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How to Hold or Take a Big City -- Seven Lines of Effort

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How to Hold or Take a Big City -- Seven Lines of Effort

Geoff Demarest

This essay proposes adoption of a specific planning framework for urban operations.[1] An American armed force smaller than, say, that used in Sadr City, Baghdad might well achieve victory in a future urban environment.[2] The imagined geographical context for the presentation of this planning framework is that of a large city, and the situation one that features active opposition by at least one well-armed organization of significant organizational and communications capacity. How large a city and how powerful an opposing force are of course consequential questions. Cities considerably smaller than what are generally taken as megacities still present significant, unique military challenges.[3] The armed opposition imagined here does not include the committed military of a large country that might assign significant national resources to either taking or holding the city with regular formations. The imagined opposing force might nevertheless be able to move several thousand armed fighters and employ a range of sophisticated weapons and surveillance systems to include those mounted on aerial drones. Regardless of the size and sophistication of the opposing force, the lines of effort for success in taking or holding a city can be placed in basically the same seven proposed categories. The reader is invited to assume that opposition entities (there likely being more than one) will not share with us the same scruples or social and political delimitations regarding how they will apply coercive violence. That is to say, as to any dissimilarity in the mixes of resources available to the contenders, moral asymmetry may be the most pronounced and consequential.

We can measure victory (our own or that of any of the competing entities) cartographically. The physical geographic space within which a contender can effectively punish its opponents, plus the geographic space in which a contender can remain impune from that punishment (sanctuary) will constitute the definitive map.[4] If throughout the city one of the parties to the contest were able to apply concepts and processes of justice as it sees fit, and can simultaneously protect individuals it chooses to protect from punishment by others, that party is *eo ipso* the complete victor. Perhaps total control of the whole urban place never becomes a practicable goal for any contender. Nevertheless, if the cartographic extent (within which whole or partial impunity is achieved) exceeds an entity's goals, one can fairly argue that it succeeds exactly to that extent. As to an American force overseas, at least a partial victory reasonably could be claimed if the US force could be withdrawn without the balances of impunity changing unfavorably, that is, without there being a change in the boundaries of sanctuaries.

Not contemplated here as part of the definition of victory is the attainment of any particular conditions of material life such as electoral suffrage, infant mortality, showers taken, calories consumed or political

legitimacy. While perhaps rightfully interested in the improvement of material wellbeing, or justified in pursuit of such progress for its own sake, material improvement may have insignificant if any measurable, timely influence on the outcome of an armed competition as to who dominates whom.[5] In some areas and to some degree, the conditions of human suffering and injustice (or, perhaps, how a populace sees how the parties addresses such conditions) can have a recognizable effect on relative competitive prospects. Sociocultural conditions are not to be ignored, but they are best understood as potential influences on, and not conflated with measures of military success. Impunity can be gained or lost almost irrespective of socioeconomic conditions.

We can assume that a conflict may end in some sort of settlement, the result perhaps of a formal negotiation. Such a settlement would be the price of real or perceived relative weakness, however. In other words, ignorant of the situational details, we cannot claim that any contending party would necessarily have enough strength to dominate totally. It probably will not. The degree to which party A might have to settle is a fair measure of the extent to which it did not win, since negotiated settlement would mean that its opponents enjoy some degree of impunity from A's coercion, or perhaps that they retain some capacity to impose punishment on A. Experiences indicate that some areas of a city may be hotly contested while other areas are fully controlled by one party or another, and these variously controlled locales may or may not be contiguous. Contestants may have to either take or hold according to a patchwork of urban sectors. There are likely to be more than two major contestant organizations, not simply a government versus an anti-government resistance or defiance. In addition, urban areas are intertwined with surrounding geographies we might prefer to categorize as suburban or rural or sea or hinterland.[6] With all the caveats in mind, however, seven lines of effort provide a reasonable starting template for planning.

