weather all influence social evolution. Mayan and Puebloan societies evolved within a particular phase of environmental change and either adapted to changes in weather patterns or moved on to different locales to survive.¹⁰ Balance is always precarious, and human social structures must also continuously adapt to these changes.

Additionally, it is important to be cognizant that the two primary components of culture, beliefs, and actions, can exist independently from each other and that the antecedent cause may have been forgotten by the practicing people. Consider for example the common western practice of saying “bless you” to someone who has sneezed. Very few practitioners likely know the

history behind this phrase and even less would espouse the belief behind the practice. The full phrase is of course “god bless you” and it originated out of a belief that a person could sneeze out part of their soul.¹¹ The blessing was meant to protect the sneezer from such an outcome. So, while some may consider it rude to not say “bless you” to someone who has sneezed, almost no one believes that the soul could be lost without this benediction.

While non-human life rarely propagates actions which have no apparent direct benefit to either reproduction or survival, this is not so of human societies where apparently meaningless behavior can persist after the belief and or cause has long been forgotten. The danger for the outward observer of these cultural artifacts is evident in the context of cross culture communication. The observer can easily fall into the trap of believing that everyone in the culture must be extremely religious if they are constantly passing on benedictions to each other for something as simple as a sneeze. Even more egregiously, the observer may draw the conclusion that the culture is uneducated or simpleminded if members believe that the soul could be expelled through a sneeze.

It is also often the case that beliefs exist for which there is no outward physical manifestation. Church attendance in the United States has progressively declined over the past century. However, the number of people who espouse belief in a higher power, or a spiritual realm distinct from physical life, remains high.¹² Once again, superficial observation of outward practices could easily lead the observer to believe that most Americans are atheist. However, treating all Americans as such would be a mistake. This is perhaps most evident in U.S. politics in which candidates often feel compelled to elucidate on their religious credentials to appeal to the largest number of constituents despite the apparent lack of religious belief amongst the general population.

Foreign policy and military operations are sometimes ineffective because interactions are based on superficial observations without proper cultural context. Assuming understanding, or the universality of values, is a weak foundation upon which to build military operations or foreign policy. Furthermore, expecting that military and or security tactics can be applied equally across cultures ignores the complexity of human societies and the various components which have evolved together to form a social stable climax (Fig 2).

