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A Note From The Editor

There will be nothing new here. More mindful readers will yet again be aware that this issue is, yet again, late. It is late for the same reasons as always and that is because it is extremely hard to secure articles with the standard of insights required to get published.

"Oh," but I hear you wail, "how come all the Strategy blogs have no such problems." This is like asking why dolphins can't hold their breath for more time than sharks. Blogs can publish anything they want; finish writing at 10:00, publish at 10:30, perhaps take it down to make corrections, and there appears to be no real minimum standard.

The content of this issue shows we hold our contributors to a high standard but it also maybe that we have standards that are too high for the frequency of publication we aim for.

Military Strategy Magazine (MSM) rests on nothing more than the quality of the published work, that will endure into institutions that hold it, such as the Library of Congress, or how often it can be referenced from citations in other work. The content is free of charge, so there is no other agenda here. It is produced for professional community benefit.

As previously stated, the word Strategy has become meaningless to the extent that most definitions are nugatory and arbitrary. Thus, MSM finds itself adhering to ideas and teaching, which while 100% valid do not fulfil the entertainment value that the market wants. We want to cure cancer with surgery and proven therapeutics in a marketplace that has greater belief in scented candles and healing crystals.

Regardless of what has happened to date, the time for change may well be upon us. Change maybe painful and destructive. Change may ultimately mean demise, but demise might be preferable to irrelevance. Strategy is a practical skill at the point of application. Very few people are strategists, but many people think they are students of Strategy. Strategy can only be done as tactics, so unless you really understand tactics – that is the application of combat forces in the engagements – then all other claims to Strategy are suspect. It maybe that for too long MSM has failed to state this as the non-discretionary basis for your position. We shall see.

William F. Owen
Editor, *Military Strategy Magazine*
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Strategic Sense in the Writing and Reading of History

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About the author

Lukas Milevski is an assistant professor at the Institute of History at Leiden University, where he teaches strategy in the BA International Studies and MA International Relations programs. He has published two books with Oxford University Press: *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018).

Strategic sense may be acquired, to some degree, from studying history; much has been written about history's importance to the strategist. It has even been suggested, not unjustifiably, that "no other profession believes more strongly that the study of its past—going back not merely decades but centuries, or even millennia— has something to offer its practitioners in the present."[i]

Yet substantially less has been written about whether or not history or, more particularly, the writing of history, is itself strategically sensible. Beyond the crucial element of what to include in any history, how that history is communicated can matter a great deal. Chris Paparone, criticizing the overly linear manner of strategic thinking taught in American professional military education, tied what he believed to be a low level of strategic sense to a flawed understanding of history: "educators and practitioners of strategy just have the luxury of viewing the

past through the lens of causal certainty, a lens that does not work when looking toward the future...Only through the study of history do they know how things ended up. Knowing how the story ended, institutions can attribute causal relationships that reinforce beliefs that such ends can be rationally achieved through purposeful strategies toward the future."[ii] Although Paparone's criticism of both strategic thinking and strategic history may go too far in some ways, the link between history and strategic sense deserves further exploration. A crucial point of tension between strategic sense and history is the role of uncertainty and the particular way in which historians handle uncertainty given their advantages of hindsight.

This article begins with a brief exploration of strategic sense, to emphasize how it opposes the uncertainty of war. It then discusses how the writing of history may affect the way we understand it, which necessarily has consequences for strategic sense and the historical interpretations and strategic concepts which we develop with our strategic sense.

Strategic Sense

Strategy requires a particular way of thinking, one which encompasses the instrumental logic of trying to match available means to desired political goals as well as the adversarial logic of trying to impose one's preferred instrumental logic on an active, intelligent enemy seeking to do the exact same thing in return. This thinking can be either more or less sensible, as implemented by any particular strategist in any particular war. Neither thinking nor implementation is easy; the whole interaction of the core interlocking relationships of strategy is more or less complex and non-linear.

Understandings of strategic sense have varied historically. The ancient Chinese believed it was inherently mystical and derived from the Dao, which allowed the strategist to understand and even manipulate the predisposition of future events while also restricting him to that predisposition.[iii] Famously, Clausewitz wrote about military genius, comprised of "first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead. The first of these qualities is described by the French term, *coup d'oeil*; the second is determination."[iv] Colin Gray has written about strategic sense and the strategist in a heroic vein: "To bend an enemy's will to resist and, if required, to reduce the capacity of his military means to do harm, the strategist needs to have control over the course of events. For this heroic task to be feasible, the strategist first must ensure that he controls his own capacity to do the harm he intends."[v] Lawrence Freedman has somewhat qualified the idea of the master strategist, by noting that "[t]he great

strategists therefore tended to be those who were able to identify the most salient features of a conflict, political as well as military, and how they might be influenced."[vi]

What emerges from how strategic thinkers have wrestled with the idea of strategic sense is that sense must be the strategist's answer to uncertainty about the future pattern of adversarial interaction in the present war, as influenced by myriad factors. Uncertainty is endemic to the practice of strategy. A strategist may be uncertain about many things: the enemy's location, strength, intentions, political will; about the weather tomorrow; about the terrain on the other side of the hill; and so on. A strategist may even be uncertain about the fighting strength of his own forces, the limits of his own political will, or even whether or not the chosen and implemented strategy is working. Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley purposely made uncertainty definitionally central to strategy: "strategy is a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate. Moreover, it is a world in which the actions, intentions, and purposes of other participants remain shadowy and indistinct, taxing the wisdom and intuition of the canniest policymaker."[vii] The uncertainty may be so predominant that it is unclear whether or not the strategist may succeed in achieving the desired political goals.

Strategic sense is the conceptual opposite to uncertainty. Only strategists with sufficient sense—sufficient relative to the challenge posed by the enemy—can penetrate that uncertainty and allow the strategist to act in a more than ad hoc, reactive manner. Only sensible strategists can discover or impose some degree of control and linearity in the relative (but not complete) uncertainty and chaos of warfare—total control and linearity being impossible.

The ultimate sources of strategic sense are fairly straightforward: "formal education; the informal education that experience may provide; and individual human nature."[viii] Personal talent and genius, as of an Alexander, Scipio, or Napoleon, may be used as exemplars in formal education but cannot be learned directly. Whether a true military genius happens to develop in a particular polity at a particular time requires a substantial degree of luck. Accumulation of experience may certainly be useful as a source of insight, but it must be tempered by reflection. Without reflection, experience can be useless at best or harmful at worst if wrong conclusions are drawn and wrong lessons learned. Reflection, in turn, is most effective when buttressed by formal education—which must include history.

Uncertainty and the Study and Writing of History

Insightful knowledge of *strategic* history is a crucial basis for strategic sense. Yet virtually *all* history can be made

strategically relevant in some way. Not only is strategy multi-dimensional, but the number of dimensions reaches as high as seventeen according to Gray's count, including among others disparate dimensions such as society, culture, economics and logistics, military organization, technology, and geography.[ix] Political, social, economic, etc, histories may be as meaningful as campaign histories for understanding the conduct of war. This is a crucial part of Michael Howard's injunction that history be read in breadth, depth, and context, which he helped pioneer through his own written histories.[x]

Yet just because virtually all history can be strategically relevant, does not mean that virtually all history is necessarily strategically sensible, particularly in its communication. Not all historians can match the style of Howard or the other greats. To inform strategic sense, the problem arises, that the historian already knows how it ends. With hindsight the historian does not face the uncertainty which plagues any, or every, strategist; this feature of historical writing can crucially affect how history is presented. The classicist Jon Lendon has commented:

Battle descriptions in today's histories are usually written backwards in a logical chain from the outcome of the battle. From the result of the battle, then, proceed in reverse order the fighting that created that result, the manoeuvres, the dispositions of the units of the armies that did that fighting, and, first of all, the plans of the commanders that disposed and set those units in motion (although the plans of one commander can, if a surprise lies in the future, be held back for dramatic effect). This strong logic disciplines the battle description: we hear of the climactic engagement, not what happens elsewhere; we hear of the units in at the kill, but rarely get a full account of the forces of either army; the terrain is described where it bears upon that decisive combat, but the rest of the battlefield is neglected. Similarly, differences in numbers or equipment between the contending sides, matters of supply or weather or chance, the quality of troops or weapons, or human foibles – stupidity, insubordination, over-boldness, cowardice – tend to appear in the account only where the main plot requires them, unless, of course, they offer comic anecdotes.[xi]

Hindsight is a tricky beast in history. In one sense, it can be the whole point of history. Without hindsight, of what value is history? History requires hindsight as much as experience requires reflection. It is because we know how things ended that we can make judgments and learn something from history, regardless of whether this occurs as part of a ham-fisted, generic lessons, learned process or a nuanced and philosophical historical reflection. Hindsight is especially crucial if we wish to do better, and be wiser, next time. Yet hindsight eliminates—or seems to eliminate—uncertainty. The question necessarily arises: if strategic sense is meant to penetrate uncertainty, but hindsight has already removed it, how can history be strategically sensible?

Ultimately history can never really eliminate uncertainty, for a number of reasons. First, the historical record is inherently incomplete, and rarely more so than in war. Clausewitz recognized that "the facts are seldom fully known and the underlying motives even less so. They may be intentionally concealed by those in command, or, if they happen to be transitory and accidental, history may not have recorded them at all."[xii] History is hostage to a basic, albeit variable, uncertainty about some (but rarely all) of the facts. It is written around this uncertainty, in the same way that a military operation is planned around geographical or terrain features.

