How to conquer a nation in 20 years?

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This article comes with a double warning. First: it is not complete and its content is highly debatable. So there is a risk that you will start to think about the topic. My intent was not to finish this topic, but, in the spirit of the ThinkBox series, to ignite a debate. Anyhow, the topic is just too vast to cover in a few pages. Second: it may entice your darkest thoughts about waging wars. That is what it did to me. The more I thought about it, the darker the scenarios.

Now that you've been warned and did not stop reading, let's start.

Setting

You're the (military) leader of a big nation with an expanding population next to some countries that look promising as extra living space.

Question

How to conquer the needed, extra land?

The plan of attack

The sentence above could be the introduction of a nice setting for a planning exercise that most military will solve by devising some great plan to invade one or more of the weaker neighbouring countries. The preparation of the attack will be done swiftly and under concealment as to not spoil the surprise. The whole plan spans only a period of a few weeks, months at the most. Aggressive and quick.

In the execution, the surprise will never be as good as planned. Modern technology will soon pick up troop movements and spoil, at least part of, the surprise. Speeding things up will only increase the likelihood of detection. Even when the surprise is complete and the run-over a military success, a long and difficult period of keeping peace and order will follow, unless total annihilation was part of the plan. In the end, even a well-executed master plan of attack will take years to bring the needed extra land home.

What if you had to do it very slowly?

What if you were forced to take your time to conquer the neighbours? Say, your plan has to span the time it would take to conquer that country by military force followed by the long period to control it? Say, your invasion must take 20 years; how would you plan it?

First, the assumption of an assured long-term overall political control of the war effort, well-hidden in the above 'quick' military solution, surfaces. Without the continued determination to win, no nation will be conquered, fast or slow.

While we, supported by technology, are good at picking up fast moving things, we're bad at detecting slow evolutions. Especially if that change comes barely above the noise level. Can we conquer a nation at a speed that is too slow to detect?

This is not new. Mother Nature is one big, slow battlefield, every day, all day long. Darwin detected these fierce battles in the lives of plants and animals. His ground-breaking rule 'survival of the fittest' was a direct result of this observation. But did you see how that one tree conquered a big piece of its environment while in the meantime killing hundreds of seedlings? I bet you did not.

What if war has not Clausewitz' nature of a "continuation of policy by other means"? Not a continuation of political interactions carried in a different way? What if politics equals war? Total, unrestricted war with all means available. All means: demographical, political, financial, technological, economical, security … and military. A total war in its fullest sense. Wherein all the means are not to support the military effort, but for war. Jointness nec plus ultra.

But at a slow pace. A war so slow that you hardly notice it, the opposite of the Blitzkrieg. A war so slow that those waging it can deny it is actually happening. All that happens is covered by the fog of war. But rest assured, the end result can be as brutal as the fast variant: 'annihilation' of the enemy.

Don't be naive. A Slow War can be detected by revealing the big pattern over time. If you could play the seemingly isolated events of a Slow War in sped-up time, its real nature would be visible. But that nature is so fuzzy that it will look like some strange, farfetched complot theory. Even if identified as a Slow War, it will be hard to get a general acceptance big enough to mobilize and to unite the 'forces' necessary to counter the war.

Some principles

It is too soon to come up with a complete list of principles for this kind of war. And it will be hard to come up with a list based on real life experience, as it is almost certain that where there were such wars in the past, it will be hard to positively identify them. Nevertheless, let me try it:

Unity of Command

This principle of the fast, conventional type of warfare, 'unity of command', stays important in the slower version. All efforts have to be directed to the common goal, or at least so turned around that they do. The biggest challenge is that this unity of command over all means must be sustainable during a long period.

Creativity

A surprising principle, but very necessary. Certainly, at the strategic level it is necessary to come up with new approaches that are outside the box of the adversaries and their allies (and of the rest of the world for that matter). An indirect approach at low speed needs a creative brain backed-up by

tenacity and a clear goal. Every action must be carefully thought through, as everything must stay deniable.

Communication

Denying actions not only depends on their nature, but also on the ability to convince others. Good communications are critical to thicken the fog that hide the actions. You excel at it when you're able to accuse your enemy of doing what you are doing. Even if the other side does not fall into your traps, you must exploit their doing so, real or imaginary.

Patience

A slow conquest tomorrow is better than a fast one today. Do not rush towards your goal. Even if there are some drawbacks. Speed is NOT of the essence, patience is!

