



IJ Brief What is Strategy?

What are we talking about? The noun and the adjective, strategy and strategic, are so commonly, indeed casually employed that it can be shocking to appreciate how frequently they are misapplied. Given the very high stakes of this subject for national and international security, misunderstanding and therefore misuse of the concept of strategy can be dangerous and expensive. Fortunately, such perils and costs are as easily avoidable as they are gratuitous. For an efficient definition of strategy, the following has sufficient merit to serve well enough: "Military strategy is the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics".[i] This definition obviously and suitably is heavily indebted to Carl von Clausewitz, who told us, "Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war".[ii] What matters most for the definition of strategy is that it must be crystal clear in the necessary assertion that the subject is all about instrumentality. Strategy is about the use made of force for political purposes. Strategy is not the application of force itself, that is warfare and there is a professional term for it – tactics. Combat is tactics and tactical, the use made of that combat is strategy.

All military behaviour has some strategic meaning, be it ever so minor, net positive or negative, but it is not inherently strategic. It may make sense to consider war as having strategic, operational, and tactical levels, but all forces of all kinds behave tactically, just as they all contribute to net strategic effect. Despite conceptual abuses asserting to the contrary, there are no strategic forces. Strategic always refers to the consequences of military behaviour, not to its conduct. "Long-range", "nuclear", or "most important", are not synonyms for strategic. An important reason for this apparent pedantry is to enable, at least encourage, strategic thought about the forces in question. It can be very hard to recognize the need for strategic thought about forces that one has already labelled strategic. Surely, everything they do must be strategic, by definition?

The conceptual architecture of strategy is expressed most economically in the simple three-way formula of policy ends, strategic ways, and military means – with the whole construction fuelled substantially by prevailing assumptions. Since strategy is always future-leaning, rather than retrospective, the unavoidability of assumptions is obvious. It is important to remember that assumptions are never empirically certain; if they were they would be facts.

Strategic thoughts and plans for tomorrow or the day after are especially in need of reminder that future events are incapable of empirical verification now. Each leg of the triad for strategy is essential to the integrity of the whole project. If policy goals are either missing from the action or can provide no meaningful guidance, then the strategist cannot select ways in which to achieve (unspecified) ends. Should strategy and its selected ways be absent from proceedings, then the action by the military means must be conducted according to no purposefully intelligent design beyond its immediate tactical opportunistic significance. And finally, if the military means are not able or willing to fight hard enough or smart enough to beat the enemy's military means, it will not matter what policy goals and strategy might be, because the whole enterprise will collapse in failure.

It is argued convincingly that policy (meaning politics) and strategy are relatively more important than are their tactical military means, because tactical mistakes can be corrected, provided the geography of a war allows you a sufficient sanctuary in space and time. In sharp contrast, political error and strategic error typically are fatal for a contemporary conflict; they can only be corrected in time for the next war.[iii] If this sounds remarkably like NATO's adventures in Afghanistan, so be it!

Strategy functions in historical experience in the form of particular plans for using the threat and use of force to solve the problems of the day. It is important, however, to recognize the distinction between strategies to do "this" or "that" now, and Strategy (capitalized perhaps) the subject. The latter, Strategy, is an eternal and ubiquitous function that all security communities have required, past, present, and we can anticipate with extremely high confidence, future also. Human security communities – extended families, clans, tribes, states, even gangs of bandits – have to do strategy, functionally understood, because they all have purposes (political ends) that need protecting or advancing by choice of effective methods (strategic ways), using whatever instruments of coercion (military means), they have or can acquire. All human social communities seek security through a stable and advantageous distribution of power. This quest for security both internally and inter-communally has a generic name, politics. We do politics because we are human and we always find that we need it. And in order to manage the relationships of power distribution one has to do strategy.

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It does not matter that strategy in our common meaning of the word, distinctive from tactics, did not appear in English, French, German, or Italian, until the 1770s, our ancestors of all races and persuasions conducted strategy as the use of available means in effective ways to achieve political ends. [iv] The idea that polities in Ancient and Mediaeval times could not have thought or behaved strategically because they did not have a word for it, or an obvious synonym to our contemporary meaning of it, in their language, is simply absurd. The idea of a strategy-absent Roman Empire is ludicrous. The necessity for strategic thought and behaviour is a condition of secure political existence. The 30 Legions of Imperial Rome and their Auxiliary support were not deployed at random.

The strategists who must devise and execute strategies for their day are able to seek and find educational help in the general theory of Strategy. This theory explains what Strategy is, what it does, and how and why it works. The principal authors of the theory, of course writing in the language and with some of the stamp of their time, place, and circumstances, most notably were Thucydides, Sun-tzu, Niccolo Machiavelli (arguably), and Carl von Clausewitz. The two and a half millennia of provenance of the shortlist of classics on the theory of strategy attests more than adequately to the persistence of thought about Strategy in general, and to the persistence of its practice of strategy in local particulars of time, place, and context. Discontinuities in detail of character abound, but continuity in nature is the enduring reality of strategic history.

Endnotes

[i] Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.262.

[ii] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds., Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1832-4; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p.177.

[iii] "Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever". See Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.33.

[iv] On the historical provenance of 'strategy' the concept, see the outstanding discussion in Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch.1, "What is Strategy?"