Second, history is rarely definitive. Historical interpretations are made and become orthodox for a generation, they are challenged and revised by the next generation, whose work in turn is challenged by yet another new generation of scholars. When exploring causation in history, not only are the facts incomplete, but they are often legitimately interpretable in various ways. When there is room for interpretation, uncertainty necessarily exists. History as written may be arguable, agreeable, maybe even right, but sometimes it can also be hard to know the difference. The alternative is probably less frequent: historical certainty can and does exist, and attempts to see uncertainty on such topics may be intellectually and, depending on the topic, even morally dishonest.

Third, historical judgment is inherently also counter-historical, counterfactual judgment. This is an all-but-inescapable feature of judgment. For example, if one were to argue that the battles of Stalingrad or Midway were decisive turning points of the Second World War in their respective theaters, one simultaneously implies the counterfactual point that without these battles, as they historically occurred, those decisive turning points would not have occurred, or at the very least, not in the place or way that they actually did. This inherent uncertainty is of the same sort which the practicing strategist faces, albeit in a far less morally challenging context: it is the uncertainty of potential futures which have not (yet) come to pass. In making judgments, historians are, consciously or not, thinking about untrodden, past historical futures in the same way that strategists think about untrodden present-day futures. When making such judgments, historians cannot escape uncertainty, although rarely do they engage with the counterfactual side of the judgment—and for good reason, as by virtue of being counterfactual, hardly any evidence exists!

But the perception of uncertainty is also affected by hindsight through the way it shapes history as it is written. Hindsight encourages historians to write history more efficiently and, through efficiency, with greater certainty and linearity. The historian can identify the key narrative and follow it; often, the key narrative is the one which may be unraveled from the end to the beginning without substantial breaks, then to be travelled forward from beginning to end in a coherent

narrative. This is seen as good writing in a technical and stylistic sense, as digression is understandably normally undesirable.

Back to Strategic Sense from Historical Writing

Despite its attractiveness, stylistic efficiency can decontextualize the historical process under study, including military action. Decontextualization runs counter to Howard's advice specifically to engage with the context of one's subject. Context matters greatly for instilling strategic sense through the study of history. Any particular interpretation of strategic history is an encapsulation of the author's strategic sense relating to that topic. Any new concept proposed and added to the ideational ecosystem of strategic studies, whether an operational concept like AirLand Battle or a more general concept like hybrid or gray zone warfares, encapsulates the involved thinkers' and authors' aggregate strategic sense. These interpretations and concepts offer both a collective basis and a shortcut for thinking about present and future challenges. If they are flawed, subsequent strategic performance is likely to be compromised.

First, decontextualization may lead to the belief that the particular military action studied was not merely decisive, but the only contributing factor to the outcome. The recurring debates over who really contributed most to victory in the Second World War are a case in point. For example, Phillips Payson O'Brien has challenged the usual wisdom that the Soviets were the main contributors to the defeat of Germany, arguing instead that it was attrition of industrially-high-effort material inflicted by the Western allies which was decisive.[xiii] Despite much good sense in this argument, it not only goes too far but also reflects a notion of war as essentially an abstract tabulation of material capabilities in which neither human lives nor geography matter. Obviously, they do matter; Hitler shot himself because the Soviets were a few hundred meters from his bunker in Berlin, not because the Western Allies had essentially destroyed the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine, crucial though those and other Western efforts were to incapacitating Germany in the months and years leading up to May 1945.

Second, decontextualization also matters for purposes of categorization. The West was surprised by Russia's so-called hybrid warfare against Ukraine in 2014, which led to a major emphasis on Russian subversive practices. Consequently, it has characterized Russia as a pioneer of these practices, notwithstanding Russia's own perspective which holds that the West did it all first, having supported various revolutions in countries around Russia's borders or traditionally friendly to Russia, and even including the Arab Spring. Similarly, conventional history understands the Second World War as the exemplary conventional war, neglecting not only widespread partisan warfare but also

the degree to which modern concepts of gray zone warfare were arguably preempted by the United States' 1940-41 undeclared war against Germany in the Atlantic.

Stylistic efficiency and potential decontextualization inherent in writing history may in turn engender new theories of warfare characterized by decontextualized assumptions of historical efficiency. This leads to the narrowly linear and excessively efficient strategic thinking of which Paparone disapproved. Effects-based operations (EBO) is one example. As Hew Strachan critiqued, "[e]ffects-based operations sought to plan by beginning with the desired outcome, with the implicit assumption that it might be gained by means very different from those suggested by capability-based plans…It reverse-engineered from a desired future without making sufficient allowance for what might happen en route, or indeed for unintended consequences."[xiv] EBO is based on the notion that precise, limited strikes may have precise desired effects. EBO proponents sought unsuccessfully to operationalize historical efficiency. A particular—and rather flawed—kind of strategic sense in the study of history combined with excessive faith in technological advancement led ultimately to a strategically insensible operational concept.

Conclusion

Strategists and historians necessarily treat uncertainty differently. Endemic to strategy, uncertainty is apparently, but not actually, eliminated in history. Since strategists must rely on their own strategic sensibility in the face of uncertainty in war and often educate themselves through history to be better prepared for the challenges of practicing strategy, this basic difference in relation to uncertainty matters for learning. Poorly conceived or poorly written history may instil a sense of apparent historic certainty, linearity, and clarity—in sum, historical efficiency—which in turn may lead to poor strategic sense. Efficiency is not always appropriate; Edward Luttwak in a wholly different context notes how efficiency in defense spending is the opposite of strategic effectiveness.[xv] This substantially applies to historical efficiency versus strategic sense as well.

A companion of poor history is poor reading of history. Although no one reader may control the quality of the history, that reader can control whether or not, and how to, read any work of history best to develop his strategic sense. Even poor history can help build strategic sense if engaged effectively. Viewed from the context of common tropes of how military history is written, for purposes of developing strategic sense, one should ask questions framed by concerns about overemphasis on the main action narrative leading to potential decontextualization of the history. Unlike what historians convey, the strategist must focus on the whole field he faces. Inherently, the practicing strategist needs more information than the historian provides. He

must critically and contextually engage with the history, by connecting and comparing it to other relevant knowledge,

to draw out more from it than the historian has written.

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Azerbaijan's Victory: Initial Thoughts and Observations (and Caveats for the 'Innovative')

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Dr Simon Anglim teaches in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, where he is in charge of the postgraduate Contemporary War and Warfare module. He has written two books and over a dozen articles on historical and contemporary military strategy, focusing particularly on the use of Special Forces in both historical and contemporary operations.

Victory in the 21st century

Autumn 2020 saw the Republic of Azerbaijan, a country in the South Caucasus, population around 10 million and annual military budget of just $2 billion, achieve something the USA and UK had not for nearly thirty years – winning a war. 10 November brought an armistice, brokered by Russia, ending the six week-long Azerbaijani offensive into Nagorno-Karabakh - the region of southwestern Azerbaijan which, according to viewpoint, was under illegal occupation by Armenia since the previous Armenia-Azerbaijan war of 1992-1994 or struggling for independence as the Armenian-majority 'Republic of Artsakh' - and the seven Azerbaijani districts also under Armenian occupation since 1994 surrounding it.[i] Under the terms of the armistice, Azerbaijan kept the territories it reconquered – four of the seven districts - while the Armenians ceded the other three, Azerbaijan thereby regaining around two-thirds of the territory lost in the 1990s.[ii] To Azerbaijanis[iii], 'The Patriotic War' is a historic triumph, the healing of a quarter-century old 'bleeding wound' central to their national identity, peaked by the recapture of the major historical and cultural centre of Shusha the week before the peace deal was signed.[iv] For Armenia it is the diametric opposite: the Armenian government and the armed forces of 'Artsakh' – the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Force (NKDF) – failed demonstrably on every level despite obdurate fighting from soldiers on the ground and in the weeks after the peace deal mass demonstrations demanding the resignation of the government took place in Yerevan, some violent, and the period since February 2021 has brought persistent rumours of impending military *coups* in Armenia.[v]

Why does this matter beyond Baku and Yerevan? To begin with, these events demonstrate there might still be such a thing as 'victory' in 21st-century war and a place for conventional military force (i.e., force aimed at contesting territory and delivered by regular armies and air forces) in securing it. This flies in the face of some highly-publicized arguments that thanks to two decades of 'unprecedented' cultural and technological developments, 'conventional warfare is dead', military confrontations revolving increasingly around non-kinetic assets aiming at largely non-kinetic effects through applying or countering 'hybridity' somewhere in the 'grey zone', meaning 'legacy' capabilities including heavy armour and conventional manned aircraft should go firmly into the dustbin of history.[vi] However, most Western military punditry has focused on the most reported-on aspect of the war (at least outside the two belligerents) Azerbaijan's extensive use of mainly Turkish-made Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) and its apparent implications for future warfare and current acquisition policy. This includes

some influential voices, at least in the UK.

