



IJ Brief Bringing the Fundamentals of Strategy to IR

Are you a student of international relations (IR)? Are you finding IR theory elegant, but detached? Are you wondering whether something essential has been left out of a discipline that covers centuries of warfare, but not sure what? Are you finding yourself asking how the winners win, and the losers lose? Or what strategy actually is and how is it developed? Or what war is, and why is it important, and whether it is ever unimportant?

We at Infinity Journal believe a solid grasp of the fundamentals of war and strategy is absolutely critical for a true understanding how states and non-state actors interact with one another. War is a fundamental aspect of international relations. Always has been; always will be. And, yet, most IR courses talk around war, as if it were ancillary, something avoidable, an aberration — so long as war isn't studied, it isn't a threat.

Unfortunately, most IR degrees do not offer the student a full appreciation for how strategy works or how war extends the reach of policy. Many IR courses do not actually give us a functional understanding of policy. To get that understanding, we have to make a special effort, take additional courses, study the history of warfare, and talk to military practitioners.

The good news: it can be done, and for a true education, our efforts along such lines are well worth the price. To be clear, international relations — and the theories that are a part of this area of study — is a truly wonderful discipline: it both enlightens and obscures; it instructs and obstructs. What other field can do as much? To know the difference, we have to be critical, even skeptical.

But, where to turn? If we don't have the experience to temper theory, and can't realistically understand it, what are we to do? Let's be clear, all theories require tempering, not only IR theories. We must check them against practice, even if we are not practitioners ourselves. As the great military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz[i], reminded us: "Just as some plants bear fruit only if they do not shoot up too high; so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned, and the plant kept close to its proper soil—experience." [ii] So, if we are not practitioners, our knowledge of the fundamentals of war and strategy become all the more important. That knowledge can help us prune theory, making sure that our theory is sound and will help us understand the larger picture.

The list of necessary fundamentals is not a long one. While perhaps overly simplistic but befitting for this brief, we can place five into numbering format:

- It includes understanding that war is a violent contest of opposing political wills;
- That war takes place within an atmosphere of chance and uncertainty;
- And, that war is a continuation of political intercourse by other means.

War extends the reach of policy by allowing political leaders to communicate their intentions through military power whether employed on land, sea, or in the air, when, for example diplomacy fails.

The list of fundamentals must also include the following fourth and fifth items on our list of necessary basics on war and strategy.

- A functional definition of strategy — as the "bridge" that connects political aims and means.[iii] Concerning bridges — what was it, for instance, that made German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck a remarkable strategist in terms of his foreign policies, but a near failure with regard to his domestic policies?
- To answer the latter question, we need to have a working knowledge of military history. Military history assists us in understanding how wars have been fought over time and across cultures — and political history, which tells us how people have prioritized their political choices.

Regrettably, we will not find these items discussed appropriately in IR courses; but they are incredibly essential to the IR student, if he or she wishes to truly understand why war is one of the most consequential ways in which political entities have interacted with one another throughout history, and the critical role that strategy plays.

The field of international relations is justifiably rich in theory. It has to be. IR is about explaining the behavior of states and non-states, and about finding patterns in that behavior. This, too, is valuable knowledge. It can help us make better policies and strategies. But, in our view, that goal of understanding can

To cite this Article: "Bringing the Fundamentals of Strategy to IR", *Infinity Journal*, IJ Brief, October 2012.

never be reached without a firm grasp of the fundamentals of war and strategy because theory limits our understanding at least as much as it enlarges it. It is no better than the agendas, biases, and ignorance of its authors allow it to be. Theory, if left to its own devices, will take on a life of its own. To prevent that, we need Clausewitz's pruning shears, and the ability to use them with confidence and precision.

At Infinity Journal, we aim to help with the pruning. The articles we publish get at the heart of the fundamentals we

discussed above. It is the scholars and practitioners who write these articles, some of whom are both. We don't eschew theory; nor do we privilege practice. We seek to understand strategy better, both in theory and practice.

Infinity Journal is more than a publication on the theory and practice of strategy. We, at Infinity Journal, are dedicated to helping you better understand war and strategy – whether you are a student or academic, military practitioner or policymaker.

Endnotes

[i] Infinity Journal highly recommends reading so-called "primers" to Clausewitz, prior to jumping into the Prussian military theorist's Magnum Opus, *On War*. We recommend reading various writings by such scholars as Antulio J. Echevarria II, Colin S. Gray, Hugh Smith, Christopher Bassford, Christopher Daase, Daniel Moran, and Peter Paret, among many others. However, feel free to email us to ask for specific recommendations, and we will do our best to assist you.

[ii] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984), 61.

[iii] Colin Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).