Three phases

Taking it slowly does not mean that there is no need for a master plan guiding the execution. The plan may not look like a military campaign on a map; it may even be wise to never put it on paper to leave no trace. Nevertheless, I think that such a campaign will evolve around three phases.

Phase 1: Infiltration

Mao Tse Tung declared that in the revolutionary war the people are the sea wherein the revolution moves safely. The purpose of a Slow War is not to swim like a fish in the sea but to replace the fresh water of a lake by spilling small drops of salt water into it. The infiltration must be done on all levels of power. This can be achieved by helping the other side financially, intellectually, socially … and making sure that help is accompanied by people on the ground. Humanitarian aid after a disaster while leaving some of the support team behind to stay is a great way towards this goal.

But not only good and nice people may be used for this purpose, terrorists and common criminals may also become handy. They are not only small drops but can be used later as an excuse to send police and military forces in an effort to aid the country in restoring law and order. Troops that will tend to stay.

Phase 2: Destabilisation and Protection

Once there is enough salt water in the lake, the next phase can start.

This is most probably done at different times in different places as it is highly unlikely that the infiltration will be equally successful.

People have a natural tendency to stick together along ethnic lines. This tendency is used to create concentrations by buying houses and reselling them to certain ethnic groups. These concentrations are an ideal hiding place for criminals and terrorists. They in turn can be used to foster insecurity amongst the indigenous population that turns to you for protection.

As the assailant, you can offer help in case of disaster or unrest, even if you're causing it, although in a deniable way. The efforts are multifaceted, camouflaged attempts to cultivate support in the general population, often while undermining the local regime.

The ethnic groups favourable to the cause can be further enlarged by stimulated emigration over fluid borders, a higher birth rate, and demands for reuniting families …

Phase 3: Consolidation

Salt water has replaced fresh water in some areas.

In the final phase the idea is to consolidate big concentrations by linking small concentrations of favourable ethnic groups and rendering integration difficult through deepening differences. By linking the smaller concentrations and chasing the locals away from the links, bigger concentrations can be formed. These concentrated groups will feel isolated and discriminated, and start asking for their political rights. If well prepared, most of their demands will be satisfied. This will make the movement stronger. If not accommodated, you can use this as proof of discrimination.

If strong enough, a cry for independence backed up by the assailant willing to protect the ethnical related groups will open the door for annexation, the final goal.

The use of all powers

More than in conventional war, Slow War demands the application of all powers. The powers of a nation are sometimes summarized by the acronym 'midlife': military, informational, diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence, financial, and economic (e. g. agriculture, energy). I would like to add politics, population, education, technology, environment, and ideology to that list. Some sources of power cannot be used in a conventional manner or are of great value in specific phases.

For inspirational purposes, below are some examples for the use of these powers.

Politics

As the assailant, you can applaud members of favourable ethnic groups as loyal citizens of the other country by spotlighting their voting record. This of course has to be preceded by stimulating those groups to vote. If voting is not permitted, you can show this discrimination to the world and demand the right to vote for those discriminated groups.

By organising block voting, the attacker can nominate persons to political office to bring about favourable legislation toward and in support of potential sympathizers. Some groups with deniable links can send intimidating messages and messengers to the outspoken individuals who are critical and seek to eliminate them by hook or crook. There can be a war of words using local leaders.

Political aggression may further include aggressive tactics like assassination, paramilitary activity, sabotage, coup d'état, insurgency, revolution, guerrilla warfare, and civil war, but these tools should be used as last resort only.

Military

The nature of military power makes it not very useful for Slow War, except in a supporting role and in the third phase. Armed forces are just too visible and linked to the central government to be deniable. A conceived threat may be useful, but only if the threat is believable without the risk of being dragged into open conflict. Individuals or small teams can be used under the cloak of 'ordinary crime' or terrorism. But the link to the military should always be deniable.

Informational

You have to make sure your 'people' has a face for the other side. It is hard to fight people you know well. Celebrities build up good will and credibility, things that can be used. They must engage the public in dialogues, discussions, debates in colleges, universities, public libraries, radio, TV … They must not be shy to engage in exchange, but have to remember to not try to win and to be non-aggressive, certainly in the first phases.

Showing faces is just the beginning. Start taking control of as much of the press, TV, radio and the Internet as possible by buying the related corporations or a controlling stock. Create new businesses in the world of information and entertainment. Small enterprises that are not threatening anybody, but that can grow by working together.