'Political Geography Now: Nagorno-Karabakh Control Map & Timeline: Artsakh Withdrawals - December 1, 2020'

Writing on potential futures for post-Brexit British armed forces, the Conservative MP and defence pundit, Bob Seely, commented on 'how Azerbaijan's use of inexpensive Turkish drones [sic] has decimated expensive Armenian equipment such as tanks and armoured vehicles, changing the balance of power on the battlefield'.[vii] This view is shared, apparently, by the most senior British decision-makers, the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, describing Turkey's use of 'drones' in Libya, Syria and 'elsewhere' as 'game changing' and stating that the UK had some catching up to do, with implications for the upcoming UK Strategic Defence Review, rumours abounding of troop numbers and 'legacy' capabilities being cut in favour of greater 'automation' and 'innovation'; it was reported subsequently that the review would commit to purchase cheap 'attack drones' based directly on evidence from Nagorno-Karabakh.[viii] The former chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Sir Richard Ottaway, was more nuanced, acknowledging the part played by Azerbaijan's careful alliance-building and acquisition policy but also claiming that the UCAVS were 'pivotal' in assaults on Armenian defensive positions and arguing the UK should develop its own low-cost equivalents to the Turkish TB2s employed in Nagorno-Karabakh to supplement the (highly expensive) Predators supplied by the US.[ix] No such nuance across the Atlantic, predictably, an article in *Forbes*, for instance, hailing the TB2s as a 'silver bullet', alluding to suggestions from some quarters that 'the massacre [sic] of Armenian armor signals the end of the tank' and that the acquisition of cheap UCAVs by small powers might provide challenges even to US forces; Radio Free Europe was even more effusive, proclaiming that 'In Nagorno-Karabakh, the Future of Warfare is Now'.[x]

This is the author's own contribution to this debate - his observations on what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh in autumn 2020, some suggesting many of the claims cited

above may need to be nuanced or revised. He begins with strategy and the role of conventional warfare in achieving Azerbaijan's policy aims.

Strategy and the Utility of Force – Conventional Warfare is alive and kicking Armenia

While the war demonstrates that conventional military force can still be brutally effective in securing policy aims, those aims must be clearly enunciated with an obvious and realistic political end state in mind and enjoy strong public support - things we have emphatically *not* seen in the West since the mid-2000s. It also helps if those aims can be framed in terms of securing objectives of geopolitical significance – something which conventional ground forces are designed to do – rather than more diffuse ones of 'fighting terror' or 'implanting democracy'. While popular at home – even more so, now - President Ilham Aliyev is viewed widely outside Azerbaijan as an iron-fisted autocrat with an indifferent human rights record and allegations of industrial-scale corruption of Western legislators and officials laid against him.[xi] However, in 2020, President Aliyev (and given the highly personal nature of his rule, we presume it *was* mainly him) formulated realistic policy aims attainable by the means available centring on seizing key ground, as he made clear in an interview with the BBC on 9 November: if the Armenians committed to withdraw from the seven occupied regions around Nagorno-Karabakh (four largely re-taken by Azerbaijani forces by then) then he would halt the offensive and be willing to negotiate the future of Nagorno-Karabakh.[xii] However, he promised he would 'fight to the end' if they didn't withdraw and also demanded a right of return for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Azeri families who fled to Azerbaijan from the occupied territories during and after the 1994 war, their numbers estimated by the United Nations High Council for Refugees as a possible 1.2 million by 2014.[xiii] Compare this with the outcome: President Putin's peace deal mandated that Azerbaijan keep the four districts it had re-conquered while the Armenians handed over the whole of the remaining Aghdam, Kalbajar and Lachin districts at the beginning of December - so the war clearly achieved Aliyev's primary geopolitical aim while opening paths for the others.[xiv]

He had also strengthened Azerbaijan's hand via cultivating the right allies and if anything symbolised this, it is President Erdogan of Turkey being guest of honour at the victory parade in Baku on 10 December, a Turkish Army contingent marching past he and President Aliyev to the strains of the Ottoman march, *Cedin Dedden*.[xv] President Aliyev's father, Heydar Aliyev, founder of modern Azerbaijan, described the relationship between the two countries as 'One Nation, Two States' - two Turkic peoples, with common ancestry and culture, speaking mutually-intelligible languages, with traditional enemies in common and therefore natural allies, an assumption shaping the younger Aliyev's external policy and suiting President Erdogan's ambitions for his country,

also, Azerbaijan now providing a powerful bridgehead for Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.[xvi] The two countries cooperate closely in the export of oil and gas dominating Azerbaijan's economy and shaping the politics and society of this classic 'rentier' state, most prominently on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline through which up to 9 billion barrels per year flow on their way from Azerbaijan's oil fields in the Caspian Sea to Western Europe. [xvii] Military cooperation is just as close, giving Azerbaijan the benefit of learning from a respected NATO military with credible warfighting capability tested for real in Syria and Libya. Turkey has provided Azerbaijan with training support and military equipment since 1992, Azerbaijani cadets attend the Turkish Military Academy at Ankara and the two armies exercise together frequently. In 2010 Turkey and Azerbaijan signed a treaty in which each promised to come to the aid of the other if attacked: a formal alliance in all but name, and an obvious expression of this was Azerbaijan spending unspecified millions – out of that defence budget of $2 billion per year - on buying 50 TB2 *Bayraktar* UCAVs from Turkey along with MAM-L laser-guided bombs (also Turkish made), the main weapons used by the TB2 in the war. Israel, another close security partner, provided Hermes and Heron reconnaissance UAVs while Azerbaijan's own Azad system was also used for reconnaissance. Israel also supplied Harop loitering munitions, which Azerbaijan first used during previous fighting along the line of control with Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016. Given the TB2s arrived just a few months before the offensive began, it is entirely possible that some were flown by Turkish Air Force pilots, possibly from inside Turkey itself.[xviii] Another, just as telling expression of the alliance was the thirteen-day long exercise in Azerbaijan in August 2020 in which up to 11,000 Turkish troops participated and saw Turkish and Azerbaijani Special Forces practicing airmobile assaults on high value targets alongside each other.[xix] This close relationship paid off in fighting the war.

Fighting the war – was it the 'drones'?

The war presents a real-world example of Clausewitz's concept of strategy as 'the use of engagements for the object of the war', particularly as the very object of the war was seizing and securing territory, achieved through a series of battles.[xx] President Aliyev was smart enough to leave the management of this fighting to others: planning was carried out by the General Staff under Colonel General Najmedin Sadykov, like all senior Azerbaijani officers a product of the Soviet military education system, and a solid grasp of operational art is evident throughout.[xxi] The offensive was carried out by 1, 2 and 3 Corps of the Azerbaijan Army - a force of sixteen motor-rifle brigades with two artillery brigades controlled centrally - and consisted largely of a methodical advance aimed at seizing key towns, villages and chokepoints, resolving into two broad foci of effort: a push in the northwest of Nagorno-Karabakh aimed directly at its capital, Stepanakert, resolving itself into positional fighting

around the town, going alongside an advance in the south through the more open country of the occupied Azerbaijani districts of Fuzuli, Cebrayil and Zangilan, aimed at the town of Zangilan in the far southwest - taken on 20 October - securing the entire length of Azerbaijan's border with Iran. The taking of Zangilan was followed by a renewed offensive northward leading to the taking of Shusha, the centre of gravity of the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh: not only does Shusha have enormous cultural and emotional significance for both sides but it dominates the Lachin Corridor, the only line of communication between Stepanakert and Armenia and so taking it rendered the Armenian position across the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh untenable.[xxii]

Armenian/NKDF forces based their strategy on defence in depth with the apparent aim of making Azerbaijan's advance as costly as possible. Nagorno-Karabakh's mountainous terrain made such defences viable but the mountains also meant that lines of supply were limited and control of certain chokepoints was key – hence the importance of the Lachin Corridor.[xxiii] This went alongside using artillery, a combination of BM-30 *Smerch* multiple rocket launchers and Scud-B and SS-21 ballistic missiles, to attack cities in Azerbaijan with the aim, according to source, of attacking Azerbaijan's deep lines of communication or of terrorising the population and putting the Aliyev regime under political pressure. This began on 4 October with missiles fired at Terter, Mingachevir and then against Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city and nearly fifty miles behind the front. [xxiv] Ganja was hit again on 5-8 October, 11 October and 17 October each time killing civilians (for balance, Azerbaijani forces barraged built-up areas with Smerches, sometimes with cluster warheads, throughout the war). [xxv] Indiscriminate targeting of civilians not engaged in hostilities constitutes a war crime.[xxvi] It also perhaps constitutes a crass strategic error in this case – the oil refineries north of Baku are within range of Scud Bs fired from Nagorno-Karabakh and attacking them could have posited an existential threat to the Aliyevs' rentier regime possibly inducing them to talk: nevertheless, there was just one report of an attempted attack, on 14 October.[xxvii]