They are as follows:

1. Maintain and improve advantage in anonymity
2. Maintain and improve advantage in competitive distances
3. Control the disruption of service flows
4. Control convocation spaces
5. Progressively reduce enemy sanctuary space
6. Pursue the *mens rea*
7. Punish the enemy

Measure the physical geography of all of the above

Ultimate goal: Dominate the granting of impunity

1. **Maintain and improve advantage in anonymity.**[7] Implement specific actions and programs whose immediate goal is to tip the balance of anonymity, that is, encourage and enable the reporting of information, especially regarding the whereabouts of elements of the enemy's armed members and leadership. These actions can include construction of reporting websites and phone numbers, or designing offices wherein a citizen can report without being seen doing so by an agent of an opposing force. The side currently able to openly occupy space can more easily flood public places with closed circuit cameras, for instance, but some use of cameras will be available to the other side as well. Include here also a number of considerations for the preservation of secrets, such as polygraphing, background investigations, oaths and the like. Those implementing siege of urban territory or the take-over of

buildings have less opportunity for actual, physical presence by which to instill a 'rule of silence.' For them, the creation of psychological presence is made more difficult, but hardly impossible.

2. Maintain and improve advantage in competitive distances.^[8] One of the most significant lines of effort is the building of walls, doors and bridges.^[9] This is best done in an overall urban plan that considers travel distances among police stations, public convocation sites, likely sites of opponent perpetrations and government enforcement initiatives. Conversely, for the siege, approach distances to service nodes, convocation areas, and other valuable terrain need to be prepared.^[10] Especially this initiative needs to anticipate withdrawals or escapes. Tunnels are a classic siege preparation, but way-stations made from the offices of front organizations, or the coopting of transportation networks are now typical. In Bogota, the FARC had briefly converted the immense garbage disposal network into a back alley taxi service.

3. Control the disruption of service flows.^[11] As cities grow they tend to change in step fashion. That is, urban phenomena may appear fairly rapidly to bring the city to a new stage or status that has direct bearing on prospects in armed competition. For instance, a small city might overnight be home to a radio controlled taxi network while a megalopolis might finally gain a third major airport, bringing a closer coordination of airspace control and all but sealing out some classes of aircraft. Also among the effects of scale may be a tendency toward single contract or single network consolidation of some services, for instance, sewage removal. As a service provision becomes monopolized or centrally regulated, it also acquires a vulnerability in that the geography of the reins of control may become centralized or present very specific nodes or constrictions. These need to be physically protected, as do the executives or key technicians who wield control. Because large cities often find economic advantage in consolidated service systems, the nodes and constrictions in these systems present geographically specific targets, targets that can not only be physically occupied, but the occupation of which can be defended for sufficient time to make power concessions appear economically and politically attractive.

4. Control convocation spaces.^[12] Convocation (causing crowds to form) is hardly a new tactic, but social media has augmented their practicability. Rules of operational art still apply, however, to actions based on the massing of people, including protests, demonstrations, or marches. Regardless of the speed of instruction, coordination, and movement of such aggrupation, the characteristics of the spaces to which people can go to accumulate count for a great deal when it comes to how consequential or dangerous a crowd might be to the survival of an established governmental or economic structure. Some cities, because of ancient land use planning, have open areas that straddle important lines of communication or threaten significant economic nodes. If, on the other hand, a formation of large crowds can be diverted to open spaces that present little threat to principle transportation links or other pieces of economic terrain, the ability of resistance leadership to extort concessions from government is greatly reduced. For the government planner, in other words, it is smart to orchestrate the architectural, spatial relationship of constrictions and access points to open spaces such that, whatever the speed of social media, there is a lessened potential for economic threat resulting from the fact of a crowd itself.

5. Progressively reduce enemy sanctuary space.^[13] A sanctuary is that space within which a contestant cannot be punished by their opponent. Sanctuary may be attained through anonymity, legalities, moral and electoral risk, and physical distance. Sanctuary is in any case a physical material place. One either enjoys a place wherein they are safe from the punishments that their foes can be impose upon them, or they are not. As such, the sanctuary space can be mapped, and while the cartographic delineations of sanctuary space will be hypothetical, it is that hypothesis exactly that can guide the application of competitive resources in order to shrink the sanctuary space of one's competitors and to increase one's own. In addition, every attempt should be made to map the likely routes to and from sanctuary spaces.