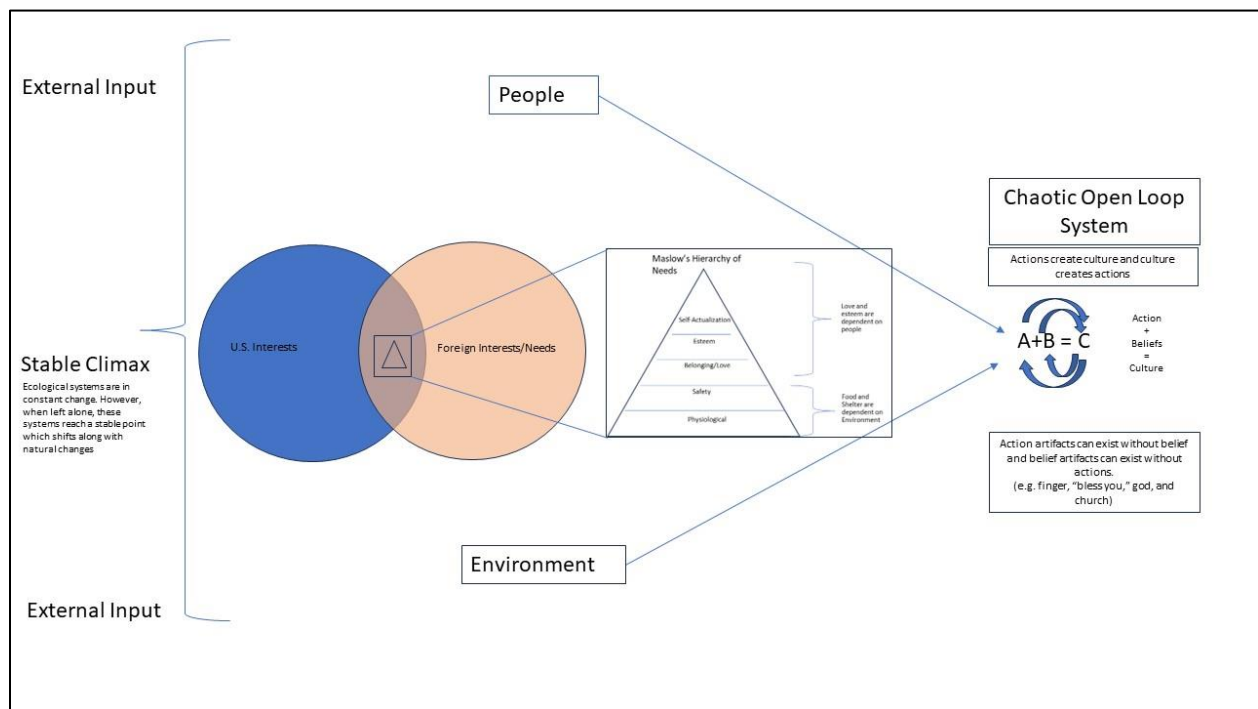


Figure 2

Cultural Inputs

As a chaotic system, some external inputs to culture are unidentified, and the direct impact of these inputs may be uncharacterized. However, there are two primary external forces which influence culture: people and environment (Fig 3).

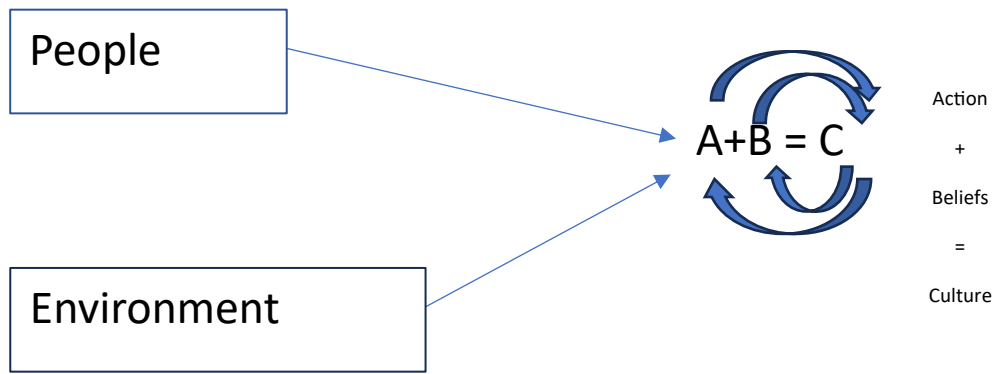


Figure 3

Some aspects of culture are a direct response to the environment. Availability, or lack, of natural resources, such as water, often plays a creative role in cultural evolution. Drought, or flood, can induce a culture to develop beliefs, such as gods, to explain why there is a lack or overabundance of rain.¹³ These beliefs can in turn manifest in external expressions such as human sacrifice to appease the gods to either send more or less of the natural resource which is negatively impacting the society or to cope with the environmental challenges.¹⁴

The environment's role in cultural evolution is currently magnified by global warming and climate change. Climate change is forcing people to adapt to a new normal, often resulting in conflict,¹⁵ or to emigrate from traditional homelands resulting in social system collapse. Forced migration into new systems results in a local response which can result in a positive adaptation such as amalgamation and acculturation, the idea of the American melting pot, or it can result in a rejection, such as the right-wing movements in Europe, meant to protect traditional culture from the external influence.¹⁶

Obviously, people are the critical component of human culture. Culture would not exist without people. However, external peoples often play as important a role in cultural evolution as do the primary members of the group. This is clearly illustrated by the 1885 Berlin Agreement

under which European powers divided spheres of influence on the African continent.¹⁷ This agreement separated groups which had relied on each other for subsistence and brought together some groups which had been adversaries for centuries. These divisions and animosity were further exacerbated in the early 1960s when many of these countries gained independence from their colonial powers and have struggled ever since to create a new inclusive identity for nation states which were created by external powers.