The missile attacks proved a strategic distraction as the war was decided on the ground through some hard fighting. Combat seems to have been highly attritional, an advantage for Azerbaijan with its superior numbers, but for an outnumbered force supposedly being pulverised from the air by flying Terminators, the NKDF fought hard to the very end, inflicting heavy casualties on the Azerbaijanis in positional mountain combat in which, unsurprisingly, light infantry featured prominently and in which the Azerbaijanis clearly did not have it as easy as many Western pundits claim. Official figures for killed in action from September to November are 2,783 for Azerbaijan and 2,317-2,425 for Armenia; by way of comparison, Israel suffered 2,656 KIA in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.[xxviii] Azerbaijani troops – mainly conscripts and recently-mobilised reservists with varying quality of training - had

to fight uphill through prepared lines and other positions, frequently under artillery fire from the defenders, to take a long series of fortified towns and villages, lists of names being broadcast nightly in the media and turned into memes on social media.[xxix] Typifying this was the battle for Fuzuli on 29 September, which began with Azerbaijani Special Forces occupying the hills around Fuzuli, cutting its communications with the intent of forcing the NKDF to abandon the town without serious fighting, a pattern repeated throughout the war in the s outh.[xxx] However, this was followed up by a conventional advance combining tanks with mechanised forces, the Azerbaijanis suffering some considerable losses of armour and people as the NKDF carried out a fighting retreat, most losses being to portable ATGMs or artillery, an indicator of why the offensive in the north bogged down into positional warfare for the rest of the war.[xxxi] Azerbaijani forces had little close air support throughout the war: Azeri Mi-24s were not committed until 5 October, fully a week after the offensive began and their contribution seems to have consisted of firing rockets from maximum range, aimed at saturating areas rather than hitting specific targets and much of their heavier artillery, the MRLS, for instance, seem to have been committed to barraging Stepanakert rather than supporting the advance in the south.[xxxii] NKDF forces were able to organise local counterattacks up to the closing days of the war, such as that on an Azerbaijani tank battalion which got within four miles of the Lachin corridor only to be driven back by MRLS fire with several tanks destroyed and the decisive moment of the war, the recapture of Shusha, actually took place in overcast weather restricting the use of UCAVS and any other air support, and was brought around by lightly-armed Azerbaijani Special Forces advancing through the mountains behind the city to take its garrison by surprise. [xxxiii]

So, what part did the UCAVs play in all this? Certainly, an important one but perhaps not as all-encompassing as some claim. 'Drone' strikes began on 27 September, concentrating heavily on the NKDF's short-ranged air defences, over the first few days destroying fourteen SA-8s/SA-13s, four SA-10s and eight air defence radars, all struck by TB2s with a SA-3 near Stepanakert being taken out by a Harop. With these strikes we offer our first point of contention, that these were elderly Soviet-era systems largely incapable of tracking targets with radar signatures as small as the UCAVs presented; moreover, NKDF radars were jammed extensively by Turkish-supplied systems and, indeed, further TB2 attacks took out the NKDF's two Russian-supplied Repellent 1 counter-UAV systems which detect incoming UAVs by their control signals.[xxxiv] Consequently, NKDF forces often operated blind and without any serious air defence, a major force multiplier for the Azerbaijanis and their Turkish allies. Following this, the UCAVS were switched to attacking ground targets with priority given to artillery, MRLS, tanks and supply dumps and vehicles moving along roads behind the battlefield. [xxxv] Noteworthy incidents included that of 1 October,

where a NKDF armoured force massing for a counterattack in the north came under sustained UCAV attack, losing 'many tanks' and by 23 October independent open-sources were estimating that the NKDF had lost 144 T-72s, 35 BMPs, 310 soft-skinned vehicles and 116 artillery pieces; which system was hit by what was unclear, but the same sources estimated Azerbaijani Harops had destroyed 34 targets and ground-launched ATGMs 21 with much of the balance, presumably, going to the TB2s.[xxxvi]

Impressive figures, but context helps here. UCAV footage featured prominently on Azerbaijani television and on electronic billboards in Baku, forming a key part of Azerbaijan's intensive multi-lingual social media campaign, 'snuff movies' posted to YouTube and Twitter selling the narrative of Azerbaijan smashing its detested foe with impunity. There is little surprising here for the experienced eye, the films reinforcing the eternal adage that on the modern battlefield, being seen is being hit, one tank, AFV or truck after another getting 'plinked' in masses of smoke and flame by MAM-Ls or other systems the Bayraktars and other UAVS are spotting for. Just as evident is the poor discipline and drill of the crews; on one level, there was the extensive use of mobile phones with GPS and even postings to social media by soldiers of both sides, showing their locations for all to see; on another, the films show target after target moving and sometimes parked in the open in broad daylight with no camouflage or overhead cover when stationary or even in prepared positions, so making life easier for the UCAV pilots than better trained and disciplined opposition might do.[xxxvii] Michael Kofman of the Wilson Centre and Jack Watling of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) both investigate these phenomena in detail, contending that NATO/Western mechanised forces would be just as vulnerable when manoeuvring, particularly given the modern battlefield is swept by long-range radars and electronic surveillance and most camouflage will not protect against modern infra-red detection systems. However, solutions differ, Kofman arguing for smaller forces with more extensive air defence, while Watling contends that 'swarming' can be forestalled by dispersing forces in non-tactical phases such as Armenia and Azerbaijan did not do: consequently, the tank might is not obsolete but needs to fit into a new tactical system emphasising moving dispersed but concentrating rapidly for the tactical phase.[xxxviii] To this we can add that NATO or Russian formations are likely to have air defences far more capable of engaging small, evasive targets: it is also remarkable that despite the Azerbaijani acquisition of the TB2s being 'open book', NKDF forces were not equipped with smoke generators or laser detection systems which would have given their vehicles at least some degree of forewarning and protection against laser guided weapons like the MAM-L.[xxxix] Claims of yet another 'revolution in military affairs' might therefore need some qualification.

Conclusions

The Nagorno-Karabakh war is significant for those with professional or academic interest in 21st-century war in that, alongside recent action in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria, it suggests claims about the death of conventional warfare might be premature. Rather, it might just have a present and a future, too. The war saw a series of conventional operations carried out by the Azerbaijan Army, with assistance from Turkey, attaining most of the geopolitical objectives their President and Commander in Chief set them: these operations hinged on high-intensity attritional combat aimed at seizing key ground, culminating in the securing of a major centre of gravity unhinging the entire Armenian position in Nagorno-Karabakh – so the basics of land warfare still count in scenarios like this one. Casualty figures were high for small countries engaged in a short war, but given we are dealing with two intensely nationalistic cultures fighting over territory, and the public and political reactions on both sides, the sacrifice seems to have been deemed worth it at least by Azerbaijan. However, when divorced from this they indicate eternal issues of attacking prepared positions in rough country and the need to coordinate infantry with support fires, something which might not have been done very efficiently here.

The much-hyped UCAVs contributed to Azerbaijan's success in two ways, both important but hardly 'revolutionary' in that they provided a cheaper means of achieving things done traditionally by manned aircraft. First was suppressing enemy air defences in the opening stages, opening the Armenians up to the second impacting factor, deeper attacks destroying armour and disrupting lines of communication, tipping the balance of attrition in Azerbaijan's favour in what was still a costly win for them. Here is something else transferable to other scenarios: 'swarms' of small UAVs and UCAVS might be a good – and cheap - investment but the conditions for best use need to be present, one being tactically inept opposition with air defences which can be overwhelmed early by swarming SEAD attacks; dealing with, for instance, the layered air defences forming an umbrella over large Russian formations might be a different problem. It might also be that the real messages here are not so much about the future of armour as that of tactical 'fast air' and attack helicopters, the Bayraktars in particular producing similar desired effects as these systems have for two generations for a fraction of the cost and with systems – unlike fast air and attack helicopters - their users could afford to lose and were cheap to replace. That might be the real transferable military message here while the political one might concern the acquisition policies of certain NATO countries, such as the UK, based on buying small numbers of highly expensive systems, and what those systems offer in reality.

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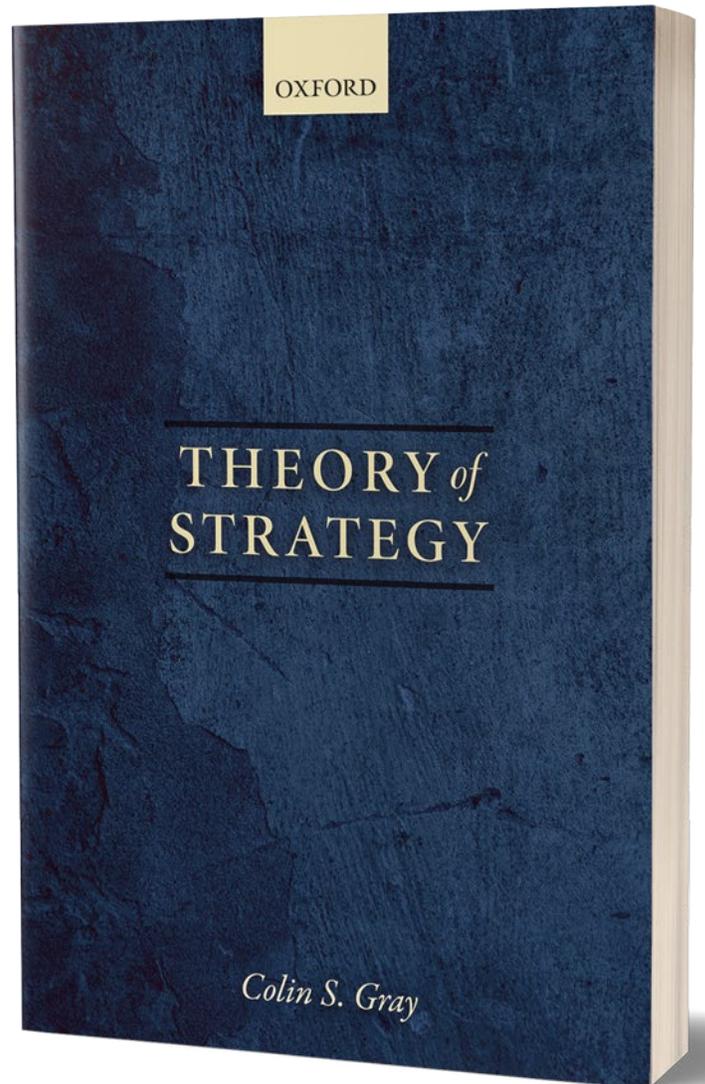
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An Army Reconsidered — Vichy France's Stubborn Defense of the Levant in the Second World War