6. **Physically pursue of the *mens rea*.**[14] The challenge posed here is more than just a ‘small fries’ versus ‘big fish’ distinction. The locus of dangerous intent is the human mind, and while it may profit us to work intellectually against those ideas and messages that we find in some way dangerous, sending our opponents a stark physical message can be ultimately influential. To the extent it is apparent to our opponents that we can and will bring dire physical consequences upon those who lead others to act in ways we cannot abide, our goal of holding or taking the city will be more economically achieved. A competitor is most likely to be effective who can mount constant, physical pursuit of the human initiative of what aggravates him. It is leaders’ corporeal impunity from punishments (and in turn the impunity they can grant to others) that must be challenged and dismantled. If there exists a single imperative for any durable victory, it is that we definitively disprove any suggestion that our opponent can bestow physical impunity to his followers. If the good guys are not capable of physically pursuing the bad guys within whom resides the *mens rea*, it is unlikely that the good guys are making progress in the direction of durable victory.

7. **Punish the enemy.**[15] This to an extent is a repetition of line of effort 6 above. Pursuit of the *mens rea* is valuable in itself in that a vigorous pursuit keeps the opponent off balance, makes it difficult for him to take initiative, and whittles at his moral. However, the act of pursuit is not a goal. Punishment alone is proof of the absence of impunity. The punishments might include no more than the stripping of wealth or of public authority, but to be absolutely effective the punishment of the *mens rea* probably has to be corporeal, that is, confinement or death. The operant psychology is one of visibly extending punishments to the enemies’ *mens rea*. This may mean capturing or sniping leaders. To the extent it becomes clear that ‘we’ have a monopoly of punishment over ‘them’, that is, we can punish them, but they cannot punish us, we win and can negotiate from strength in view to the future. If on the other hand, they can close our sanctuary space, that is, they can occupy and use the mayor’s office, the court building or the police station, etc., or they can kidnap our daughters at the school or theatre, then we are well along the way toward losing. Ultimately, for winning (that is, controlling territory, that is, effective/efficient/sufficient influence, that is, controlling impunity, that is, ‘we dominate them’), we must be capable of punishing them and they not capable of punishing us.

How to Organize the Study of a Big City to Support the Seven Lines of Effort

This section proffers a separate list, suitable for research or intelligence, of phenomena on which to focus in order to make an explanatory description of a large urban area. I propose twelve research categories. All are relevant to resourcing and implementing the seven lines of effort, although some of the twelve more clearly allude to a specific line of effort.

1. Constriction points in the lines of supply into the city (water, power, food, and telecommunications)

a. Practical distance to and from (‘practical’ meaning cost or friction distances from a party’s start points or bases, i.e., time, fuel, money etc.)

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

2. Constriction points in the lines of waste in and going out of the city (garbage, sewage, hazmat, death and medical)

a. Practical distances to and from

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

3. *Key control points for city services within city (vulnerable nodes) (transportation, convocation, comfort)*

a. Practical distances to and from

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

4. *Most commercially valuable terrain (banks, by the way, are valuable. That's where the money is)*

a. Practical distances to and from

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

5. *Key events times, locations, movement and normal participations (both recurring and special events)*

a. Practical distances to and from

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

6. *Key recreation (especially sinful recreation) locations, times, normal participations (for a party's own members as well as for opponents', but especially for opponent parties' leadership)*

a. Practical distances to and from

b. What organizations control

-- Headquarters locations

-- Practical distance to and from

7. *Collective identities of note (political, ethnic, gang affiliation, etc.)*

a. Physical locus, scale and range

b. Representation (agents, especially exclusive agents)

-- Physical locus, extent, density and movements

-- Means of wielding influence

-- Capacities for physical coercion

8. *Exclusive agents (those who set themselves up as representatives of others and are jealous of that representation – like lawyers, politicians, union bosses, priests, etc.)***[16]**

- a. Physical locus and movements
 - Practical distance to and from
- b. Means of influence
- c. Instruments of physical coercion
- d. Available resources
- e. Known vulnerabilities and locations in time
 - What they love
 - Practical distance to and from
- f. Level of will (ruthlessness, courage, etc.)
- e. What nodes, constrictions, and key locations they control or occupy; which they do not control but are attempting to control, and which should they logically want to control.