Nigeria is an ongoing example of this struggle for inclusivity. In 1914, Great Britain brought together the northern and southern Nigerian protectorates which formed the borders of the nation state of Nigeria which gained its independence in 1960. The amalgamation of various tribal groups led to the secession and declaration of independent of the Republic of Biafra and the subsequent Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970 which resulted in casualties with estimates up to one million people including both combatants and civilians.¹⁸ Biafra lost the war but as recently as November 2024 was still declaring its independence.¹⁹

Another, perhaps better known, example is the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The genocide has its roots, at least in part, in the arbitrary colonial borders which created the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and forced two incompatible ethnic groups, the Hutu and Tusti, into the same nation state.²⁰ This conflict killed an estimated one million people and up to a quarter of a million women were raped.²¹

Culture is not static. It is in a constant state of evolution. If all aspects of culture, including people and the environment, are in harmony and evolve together then stability can be achieved and maintained.

Invisible Interdependencies

In 1911, the United States passed legislation which, although primarily intended to limit the hunting of seals, provided protection to sea otters.²² By the early twentieth century sea otters had been practically hunted to extinction along the western coast of the United States and Canada. While the near extinction of sea otters was undoubtedly a natural tragedy, it is the near loss of the function otters played in their ecological system which would have been a tragedy for all air-breathing life on earth. Unbeknownst to most, including those who passed the 1911 legislation, seventy percent of all oxygen in Earth's atmosphere is produced by ocean plants and kelp is a major contributor to this process. However, kelp is under constant attack from sea urchins, the locust of the sea. A swarm of sea urchin can completely decimate an underwater kelp forest. It is in the protection of these kelp forests that the sea otter plays a key role. Sea otters prey upon urchins and thereby check their growth and kelp consumption.²³ Without sea otters, kelp forests remain vulnerable to sea urchin decimation.

This precarious equilibrium is also true of external inputs to human social systems. The 1947 partition of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, after almost a century of British colonial rule resulted in the dislocation of some 15 million people and the deaths of up to two million people in the ensuing violence.²⁴ It also led to several wars between the new nations ending in two nuclear powers increasingly led by radical governments consistently on the verge of conflict.²⁵ Great Britain's inability to deal with the growing cultural divisions resulted in a hasty division of peoples which had existed in relative harmony for centuries. And as previously discussed, when the United States invaded Iraq, it had a poor understanding of the precarious existing balance between the two predominant Islamic sects: Shia and Sunni. Saddam Hussein was a sadistic ruler who was detrimental to regional stability as illustrated by his invasion of Kuwait. Ethnic and

religious minorities were under constant persecution during Hussein's regime. Between 1986 and 1989 one military campaign killed or "disappeared" over 180,000 Kurds. Over 200,000 were reportedly killed during one anti-Shia military campaign in the first few months of 1991. Hussein also used poison gas on dozens of villages killing thousands more.²⁶

However, internal to Iraq he was instrumental to stability. Removing him from power resulted in an understandable Shia reaction, which consequently resulted in a violent Sunni reaction. The instability resulting from Hussein's removal was violent and the United States was unprepared for the reaction because it had a poor understanding of the balance between Iraqi Shias and Sunnis. The United States and its allies also failed to grasp the religious ties Iraqi Shias had with Iranian Shias and the resulting shift in the regional balance of power closer ties between Iraq and Iran have had.²⁷

Intersection of Interests

The essential requirement to successful foreign policy or military operations, and in particular security assistance and cooperation, is understanding the interests and social systems of all parties (Fig 4). Within the context of security cooperation and assistance, if the host nation's interests and needs are not being addressed and or met in an acceptable manner, resistance is likely to persist and undermine any external attempts to create stability. This concept is currently evidenced by the Nigerien request that U.S. forces leave that country.