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In June 1941, Allied forces launched one of the least known operations of the Second World War, invading Lebanon and Syria from Palestine to defeat Vichy French forces whom they suspected of aiding Germany in gaining a foothold in the Levant. With no hope for reinforcement or resupply, the French waged a stubborn defense, holding the capital city of Beirut for over a month before the weight of Allied reinforcements, naval, and air superiority finally forced French commanders to seek terms. Although Vichy France's "Army of the Levant" was ultimately defeated Allied casualties and dashed expectations for a much faster victory stand in marked contrast to the rapid demise of the French Army at the hands of the Germans a year earlier.

The Army of the Levant was for all intents and purposes a miniature version of the same French army that surrendered to the Germans, with commanders trained in the same military schools, practicing more or less the same doctrine. In fact, some Vichy commanders had fought against the Germans in the *Battle of France*.[i] How is it then that the army best known for crumbling in 1940 was able to account so well for itself just a year later? A comparison of the two battles may provide some redemption to the martial reputation of French soldiers, whose tactical performance in 1940 was undermined by strategic, pre-war decisions that—as we'll see—had considerably less bearing on the battlefield effectiveness of French soldiers in the Army of the Levant.

Operation Exporter--The War in the Levant, 1941

Terms of the Franco-German armistice allowed for southern France to remain free of German occupation and for France to retain its empire abroad, including its African colonies and its mandates over Lebanon and Syria. One term of the agreement, however, was that the new French government, which established its capital in the village of Vichy, had to defend its overseas territories from any aggressors.[ii] In 1941, Great Britain learned that Germany was using French air bases in the Levant to refuel, causing alarm that the Germans could ultimately use the bases to strike at the Suez Canal and sever Britain's access to much of its empire.[iii] Churchill—against the wishes of his senior commander—insisted on invading Lebanon and Syria to ensure the Germans could not gain a foothold.[iv] Vichy France—concerned that inaction against the Allies would bring further German punishment—found itself compelled to conduct a defense of Lebanon and Syria against Allied forces invading from Palestine.

The commander of the Army of the Levant was Gen. Henri Dentz, best known to history as the officer tasked with formally surrendering Paris to Germany in June, 1940.[v] Gen. Dentz read the geography facing the attacking forces in Palestine and determined that the attacker would most likely approach on 1 to 3 axes of advance: (1) Along the

narrow coastal road leading to Beirut; (2) into the rugged mountainous terrain of southern Lebanon, en route to the French airfield at Rayak; and (3) the open desert plain that leads to Damascus.[vi]

The Allied plan of attack—code-named *Operation Exporter*—devised by Lt. Gen. Henry Maitland "Jumbo" Wilson, in fact, decided on not one or two, but all three axes of advance, with all three receiving roughly the same brigade-sized effort. The Australian 21st and 25th Brigades led the advance on the Lebanese coastal and mountain sectors, respectively, while the Indian 5th Brigade--assisted by a contingent of 'Free French' soldiers loyal to Charles de Gaulle--was responsible for the attack on Damascus.[vii] Gen. Archibald Wavell—commander of all Commonwealth forces in the Middle East—despite his reluctance to commit troops to the Levant, believed Beirut and Damascus would be taken in just a day.[viii]

On 8 June, the Allied invasion commenced. Dentz organized the defense of Lebanon such that he could use the terrain to force the Australian columns into parallel bottlenecks while needing only to deploy a small number of Vichy forces in any single engagement.

By 9 June, the Australians had arrived at the Litani River—the first major obstacle on the coastal road. Once there, a single battalion of France's 22nd Algerian *Tirailleur* (Infantry) Regiment held up the Australian advance for two days. The French destroyed the Qasmiye bridge over the Litani and forced the Australians to cross the river under a barrage of machinegun and mortar fire. In the early morning hours of the 9th, a Scottish commando battalion conducted an amphibious attack north of the Litani in a failed effort to capture the bridge before the French could destroy it. The commando raid yielded the capture of several French 75-mm field guns and the efforts of Australian engineers ultimately established a secure pontoon crossing, but the fighting had already taken a toll to include heavy casualties (25%) inflicted on the commandos.[ix] [x]

Just seven kilometers past the Litani, the Australian column was again halted, this time by two companies of Legionnaires who found concealed positions in ancient Phoenician caves near the village of Adloun.[xi] The Legionnaires were at times supported by French R-35 medium tanks, which would soon become a key feature in multiple counterattacks on all three Allied columns. Again, the Australians persevered, but only after another two days of hard fighting and mounting casualties, a pattern that would repeat itself multiple times over the following weeks.

In the central sector, progress initially appeared less contested than it was on the coast. When the Australians reached Merdjayoun on 11 June, the Vichy barracks had been abandoned, prompting Australian leadership to push farther north. On 15 June, Vichy forces launched a major counterattack led by three battalions of North African

infantry, supported by 20 R35s, Legionnaires, and Circassian Cavalry, dislodging the Australians from Merdjayoun and driving them nearly back to Palestine and effectively negating a week's worth of progress.[xii]

The eastern most column advancing toward Damascus led by the 5th Indian Brigade and assisted by a contingent of Free French forces made solid progress, taking Deraa, Sheikh Meskin, Esra, and Kuneitra with little resistance. On 15 June, Vichy forces out of Damascus counterattacked, recapturing Esra and Kuneitra, making great use of R35s just as they had in the central sector.[xiii] The experienced 5th Brigade was able to regroup and ultimately took Damascus on 21 June, but only after fighting through several more Vichy counterattacks as they approached the city.

With Damascus captured and the central sector column making very slow progress, the focus of *Operation Exporter* shifted to the coast and, specifically, the steep ridges of the Damour River where Vichy defenders made one final effort to prevent Allied forces from reaching Beirut. A series of engagements were fought between Australian infantry attempting to scale the cliffs and seize French outposts in the hills overlooking the river.[xiv] Well cited French artillery made the movement difficult and costly for the Australians, but intense and frequent shelling by the Royal Navy and Australian artillery units ultimately compelled the Vichy forces to fall back after four days of fighting.[xv] [xvi]

The Army of the Levant might have continued to fight for the few remaining kilometers that stood between the Allied advance and Beirut. However, the Vichy government, believing that the Army of the Levant had fought hard enough to demonstrate to the Germans that they had satisfied France's commitment to defend its colonial possessions under the previous year's armistice agreement, allowed Dentz to agree to discuss armistice terms with the Allies.[xvii]

'To Lose a Battle' -- France, 1940

The events that led to the collapse of the French Army just over a year earlier are among the best chronicled of any operation in the Second World War. The *Wehrmacht* swept through Holland and Belgium, which caused the Allied forces to predictably push northeast to meet what they thought was the main German effort. All the while, enormous columns of German armor—including Rommel's *7th Panzer Division*—maneuvered through the "impenetrable" Ardennes Forest, achieving a breakthrough across the Meuse River.[xviii] The *Wehrmacht* then drove west, linking up with the divisions that had attacked through Holland and Belgium, encircling hundreds of thousands of British and French troops. The French Army continued to fight, making possible the 'Miracle of Dunkirk', but was never able to launch a meaningful counterattack. Paris fell on 14 June, and an armistice was completed with the Germans on the

25th—just 46 days after fighting had begun.[xix]

French strategy on the eve of conflict had been to fight on the defensive, grinding the anticipated German advance to a standstill, creating a continuous front reminiscent of the First World War in order to buy time for broader mobilization and Allied reinforcements.[xx] This strategy was critically undermined long before any shots had been fired by a series of interwar policies that slashed the number of active-duty (or professional) soldiers in the army in favor of more conscripts while frequently reducing the length of conscript service. Similarly, the number of active-duty units was pared back in favor of more reserve units to be manned largely by those same conscripts who were provided with less and less time to familiarize themselves with their weapons and train on fundamental soldiering skills such as marksmanship, demolition, and entrenchment.[xxi]

The French army's reliance on reservists and the organizational rigidity that accompanied the development of a defensive doctrine to accommodate inadequately trained soldiers was displayed throughout the battle. If the strategy was to slow and delay the German advance, then the army missed several opportunities to do so, often in areas manned by reserve units.[xxii] Consider the experience of the aforementioned 7th Panzer Division, which often served as a spearhead of the German breakthrough.