9. Grievances of note

- a. Associations of grievances with namable collective identities
- b. Representation, especially exclusive representation of the grievance

Resolution possibilities and physical locus and range of resolution mechanism (i.e. jurisdictions)

10. Symbols of note (flags, songs, historical and literary figures, etc.)

- a. Physical locations where found, density or duration of occurrence
- b. Depth and extension of awareness and affectation regarding symbols
- c. Psychological, affective and political correlations

11. Known relevant attitudes (regarding us, allies, enemies, etc.)

- a. Location, density, intensity, range, durability
- b. Reflections in symbols, events, communications

All of the categories are inter-related and if for some reason facts asserted within a category do not reconcile with those of others, then something is amiss which requires a disclaimer, reconsideration of the assertions and probably more field research. A competitive objective, for instance, would be to control nodes physically - - the other factors (like knowing who exactly controls those nodes, the sources of their power to do so, and especially their physical vulnerabilities, feeds into possibilities of physically changing control the node, or alternatively, to protect the status quo.

Once nodes, etc. are identified along with their respective 'ownership', we can begin to measure how much strength it would take for other competitors to hold or to take, and to remain. If we correctly identify the nodes, constrictions and most valuable terrain, then the next step would be to understand the cost and risk distances in getting to those places and staying there. How far is each in practical terms, what resistance could be generated against getting to and staying in each place, as well as the likely useable routes of escape and withdrawal from attempts to take or hold the key locations -- all this is subject to geographic study.

What may seem as an emphasis on physical locations and their control is not a dismissal of the psychological or sociological elements (perhaps the 'subjective' dimensions and options), but it is intended to seek relative efficiency and appropriateness in the short-term use of coercive force.[17]

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

End Notes

[1] Meaning the range of armed coercive force available to a city's government along with the forces in play from any of the higher administrative levels to which a city might belong (department, nation, region, coalition, etc.). Units might include police military paramilitary militia, intelligence etc.

[2] See, regarding urban operations in Iraq see, Chris Bowers, "Future Megacity Operations—Lessons from Sadr City." *Military Review*, May-June, 2015.

[3] See, on this point, Michael Evans, "The Case against Megacities: The Megacity Myth," *The United States Army War College Quarterly, Parameters*, Vol 45 No 1 Spring 2015, pp. 33-43.

[4] The idea of the use of the control of impunity as a proxy for victory is adapted from Geoffrey Demarest. *Winning Irregular War: Conflict Geography*. Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), 2015, http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Winning-Insurgent-War/WIrW_2015.pdf.

[5] For expansion on this point see, "Section 39, Socioeconomic Causation," *ibid.* 155-158.

[6] To expand on this theme see, "Section 34, Urban or Rural," *ibid.* pp. 133-136.

[7] To expand on this theme see, "Section 2, Anonymity," *ibid.* pp. 4-5.

[8] To expand on this theme see, "Section 64, Measuring Distance and Comparing Power," *ibid.* pp. 262-66; "Section 32, Land-use Planning," *ibid.* pp. 126-129.

[9] See, on this point, "Section 32, Heavy Machines," *ibid.* pp. 119-120.

[10] To expand on this theme see, "Section 33, Engineers and the Built Environment," *ibid.* pp. 130-132.

[11] To expand on this theme see, "Section 91, Forts and Walls," *ibid.* pp. 366-370; "Section 94, Poop," pp. 379-380; "Section 63, Roadblocks and Checkpoints," pp. 258-261.

[12] To expand on this theme see, "Section 27, 'Nonviolent' Action," *ibid.* pp. 110-115.

[13] To expand on this theme see, "Section 7, Sanctuary," *ibid.* pp. 22-27; "Section 23, Mens Rea," pp. 96-98.

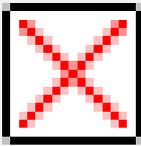
[14] To expand on this theme see, "Section 23, Mens Rea," *ibid.* pp. 96-98; "Section 10, Decisive Battle," *ibid.* pp. 36-39.

[15] For more on this theme see, “Section 1, Impunity,” *ibid.* pp. 1-3.

[16] For more on the theme of exclusive agency see the index entry of that term in *Winning Irregular War*, *ibid.*

[17] Pardon a bit of atmospherics, but the terms ‘long-term effect’ and ‘short-term effect’ are themselves relative, and it might be vanity to claim long-term goals are fundamentally better than short-term goals, or that ‘long-term’ is, without specific context, a more strategic notion than ‘short term’.

About the Author



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Geoffrey Demarest is a researcher in the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. He holds a JD and a PhD in International Studies from the University of Denver, and a PhD in Geography from the University of Kansas. He is a graduate of the US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and of the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Demarest's latest book is titled *Winning Insurgent War*.

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