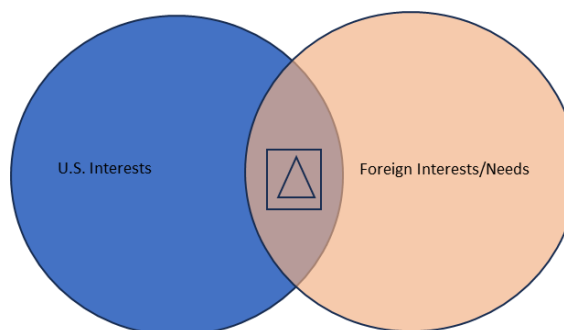


Figure 4

Furthermore, instability is inevitable if the needs of the host nation or people are not properly understood, or at least identified, by the external powers. In this context it is helpful to conceptualize social evolution and needs within the paradigm of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Fig 5).²⁸ Maslow's paradigm focuses on the progressive needs of the individual. However, this progression can be equally applied to the social and cultural evolution of groups of people including nation-states.

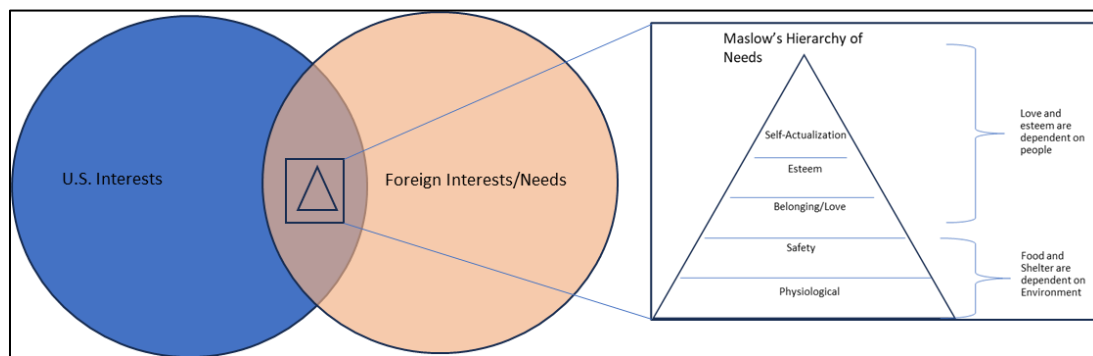


Figure 5

Unimpeded social and cultural evolution may address the hierarchy of needs concurrently or sequentially. However, social evolution is not linear, some needs once addressed may become needs again, as in the case of post-conflict societies. Prior to conflict, or another system disruption, a state may have been at a developmental phase allowing it to focus on the self-actualization level of Maslow's hierarchy. In the self-actualization phase ideals such as democratic government or universal equality are important. However, a post-disruption society's focus may revert to the bottom of the hierarchy of needs where shelter and sustenance become important and higher-level values are no longer a priority. From a foreign policy and military intervention perspective, if the preponderance of the population is primarily concerned with basic needs such as food and safety, imposition of ideologies, such as democratic values or

gender equality, although noble, which address top level self-actualization issues, are unlikely to succeed. National self-actualization is dependent on several cultural and historic characteristics which make the forceful imposition of external values a destabilizing process.

This does not mean that the United States should abstain from global interaction or efforts to further values which are beneficial to all human society. It only highlights the nature of a Stable Climax. A Stable Climax is neither good nor evil, it is merely, as the name implies, stable. External inputs into a stable climax, especially if the cultural and social structures are poorly understood and the level of need, as per Maslow's Hierarchy, are not identified and addressed satisfactorily, are likely to have a destabilizing effect.

Social Evolution

Societies, like organisms, evolve. Within comparative studies of biological and social evolution there are two systems which assist in elucidating the development of disparate cultures. The first is the distinction between Darwinian and Lamarckian evolution.²⁹ The second is the previously mentioned concept of ecological climaxes.