At the Ourthe River in Belgium, a team of French combat engineers demolished a bridge just ahead of the 7th Panzer Division's arrival on 11 May. However, the army failed to leave a combat unit on the opposite bank to fire on the Germans once they arrived, allowing German engineers to quickly erect pontoon crossings.[xxiii]

At the Somme River, the French Army failed to demolish any of four railway bridges—two across the river and two across roads—that were ultimately captured by Rommel on 5 June. In *The Rommel Papers*, B.H. Liddell-Hart speculates that, "Once the rails had been [captured], [Rommel's] tanks and other vehicles were able to pass over the river and marshy belt with far less delay than if bridges and causeways had had to be built. [. . .] If the French had destroyed even the final pair of bridges, over the road, the capture of the bridges over the river would have been of little avail."[xxiv]

During an engagement at Sigy on 8 June, the French army demolished a bridge over the River Andelle. This forced Rommel to reconnoiter another crossing for his tanks. Upon finding an area of the river he felt was suitable to ford, the column began to move forward only to halt again after the breakdown of a Panzer II tank in the middle of the river. Large pieces of the demolished bridge and even reeds cut from the river bank were used to improve the ford for further crossing by the unit. That was until Rommel received word that a *Wehrmacht* reconnaissance unit had prevented the French army from demolishing bridges over the Andelle at nearby Normanville and he had his forces

move at top speed to that crossing.[xxv]

In addition to the multiple failures to challenge the German advance at points where the terrain would have made them most vulnerable, the French army often delayed counterattacks, allowing the Germans to strengthen bridgeheads and resume the advance before an effective counterattack could even be launched.[xxvi] These examples do not mean to suggest that the French army never made effective use of terrain to slow the German advance during the *Battle of France*—they did. Nor do I suggest the French army was unable to launch small-scale counterattacks with some success—they did that as well. However, these actions were too few and on too limited a scale to prevent the *Wehrmacht's* ultimate, swift, and total victory.

Tactics Enabling Strategy

So how is it that the Army of the Levant was so able to consistently delay the Allied advance and selectively counterattack to reverse Allied gains, while a year earlier, the German advance seemed to cut right through the French army with little resistance? It would be impossible to answer that question without first appreciating the unique circumstances of each conflict. In particular, the nature of the adversaries and the makeup of the respective French forces provide useful variables through which to gauge France's relative combat effectiveness.

As the saying goes, "the enemy gets a vote," and the German army of 1940 was probably the best trained in the world and innovated revolutionary armor and air doctrines. Germany determined its point of main effort (or *schwerpunkt*) would be the Ardennes Forest, where the French considered an invasion possible but could not imagine such a maneuver being executed as quickly as it was by the *Wehrmacht*. Further, German commanders like Rommel pressed every tactical advantage and even pushed back on orders from higher headquarters to slow down so that troops could rest.[xxvii] In doing so, the *Wehrmacht* often denied the French army chances to regroup and conduct any sort of meaningful counterattack.

By contrast, the majority of the Allied forces at the outset of *Operation Exporter* were drawn from Australia's untested 7th Division. In addition, Gen. Wavell determined that he could not spare any armor to support the invasion, which proved a constant source of aggravation to Australian commanders.[xxviii] Gen. Wilson's own ill-considered plan, spreading his forces evenly along the front, rather than concentrating them on a single objective (as the Germans had in France a year earlier), very likely contributed to how long the Vichy forces were able to maintain the defense. [xxix]

Additionally, the scale of each battle varied significantly. The German force that invaded France in May, 1940, consisted of more than 3,000,000 men and 2,500 tanks. While France and its allies had, roughly, a 1:1 parity with the Germans at the outset of conflict, the vast majority of the French army was composed of conscripts and reservists.[xxx]

In contrast, all of the 35,000 French and colonial personnel under Dentz's command were professional soldiers. This, above all, is what allowed the Army of the Levant to so capably resist the Allied advance, which itself was manned by just 34,000 soldiers. In the Australian 7th Division's report on Syria, praise for the Army of the Levant's tactical ability was effusive:

> The siting of the French defensive posts at the Litani and all other defensive positions was an object lesson. Their concealment, camouflage, and battle discipline were excellent. The difficulty found in pinpointing strong posts even when they were firing had to be experienced to be believed. Where our tendency is to build up unnatural posts and try to camouflage them, he disturbs the natural cover as little as possible and gets down behind it.[xxxi]

The Army of the Levant was excellent at constructing and concealing defensive positions and held those positions from larger attacking units with complimentary and lethal fields of machinegun and artillery fire. Army of the Levant soldiers also regularly counterattacked with combined infantry and armored elements that often delayed the Allied advance for several hours and occasionally set them back by a matter of days. To conduct such types of operations requires years of regular training. The ability to counterattack, especially, is no easy task and benefits from having units manned by soldiers who are familiar with one another and have trained together.

The austerity measures the French army underwent during the interwar period denied several hundred thousand French soldiers the opportunity to develop any level of martial parity with professional soldiers in the army. Worse still, French conscripts and reservists often did not even train in the units with which they would be mobilized for war.[xxxii]

Indeed, professional French soldiers fought well against the Germans too, including in the battle's first tank engagement in Belgium. Unfortunately, it wasn't professionals, but soldiers from the oldest and least trained class of French reserves that were tasked with defending the area where the Germans achieved their breakthrough.[xxxiii]

The French defeat of 1940 is often blamed on poor strategy. While there is certainly merit to that judgement, it is incomplete and misses an important nuance: soldiers are only as capable as the sum of their training. The vast majority of the French army lacked the requisite training to carry out the strategy of slowing the Germans down and creating a continuous front. Even the best military strategy will lead to defeat if the forces assigned to carry it out lack

the tactical proficiency to do so. The Army of the Levant's defense in 1941 tells us that professional French soldiers of that era were excellent at fortifying defensive positions and counter attacking with high morale and skill. Such competencies would have been invaluable if more broadly available in the French army a year earlier.

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Marie von Clausewitz

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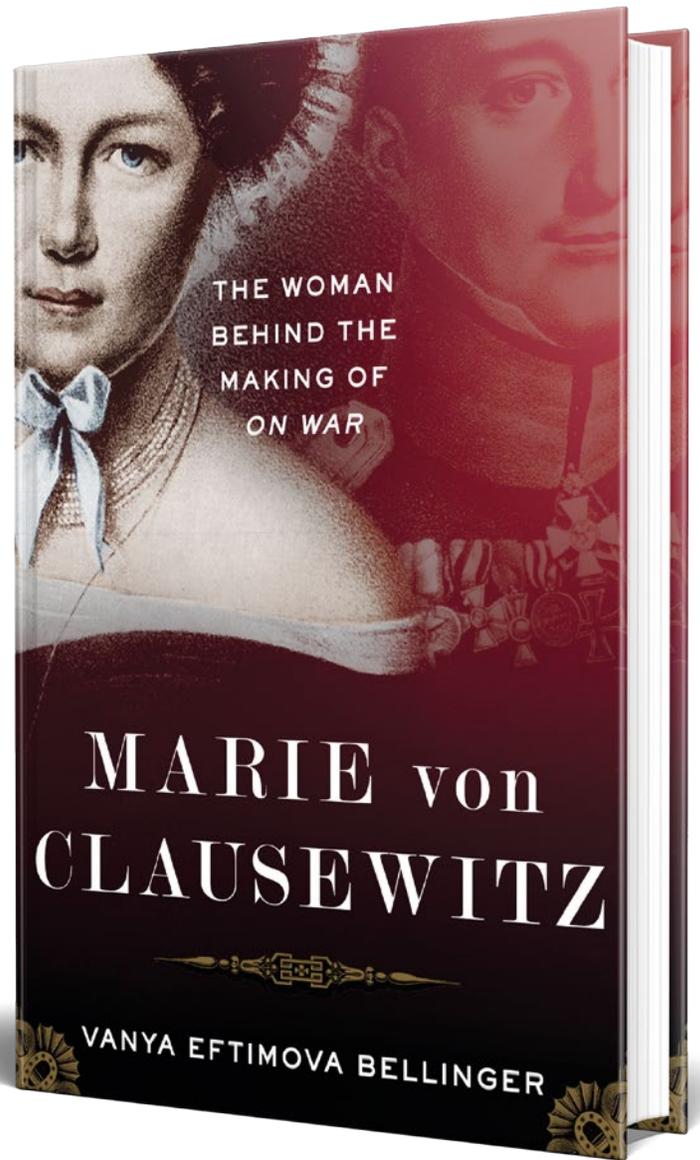
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An Object Suspended Between Three Magnets? A Closer Look at Clausewitz's Trinity

Nikolas Gardner – UAE National Defense College, Abu Dhabi

ALTHOUGH OUR INTELLECT ALWAYS LONGS FOR CLARITY AND CERTAINTY, OUR NATURE OFTEN FINDS UNCERTAINTY FASCINATING.

— CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, ON WAR
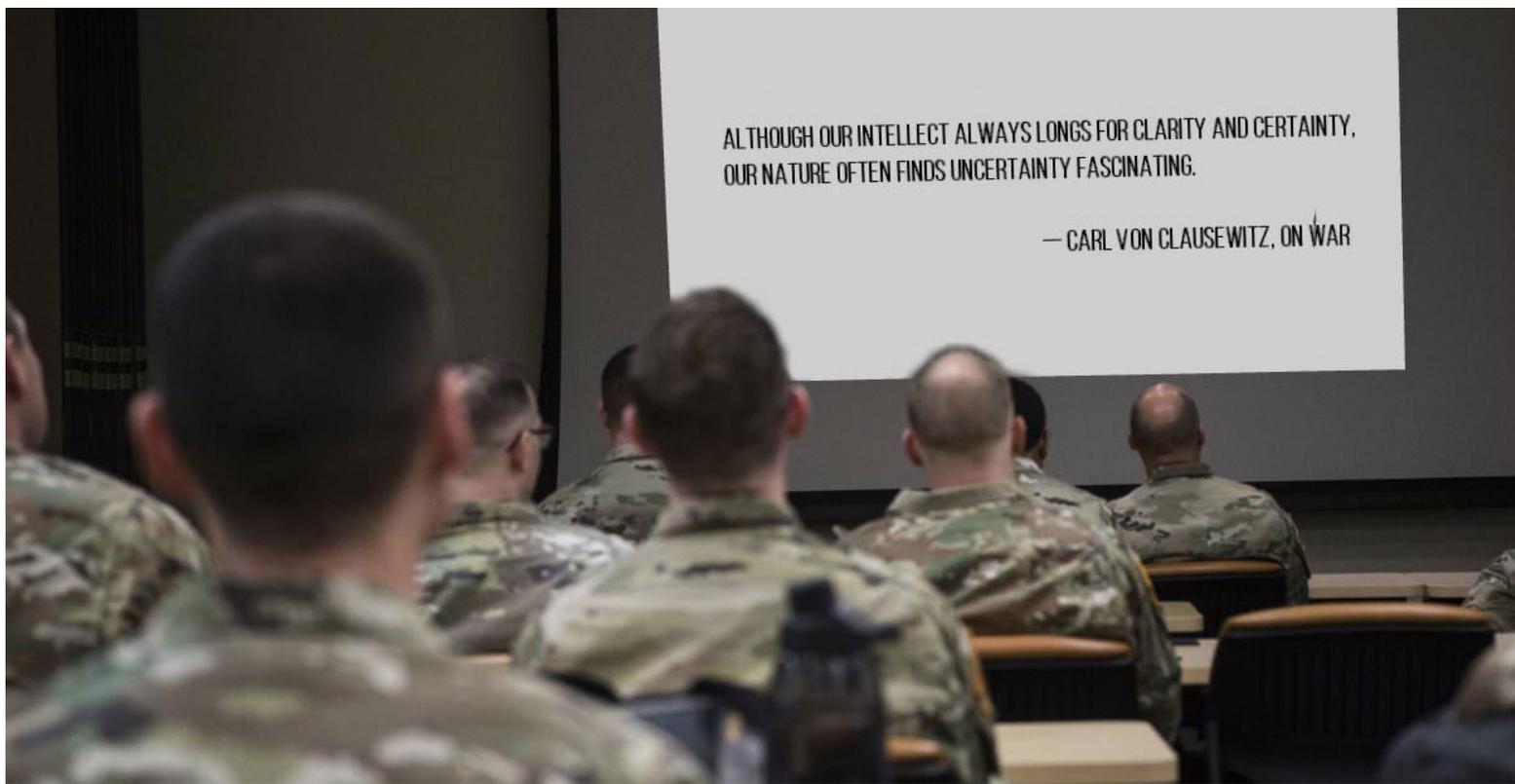
About the author

Nikolas Gardner is professor of strategy at the UAE National Defense College in Abu Dhabi. He has published on command and control in the First World War and the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz's theory of war. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the National Defense College or the United Arab Emirates government.

Of the many concepts in Clausewitz's *On War*, the trinity stands apart in its explanatory scope. While terms such as friction and the culminating point of victory are apt descriptions of specific phenomena or situations, the trinity offers a succinct characterization of the nature of war itself. Our understanding of the trinity and its implications for the development and implementation of military strategy has evolved significantly since 1982, when Harry Summers first used Clausewitz's simplified "secondary" trinity of people, army, and government as a tool to explain America's defeat in Vietnam. Numerous scholars have elucidated the fundamental tendencies that comprise the trinity and the relationship between them.[i] Drawing on the pioneering work of Alan Beyerchen, they have demonstrated that the trinity is a metaphor for war as a complex system. The behavior of this system is nonlinear, in that outputs are not necessarily proportionate to inputs, and the whole of the system is not simply the sum of its parts. In other words, a small shift in the relationship between the tendencies of reason, passion and uncertainty can produce disproportionately large consequences, or vice versa. Moreover, the interaction between tendencies produces results that cannot be understood by considering each in isolation.[ii] In order to reflect this nonlinearity, Clausewitz argues that any theory seeking to explain war must behave like "an object suspended between three magnets," referring to the tendency of an object released equidistant from three points of attraction to move toward each point in an unpredictable pattern.[iii] As Beyerchen explains, this image "implicitly confronts us with the chaos inherent in a nonlinear system sensitive to initial conditions."[iv]

Thomas Waldman has pointed out that the tendencies that comprise the trinity, "are not always in competition with one another, but can be mutually supportive."[v] Moreover, Antulio Echevarria has cited numerous historical examples of coherence between them.[vi] Neither Clausewitz. nor scholars who study *On War*, however, have offered a sustained analysis of how and why they cohere. On the contrary, his vivid imagery encourages us to view the interaction of reason, passion, and uncertainty as a largely random and mysterious process. This is not entirely unhelpful. By expressing the inherent unpredictability of war, the trinity serves as an important reminder of the hazards associated with overly prescriptive military strategies. But in accepting this unpredictability, we overlook a growing body of research by international relations scholars, which focuses specifically on the interaction of reason and emotion in the context of uncertainty, at the individual and societal levels. This literature does not invalidate Clausewitz's portrayal of war as a complex system, but it does identify patterns in the interaction of the tendencies that comprise the trinity. Understanding these patterns can only enhance its value as an explanatory tool for both scholars and practitioners.

Since Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War, students of war and statecraft have recognized that emotions affect international relations. Modern western scholars, however, have traditionally treated them as "natural opposites", with emotions impeding rational behavior.[vii] When scholars began studying the impact of emotion on national security decision making in the 1970s, they tended to portray emotions as "interferences with or derivations from rationality."[viii] But the twenty-first century has seen increasing recognition that emotion and reason are difficult, if not impossible to disaggregate. Emotion, Jonathan Mercer has argued, "is part of reasoning and not a distraction upsetting a coldly rational process."[ix] The impact of emotion is evident even in decisions based on extensive and ostensibly dispassionate analysis. Based on an examination of conflicts since 1648, Richard Ned Lebow has argued that the primary motivation for war has been "the universal human drive for self-esteem", an impulse with which Clausewitz was personally familiar.[x] This drive leads individuals to seek honor and standing among their peers. An increase in standing generates satisfaction, while an affront to it generates anger or fear. Citing the outbreak of the First World War as one among many examples, Lebow argues that these emotions encourage leaders to minimize the costs and risks of going to war if they can potentially increase their standing by doing so. Even if leaders are unaware of its impact, emotion has a significant effect on their calculations.[xi]

Observing much of the same history, Clausewitz may well have agreed with Lebow's assessment. Recent scholarship in the social and cognitive sciences, however, has postulated an even closer and more complex relationship between emotion and reason. Drawing on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, Todd Hall has argued that some states intentionally pursue a "diplomacy of anger". Rather than the measured approach associated with coercive diplomacy, Hall contends that leaders can engage in a "team performance of anger" in order to convey to an adversary their emotional investment in a particular issue. While this suggests that leaders employ emotion deliberately and, by implication, rationally, Hall acknowledges that "[m]obilized emotion may not be easy simply to switch off."[xii] Encouraged to express their anger, state representatives may become more incensed in the process, affecting their subsequent decisions and increasing the danger of escalation if their adversary remains defiant. Once anger becomes part of leaders' calculations, it becomes difficult to remove.

The same is true of fear. Drawing on neuroscience research, Neta Crawford has explained the lingering effects of fear on human decision making. According to Crawford: "Long-term fear, or even a single traumatic event, may alter our brains at a biochemical level. Repeated stress caused by immediate or anticipated threat can reshape our brains as the stress hormone cortisol etches a chemical traumatic trace; nurture becomes nature." Experiences that create fear will leave such strong memories that we will interpret subsequent events that trigger the same emotions as similar to the initial traumatic experience, whether or not they

are actually alike. As Crawford argues: "This is analogical reasoning triggered by emotions, not a coldly cognitive assessment – suggesting that a past event where we were afraid is like the current situation (regardless of whether the historical event is similar in important respects)."[xiii]

This type of emotion-based pattern recognition is not simply an impediment to rational calculation. In fact, it plays an important role in helping us cope with uncertainty. Like Crawford, Stephen Peter Rosen has argued that memories formed at times of emotional arousal influence our interpretation of new situations. But he argues that they serve a valuable purpose in that they expedite decision making. According to Rosen: "Emotion helps us select data from an enormous amount of information available to us and reduces the cognitive problem to proportions that humans can handle."[xiv] This is essential in crisis situations, when military and political leaders must make rapid decisions based on large quantities of ambiguous information. By flagging familiar patterns amid masses of new data, emotion can "provide the motivation to act even when there is uncertainty."[xv]

While Rosen's work sheds light on the impact of evocative memories on crisis decision making, Jonathan Mercer has shown that the influence of emotion is even more pervasive, shaping the beliefs that guide our decisions on a daily basis. Mercer defines a belief as "a proposition, or collection of propositions, that one thinks is probably true."[xvi] Emotion helps us form our beliefs in the absence of certainty. For example, we may believe that another individual is trustworthy because their previous behavior has induced our happiness or gratitude, even if we cannot foresee their future actions. Alternatively, we may see that person as threatening because their behavior has induced our fear or disgust. In addition, we choose courses of action based on our beliefs about future scenarios. For example, we may purchase life insurance because we fear the financial consequences for our dependents in the event of our demise. Beliefs shape military and political leaders' assessments of allies and adversaries, as well as their decisions regarding the use of force, in similar ways. Thus, Mercer argues that a leader pondering air strikes against an adversary must consider: "How will one feel if bombing a target kills many civilians, and how will one feel if not bombing results in the escape of some terrorists?"[xvii] Like Rosen, Mercer emphasizes the role of emotion in facilitating decisions, but he goes further in arguing for its utility. As he explains, people who cannot experience emotion have difficulty making optimal decisions because they cannot assess risk, which requires the ability to imagine future scenarios and associate them with positive or negative feelings.

