

Oxford Research Group
Breaking the cycle of violence

**COLLECTIVE
STRATEGIC
THINKING:
AN INTRODUCTION**



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Collective Strategic Thinking: An Introduction

The purpose of collective strategic thinking is to enable identity groups to shape their own future. It is a conflict engagement tool which seeks to reduce the intractability of conflicts and thus contribute to conflict resolution.

Collective strategic thinking can be compared to a long and challenging journey. But the rewards are great.

We need to know

- (a) who we are and what resources we have
- (b) where we are starting from
- (c) where we want to go
- (d) how we can get there
- (e) who can help us on our way
- (f) who is likely to hinder us
- (g) and how we can gain the support of the former and block the efforts of the latter

How is this done? In this presentation I offer a framework for collective strategic thinking that I hope will stimulate participants to develop their own strategic methodology and their own strategic vocabulary.

Some elements of collective strategic thinking

(a) Who are we?

Strategic identity. It is good at the beginning of the journey to acknowledge internal differences and cross-cutting identities within our identity group. This applies to all sizeable identity groups. All societies are made up of ideological, ethnic, wealth, gender, age and other differences. Some of these differences are reflected in organized political parties, religious establishments, or familial and tribal groupings. These can lead to internal disagreements about collective strategy.

Strategic unity. The strategic aim is not to engage in internal politics. Nor is it to agree about everything. The prerequisite is that these differences between groups are not so great as to make collective strategic thinking impossible. The requirement is for *sufficient* strategic unity. Without sufficient strategic unity, others will be able to 'divide and rule'.

Strategic authority. There also needs to be sufficient *strategic authority* to make decisions and implement them. This is a requirement for effective collective strategic action. It is a task for governments. The role of strategy groups here is to consider whether such strategic authority already exists or whether it is something that needs to be further developed.

(b) Where are we?

Strategic context. Here we look at the ground we are already standing on. We will not be starting from where we would like to be. Are our interests, values and needs already sufficiently satisfied? Scholars distinguish 'basic needs' as cultural identity needs, security needs, economic development needs, and political autonomy needs. In asymmetric conflicts *possessors* may be happy with the *status quo* (the existing situation), but *challengers* are not. If our interests, values and needs are not being satisfied, what is blocking them?

This is where collective strategic thinking requires clear analysis of the *status quo* as a *complex system*. It is a *system* because it is made up of interlocking sectors (political, economic etc.) and levels (local, national, regional, international). It is *complex* because initiatives are likely to lead to unexpected outcomes. Complex systems are hard to change. But the strategic environment is constantly shifting and when change comes it may be sudden and comprehensive. For example, the change which swept across the MENA region in 2011.

The existing system is dynamic and a product of history. It is helpful for collective strategic thinking to compare the situation across space (learning lessons from other societies) and across time (learning lessons from the past – for example why did national dialogue fail?).

Strategic strengths and weaknesses. This is where we need ongoing analysis of our own strengths and weaknesses in comparison with those of other players. (This is the first part of a SWOT analysis – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.) The key concept here is *power*. A useful strategic definition of power is ‘the ability to get what you want done’. So, evaluation of power depends on clarity of goals (see (c)). There are also different forms of power, e.g. threat power, exchange power, integrative power (Joseph Nye’s hard power and soft power).

(c) Where do we want to go?

Strategic thinking is oriented towards the future. We are looking out across a wide and varied landscape that we want to travel through. Where are we heading?

Strategic scenarios. Before determining our strategic goals, we first need to evaluate the future possibilities. These are ‘scenarios’ (a scenario is a possible future). For example, if peace finally comes, what form will it take at state level? What possible outcomes are acceptable to us

and what outcomes are not acceptable (e.g. in terms of economic resource arrangements, political federal or autonomy arrangements, etc.)? Our strategic aim is to promote outcomes that are desirable and to block those that are undesirable.

It is also important not just to consider *desirability* (which outcomes we like and which we do not like), but also *attainability* (what relative power we have to influence this) and *likelihood* (which ones are most likely to come about). We want our strategic thinking to be *realistic*. (This is the second half of a SWOT analysis – opportunities and threats.)

Strategic goals. We can now clarify our strategic goals – where we hope we are heading. For example, we may have to choose between a goal that is very desirable but also very difficult to attain, and a goal that is less desirable but easier to attain. As seen above, members of a strategy group are also likely to disagree about goals – particularly about distant goals. For both these reasons, it is helpful to distinguish between *short-term*, *medium-term* and *long-term* goals. In our journey through a constantly changing and dynamic environment, we may agree over short-term goals while disagreeing about desired endpoints. And our success or failure to attain short-term (interim) goals may change our calculations about future possibilities. The strategic landscape is constantly changing.

(d) How do we get there?

This lies at the heart of the strategic thinking process. In the light of (a), (b) and (c) what *paths* do we need to go down in order to reach our destination, what *choices* do we need to make if we come to a fork in the road, and what *means* do we need to use to travel down the paths.

Strategic paths. There are as many paths towards our strategic goals as there are sectoral (economic, political, security etc.)

and multi-level components in our analysis of the *status quo* as a complex system in (b) above. This is like opening a complicated safe. These are *complementary* strategic options, which need to be *orchestrated* and pursued at the same time. If we are blocked down one path, we go down others. We do not stand indefinitely, complaining, at the barrier. We move around, under or over it. Our strategic aim is to surprise opponents, to keep on the move, to engage on ground where our relative strengths are most pronounced, and, in general, to maintain initiative, flexibility and strategic momentum.

Strategic choices. There are also *strategic choices* that we may have to make if we come to a fork in the road and cannot travel down both at the same time. This is Plan (A) and Plan (B) (etc.). We need to prepare Plan (B) in advance so we are ready to switch strategy if necessary. But Plan (B) also plays another role. If Plan (B) is less attractive to another strategic player than Plan (A) and is seen to be credible from the outset, then this can act as a strong incentive for that player to support our preferred Plan (A) from the beginning.

Strategic means. Finally, there are *strategic means*. How do we go down these strategic paths? We are back to our analysis of strengths and weaknesses in (b) above. What forms of power are most likely to work best in different circumstances? The choice is determined by ongoing calculations about whether or not a particular strategic means works in a particular case. If it does not work, change it.

(e) Allies, opponents and communications

Although apparently ‘tagged on at the end’, these strategic considerations are vital – sometimes decisive – from the outset.

Strategic allies. In many cases eliciting strategic support from external allies can prove to be the key – especially when regional and international powers intervene and call many or most of the shots. This can swamp and reshape dynamics within the ‘target’ state or district.

Strategic opponents. Similarly, it is a high priority in collective strategic thinking to look at the strategic chessboard from the perspective of the opponent. We do this, not in order to sympathise with or learn to love our opponent, but in order to win. Chess players who do not do this, lose.

Strategic communications. Finally, and permeating all the rest, is strategic skill in framing communications for multiple audiences – to rally internal support, to counter opponents’ strategic moves or sway receptive constituencies within the opponent’s domain, and to influence sympathetic third parties. Language and wording are key strategic components. The strategic aim here is simple – to win the war of words. But doing this requires considerable and varied resources – and is usually far from simple.

Following from all this comes actual policy-formulation, decision-making about preferred strategy, detailed tactics as appropriate for the different components of the chosen strategy, and the drawing up of action plans and timetables for the implementation of specific tasks. These are tasks for governments. But once again strategy groups can think through strategic implications and feed these into official fora in order to improve capacities and levels of strategic decision-making for hard-pressed governments. And strategy groups can also link leadership to broader society and help build capacity for wider – and therefore more effective – collective strategic action.

About the Author

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