Darwinian evolution argues that random mutations grant, although not through direct agency, certain organisms, or subsets of a species, an increased ability to survive in the environment in which they exist and to subsequently pass these mutations on to biological offspring. Lamarckian evolution argues that organisms acquire certain traits through experience and environmental pressures which they can then pass on to offspring. Even a cursory overview of social evolution lends itself to both Darwinian and Lamarckian interpretations. In biological evolution there is, by definition, no overt cause for Darwinian random mutations. While certain environmental contamination sources and behaviors can be transmitted from mother to child, there is little evidence to suggest that Lamarckian acquired traits are passed to biological

offspring.³⁰ Societies, however, react differently to external pressures and do transmit mutations to the next generation.

A Darwinian parallel to social evolution is language. While language does not exist, nor originate, in a vacuum, it is an aspect of culture which evolved naturally. A Lamarckian parallel is the forced imposition of Christianity by the Spanish on native American peoples or the global spread of Islam. Religion is influenced by culture and is not monolithic. Christianity has split into hundreds of denominations, and it is a mistake to believe that Islam is the same everywhere. Religion, as a learned trait, is molded by society and passed down generation to generation only as far as it supports social motivations. It is a mistake to assume that religion is static or that it shares a common definition simply because of a shared name (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.).

Biological organisms, whether animal or plant, naturally reach a certain equilibrium with their environment that allows them, as well as other codependent organisms, to survive and in some cases thrive. Societies, at least from an external perspective, evolve at a much faster pace than biological organisms and therefore the characteristics of the climax may change on a truncated spectrum. However, just as external pressures can cause the collapse of a biological ecosystem, they can just as easily cause the collapse of a social structure. These collapses can cause unexpected consequences and have much more far-reaching repercussions than may have been obvious.

A Case Study: Afghanistan

Afghanistan's stable climax, prior to the United States' intervention in 2001, and perhaps counterintuitively, was a state of low-level conflict between opposing forces. Specifically, the opposition of cultural-religion and modernization.³¹ The United States failed to achieve its goals

in Afghanistan, at least in part, because it erroneously supposed that a 1970s snapshot of women walking around Kabul in miniskirts was a stable reference point to which the country could be returned.³² Furthermore, the U.S. mistakenly believed that oppression, illustrated by the Burqa, was a Taliban imposition and that eradicating the Taliban would allow the country to revert to its supposed golden era.³³

The end of World War II brought about the largest reconstruction effort ever carried out by a third-party nation or organization. The Marshal Plan, largely funded by the United States, sought to rebuild Europe, and Germany in particular, back to its pre-war industrial capabilities. Through the Marshal Plan, the United States spent over \$13 billion dollars in its reconstruction efforts.³⁴ And thanks in large part to these efforts, in 1965, twenty years after the war, West Germany had the fourth largest GDP in the world.³⁵

Similarly, in Japan, following the end of World War II, the United States began a decades-long process of bilateral development and reconstruction. As with Germany, twenty years after the war, Japan's economy had also grown exponentially and was the sixth largest GDP in the world.³⁶ Also, as with Germany, US troops are still stationed in Japan almost eighty years after the end of the war.

It is easy, and some have attempted to do so, to compare reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan to the post WWII efforts in Germany and Japan.³⁷ Over the twenty years between 2001 and 2021, the United States spent about \$145 billion dollars in Afghanistan on reconstruction and development programs.³⁸ This comparison, understandably, presents Afghanistan in a negative light because after twenty years it was far from an economic powerhouse or even a self-sustaining viable state. However, comparisons between Afghanistan and post-WWII reconstruction efforts are a false equivalency and erroneous comparison.

A comparison of this type fails to consider the pre-war conditions in the respective countries. Pre-war Germany was already on a path of democratization and was an economic and industrial giant. In 1938 Germany had the third largest global GDP.³⁹ Less one forgets, it is important to realize that Adolf Hitler's National Socialist party came to power through a semi-democratic process.⁴⁰ Reconstruction in Germany was not developing something new but was building on pre-established norms and furthering existing indigenously engendered social evolution. In this way, reconstruction was, to certain extent, only resetting Germany to its existing social climax of which WWII was a disruption.