There will be a moment when you will need the media to deny attacks or to explain it as misinterpretation, to let the world know that your people are mistreated, to rally people, … Slowly prepare the tools you'll need some day.

Unify the numerous student centres, educational organizations, magazines and papers by Internet and organize an annual convention to 'coordinate' plans, and engender news in the media.

There is a multitude on channels that can be used to transmit propaganda when the time is there. In the meantime, things should slowly be built up. There is no deniability in a sudden change in the nature of the message. Modern social technology allows us to disseminate information to a vast number of people. Use diverse channels to do that because even moderate channels can be useful in the big scheme of things.

The printed word is also very powerful, including pamphlets, leaflets, books, magazines, political cartoons, and planted newspaper articles (clandestine or otherwise). Subversion, agents of influence, spies, journalists, and 'useful idiots' can all be used as powerful tools. Your messages will be more powerful when told by others.

Use both 'white' and 'black' propaganda. 'White' or overt propaganda comes from a known source. 'Black' propaganda, however, is propaganda which originates from an unknown source. The key to black propaganda is the fact that it most often appears to come from a disinterested source when in fact it does not.

Diplomatic

Show the world that you're the leader of a peaceful and concerned neighbouring country trying to help your people abroad. Build favourable relationships to make sure you have and keep the benefit of the doubt. Try to join alliances while poisoning the relationships amongst members.

Law enforcement

Increase crime in the other country by 'exporting' your criminals and providing them sanctuary. If the victim-nation is complaining that you do not prosecute persons committing crimes abroad, explain the gap in legislation and ask permission to send police to help restore law and order. If allowed, use your police to 'protect' the favourable ethnic groups.

Intelligence

Decrease the sense of security by manipulating the intelligence community with misinformation. Periodically overwhelm the data gathering systems with reports of impending attacks on bridges, tunnels, water supplies, airports, apartment buildings and malls. Openly stimulate your people to report, and provide them with doubtful data to consequently report.

Financial

Try to infiltrate the local businesses by financially helping companies. Create a dependency of local business to assure an iron grip on the local economy.

Economic (e.g. agriculture, energy)

Export the good things of your nation, even if you have shortages. Stimulate the creation of restaurants. Send out medical experts, engineers, and other professionals to occupy key positions in the economy. Use the resulting economic power to influence decisions.

Technology

Help the other by offering technology with support in the form of experts. Make sure that you stay in control of that technology.

As good example is cyber technology. Computers and software are all around and can contain sleeper software activated with a simple command.

Environment

Environmental accidents can be used as propaganda against the ruling government, even if these are created for such a purpose. Pollution is cross-border and a perfect excuse to gain influence. An environmental disaster creates the opportunity to send in troops under the excuse of humanitarian aid.

In a more active way, the environment can be used along the lines of separation. Different culinary habits may offer the possibility to poison particular food chains or to introduce diseases.

Culture

After the initial attenuation of the ideological and religious differences, the cultural lines of separation can be used to widen the gap and to enhance the formation of ghettos. These concentrations facilitate the 'we against them' feeling, necessary for phase 3.

Educational

The youth are the future of a nation, so be sure to infiltrate the educational system. Demand that your culture is explained. Facilitate the teaching of your country's history by offering teachers, free packages, online courses …

Try to create your own schools that focus on your cultural specificity which will lessen interest in integration.

Provide very sizeable monetary grants to colleges and universities in America to establish centres for studying your culture and promoting the introduction in higher education institutions.

Population

Like most wars, it is all about the people, but instead of trying to convince the current inhabitants, you replace them slowly, but steadily. You can use the concept of demographic changes, such as the rise of megacities, aging of the local population, stimulated immigration and refugees to your advantage. First infiltrate the population and later expand your ethnic group by means higher birth rates, mixed marriages, family reunifications …

Afterthoughts

It must be clear by now that to wage a Slow War you must have access to a wide spectrum of sources of power. A diversified use of power and their tools render it possible to stay below the noise level and to conquer a nation in a deniable manner. Only a trend analysis bordering on paranoia makes such a war and its goals visible. The disbelief in complot theories and the normal turnover of military and other personnel decreases the possibility of such a discovery.

I have no doubt that if we analyse some slow evolutions in the world around us, certain trends would surface. The question is if some of these trends are orchestrated by a single body towards common objectives. We may never know it. And if we suspect it, who will believe us and what can we do about it?