In Japan, the United States took a different path. The United States allowed the emperor to remain in power and thus provided a sense of normalcy which the Japanese people already understood, and could accept, and upon which the United States could rebuild.⁴¹ So, while the United States continued to foster democracy in Japan, at least in principle, it was fostered through the existing social climax and under a system with which the local population was familiar and understood. Under this system Japanese society evolved to the current state of economic independence and financial supporter to US international activities while still existing under an emperor and a more natural occurring social climax.

In Afghanistan, democracy did not evolve independently. The social democracy which existed between 1973 and 1992 was democratic in name only. Leaders during this period either took power through force or were appointed through foreign interference. During this period, Afghans did not participate in democratic free elections nor choose their own heads of government. While Daud Khan's growing dissatisfaction and disassociation with the Soviet Union, following his 1973 bloodless coup, could have led to a broadening of democratic principles, but he had less than five years in which to experiment before he was replaced by force

and the Afghan government fell firmly into the grasp of Soviet influence.⁴² However, Daud Khan was not a democratically elected ruler and was a cousin of the king and therefore also a member of the patrimonial monarchal system.

The longest existing form of government in Afghanistan—and that which evolved indigenously—was patrimonial monarchy. Nevertheless, the monarchy was generally fragile and for most of its existence fought continuously, under various rulers, to unify and then hold a wide range of territory which waxed and waned over the course of Afghan history. Afghan rulers relied heavily on, and were forced to make significant concessions to, local and tribal leaders to maintain what little semblance of control they possessed. In addition to having to continually fight for the preservation of their central government against a wide range of competitors, monarchs also had to subdue multiple rebellions across the country. The causes of these rebellions and insurgencies were multiple, spanning the spectrum of social, cultural, and religious motivations.⁴³

In the twentieth century, Afghan monarchs attempted to bring modernity and “Western” values to Afghanistan. These efforts included attempts to build a railway system as well as forcing western clothing standards.⁴⁴ Religious leaders reacted violently to many of these efforts even condemning the queen for her impropriety in wearing western clothing. The struggle between urban and rural values and western and religious perspectives have persisted through much of Afghan history. The result was a weak central government which had to make many local concessions to stay in power.

It is worthwhile to remember that democracy was an experiment in the United States which, according to John Adams, most of the American population either did not support or to which they were indifferent. Adams estimated that only about one third of the population

supported independence and the required revolutionary war, or rebellion, to achieve it.⁴⁵ The other two thirds of the American population either supported the monarchy or were indifferent to the form of government if they were left to live their lives with little to no interference. Democracy was an experiment, although admittedly fostered by a small elite, which evolved indigenously. While democracy was not new in a historical sense, at the time Americans did not have an existing nation to which to compare their social evolution and the success of their experiment.

The spread of democratic governments in the 250 years since American independence is incredible when considering the dearth of diversity in government systems in the previous two thousand years. The exponential growth in technology has undoubtedly assisted in the spread of democratic principles, however, it has also allowed sizable portions of the human population to see that to which other nations have access.

Afghans, through technology such as smart phones, were exposed to what democracies were supposed to “give” their populations and they naturally wanted and expected the same type of lifestyle. It is not necessarily the system, but what the system can provide, that is important to the average person merely attempting to survive.

However, what Afghans, and many external observers, failed to understand is that what they saw in modern democracies was the result of, at times, centuries of social evolution. Modern democracies did not arrive at their current state overnight. Afghans, however, understandably, wanted the fruits of democracy, which foreign powers had promised. The failure of the promise, however understandable, resulted in dissatisfaction with the system and retreat from the political arena. Lack of population investment created space for the Taliban to survive and ultimately thrive. After the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, many Afghans wanted to

reestablish the monarchical system because that is what they remembered as the “good days.”⁴⁶

Even though those good days largely consisted of a weak central government, little services, no peaceful transition of power and generally being left alone.

Conversely, the United States and its allies attempted to impose a modern democratic system on Afghanistan focusing largely on the self-actualization phase of social needs while ignoring, or not understanding, that most of the population was still focused on food and shelter. The attempt to instill centuries of social evolution into twenty years resulted in a wide range of investment in ideological goals without the requisite solid foundation required to guarantee the basic survival needs of the population. Consequently, corruption was rampant as people attempted to safeguard their own survival and many Afghans only pandered to western ideals to maintain the influx of resources needed to survive.

The United States and its Western allies assumed the Taliban regime was a social aberration and that Afghanistan could return to a pre-Soviet invasion golden age with sufficient international support. However, the Taliban was only the latest incarnation, if ideologically more brutal, of the continuing conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and the elite minority for the continuation of Islamic values against western modernity. All modernization movements in Afghanistan have been influenced by external power, and thus it has been easy for conservative ideologists to criticize and accuse it as foreign and both non-Islamic and non-Afghan.

Violence has always been a recourse to dispute resolution in Afghanistan. This does not mean that Afghans are somehow more violent than others. But it does mean that Afghanistan has been unable, for a variety of reasons, both internal and external, to evolve away from this perspective. There have been several modernization efforts in Afghanistan over the course of its existence. However, these efforts have mostly faltered. Even American, German, and Soviet

infrastructure projects in the 1950s and 1960s caused almost as much harm as good as it resulted in uneven distribution of resources.⁴⁷ Three centuries of social evolution cannot be crammed into twenty years of conflict and stability operations. People often have negative reactions to novel ideals.

Strategy Implications

The complexities of human society and the precarious nature of social stability, especially as it pertains to armed intervention in foreign lands, reduces available strategies to two viable options: all-out war with the primary objective the complete defeat of the enemy, or limited operations based on social-cultural analysis and specifically designed to achieve desired effects within each unique ecosystem.

Carl Von Clausewitz, the famous eighteenth century Prussian general and strategist argued in his book *On War*,⁴⁸ that war is a viable policy tool. However, once this tool is chosen it can only be effective if ideologically motivated policies are withheld, and the sole purpose becomes winning. The United States, despite its recent military failures, has been and can continue to be a successful war fighting machine. However, this success is limited if driven, or restrained, by political or ideological motivations. The United States wins wars when the goal is to win at all costs. This is evident in the successes in World War I and II. More recently, Operation Desert Storm was successful in driving Iraq out of Kuwait. And the United States used massive force to do this. However, the United States also chose this end as a suitable definition of victory without seeking to invade Iraq or depose Saddam Hussein.

Social ecosystem manipulation based on in depth analysis of the cultural strata is theoretically possible, but difficult. However, it currently seems beyond U.S. ability or will power because of the time required to do it correctly. Thus far the United States has not

demonstrated the ability to holistically understand an adversary within its social context. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan being only a few examples of how the adversary was able to exploit cultural understanding to persist despite superior American combat power. Afghanistan may have been successful if the goal had been limited to the eradication of Al Qaeda and the elimination of Osama bin Laden. However, attempts to infuse western ideology without understanding the social ecosystem resulted in reversion to a pre-U.S. invasion stable climax once again led by the Taliban. The United States must understand that western ideologies such as democracy, gender equality, and universal human rights, despite their merits, when imposed on other cultures have similar effects to that of an invasive species. Successful ideological inception is dependent on proper understanding of the current pillars of stability and the potential reactions.

As the United States once again pivots towards great power competition and focuses on countering China and Russia, it is likely to further lose sight of the complexities of regional conflicts as proxy wars with Russia and China become more likely. The wide range of activities which the United States attempted to execute in Afghanistan and Iraq if attempted in Asia or Africa will just as likely be unsuccessful if not based on analysis of each respective area of operation. The recent coups throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and Russia's growing influence in the region demonstrate that the United States is failing to understand primary motivations and address perceived needs.

The United States has used military operations to create a geopolitical environment conducive to U.S. national interests. The causes of failure in the various operations discussed here are varied. However, there is no doubt that a failure to understand cultural and social structures and the level of psychological development of each country were significant

contributors. U.S. policy will continue to struggle if the United States is unable to invest in properly understanding and addressing social-cultural contributors to stability and desisting from viewing the world through a myopic ideological perspective.

ENDNOTES

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