However, emotion does not always enhance the quality of our decisions. Rosen explains that emotion-based pattern recognition can lead to decisions "very early in the decision-making process, before there is a need to decide, before much relevant information has arrived, and before alternative strategies have been evaluated or even formulated."[xviii] He argues that during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, John F. Kennedy's negative memories of the previous year's summit with Soviet President Khrushchev quickly led him to adopt a confrontational strategy that risked military confrontation. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson's 1965 decision to commit American ground forces to combat in Vietnam may have been shaped by his senatorial campaign in 1948, in which his opposition to communism figured prominently.[xix] While Kennedy's approach has generally been vindicated and Johnson's has not, Rosen argues that neither decision resulted from a process "in which a full range of information is received and used in a meaningful way to evaluate the expected outcomes of alternative policies."[xx] Thus, while evocative memories play an important role in helping us to sift through voluminous data more quickly, they can also limit our analysis of this data, sometimes unnecessarily.

Our reliance on emotion to facilitate information processing can also leave us vulnerable to manipulation. Drawing on the work of psychologist Daniel Kahneman, Herbert Lin has explained that human beings employ two general types of cognitive processing. System 1 is "an intuitive, reflexive, and emotionally-driven mode of thought", while System 2 is a "more deliberate, analytical mode of thought."[xxi] While System 2 is less prone to error, it is also slower and consumes more of our finite cognitive resources. For most routine tasks, therefore, humans tend to rely on System 1 processes, which use mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to assess information and make decisions. Emotion acts as a heuristic, influencing and expediting our processing of data. In recent decades, however, Lin argues that "new information technologies have led to an increase in the volume and velocity of information available on earth by many orders of magnitude...."[xxii] Faced with an overabundance of information, humans are increasingly reliant on System 1 processes to digest it.

This dependence on System 1 thinking leaves us vulnerable to actors who employ emotional messages to shape our opinions. As Lin explains: "By exploiting cognitive limitations, the perpetrators of cyber-enabled information warfare have learned to exacerbate prejudices, biases, and ideological differences; to add heat but no light to political discourse; and to spread widely believed 'alternative facts' in advancing their political positions."[xxiii] Appealing to emotion is an especially potent means of achieving these aims. A recent study of Russian propaganda notes that information that creates "emotional arousal" in its intended recipients is more likely to be passed on to others, whether it is true or not.[xxiv] It is therefore not surprising that Russian disinformation operations seek to "appeal to readers' emotions rather than their rationality."[xxv]

Thus, recent scholarship shows that individuals process information and make decisions based on a complex blend of emotion and reason, particularly in the context

of uncertainty, with emotion having both beneficial and harmful effects. But how do the tendencies of the trinity affect groups, societies, or states? While Clausewitz understood that emotion, reason and uncertainty interact in the minds of human beings, he was clearly interested in how they manifest themselves at the institutional and societal levels. Explaining the relationship between individual and collective emotions has been a significant challenge for scholars who seek to establish the role of emotion in international relations.[xxvi] While the nature of this relationship remains subject to debate, recent studies have offered insights into how emotion spreads among individuals, the interaction between individual and group emotions, and how societal emotion can affect policy decisions.

In explaining its spread, Jonathan Mercer has argued that "emotion is contagious. As most people know and as psychologists confirm, other people's emotion influences one's emotion."[xxvii] Clausewitz offers an example of this contagion in his discussion of danger in war. Describing a soldier's first experience in battle, he refers repeatedly to the demeanor of senior officers. In his words: "You notice that some of the officers act a little oddly; you yourself are not as steady and collected as you were…. Forward to the brigadier, a soldier of acknowledged bravery, but he is careful to take cover behind a rise, a house or a clump of trees."[xxviii] While the hazards of the battlefield contribute to the soldier's growing unease, so too do his superiors, whose experience gives their behavior added significance. This process resembles what contemporary scholars label an "information cascade." According to Rosen: "Information cascades take place when individuals make decisions on the basis of their own private information, but also on the basis of what they see others doing, and when such decision making is sequential."[xxix] Social media facilitates this process, as individuals can observe the statements and actions of a broad range of people with whom they are not personally acquainted. In 2011, for example, the online expression of dissent by the leaders of the Tunisian protest movement convinced a sympathetic but normally passive general public to voice its dissatisfaction with the government.[xxx]

While the concept of an information cascade sheds light on the process by which information and emotion spread from person to person, it does not explain why members of the same social group experience similar emotions in response to specific information. Why, for example, did Americans feel a collective sense of anger and humiliation following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC? To address this issue, Brent Sasley has borrowed the concept of intergroup emotion theory from the discipline of social psychology. He argues that in addition to their own self-identity, individuals develop a social identity based on their membership in a particular group. This social identity leads them to appraise events "not for how they impact on themselves as individuals, but for how they affect the

group itself."[xxxi] Individuals will thus have emotional responses to events in which they are not directly involved. Because they are shared with others, these responses may be stronger than the emotions one feels in response to an event affecting oneself directly. As Mercer has argued: "Group-level emotion can be more powerful than the individual experience of emotion because one experiences it as objectively true and externally driven, rather than as subjective and individually constructed…."[xxxii]

Group emotions can affect ostensibly rational policy in several ways. Sasley contends that as members of a state, decision makers will share the emotions experienced by the rest of society, and these will influence their foreign policy decisions.[xxxiii] This may not always be the case, especially in non-democratic societies. But even if their emotional response is different from the rest of society, leaders' sensitivity to public opinion will encourage them to adopt policies that reflect the emotions of the broader group. More broadly, Neta Crawford has argued that within the different institutions that comprise any state, group emotions "structure the organization of knowledge (e.g. intelligence gathering and threat assessment) and the development of standard operating procedures and routines for handling challenges."[xxxiv] Thus, the collective emotional response of a society to a particular event can influence a diverse range of issues such as military doctrine, weapons procurement and even immigration policy, in addition to the decisions of senior leaders.

Conclusion

Given the esteem in which On War is held, especially by many readers of this journal, it may seem impertinent to revisit one of its core concepts. In no academic discipline, however, do we disregard the insights of recent research in favor of explanations nearly two centuries old. In fact, Clausewitz's conception of his theory as "capable of growth" suggests that he would have been amenable to updating his ideas in light of new knowledge.[xxxv] Recent international relations scholarship does not invalidate the trinity as a metaphor for the nature of war. But as this brief discussion has demonstrated, it does illuminate the interaction of the tendencies that comprise it. On an individual level, it is evident that emotion and reason are inextricably intertwined, and that emotion can influence ostensibly rational analysis in ways that decision makers do not realize. Emotion plays an essential role in helping individuals cope with the play of chance and uncertainty, but it can also curtail the dispassionate assessment of information. Given the exponential growth in the volume of information available to us, this leaves decision makers and the general public increasingly vulnerable to emotional manipulation. In addition, emotion and reason are intimately connected at the group as well as the individual level. Just like individuals, institutions and nations can be said to experience emotions that affect their policy

choices. This does not diminish the significance of reason in the trinity. Clausewitz viewed reason as essential in determining how violence should be employed in pursuit of political objectives. The fact that it remains essential for this purpose compels us to understand as much as possible how and when it may be distorted. By shedding light on the interaction of all of the elements of the trinity, recent scholarship helps us to do so.

More broadly, this scholarship reaffirms Hew Strachan's observation that the trinity, "like the Christian trinity, really is three elements united into one."[xxxvi] But Clausewitz's image of an object suspended between three magnets may not be the most effective way of imagining the relationship between these elements or a theory that seeks to comprehend it. Rather than pulling in different directions, the tendencies sometimes act in sequence, or even support one another. Moreover, the way in which they interact is not entirely chaotic, even if it defies precise predictions. Conceptualizing an alternative to Clausewitz's image would require a much more detailed analysis. This discussion aims only to suggest that we can identify patterns in the interaction of the three tendencies. Clausewitz may have discerned these patterns, but he did not have the benefit of nearly two centuries of research that now enable us to describe them in concrete terms. Connecting the trinity with this research can only enhance its value in explaining the conduct of war.

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On Strategy: A Primer
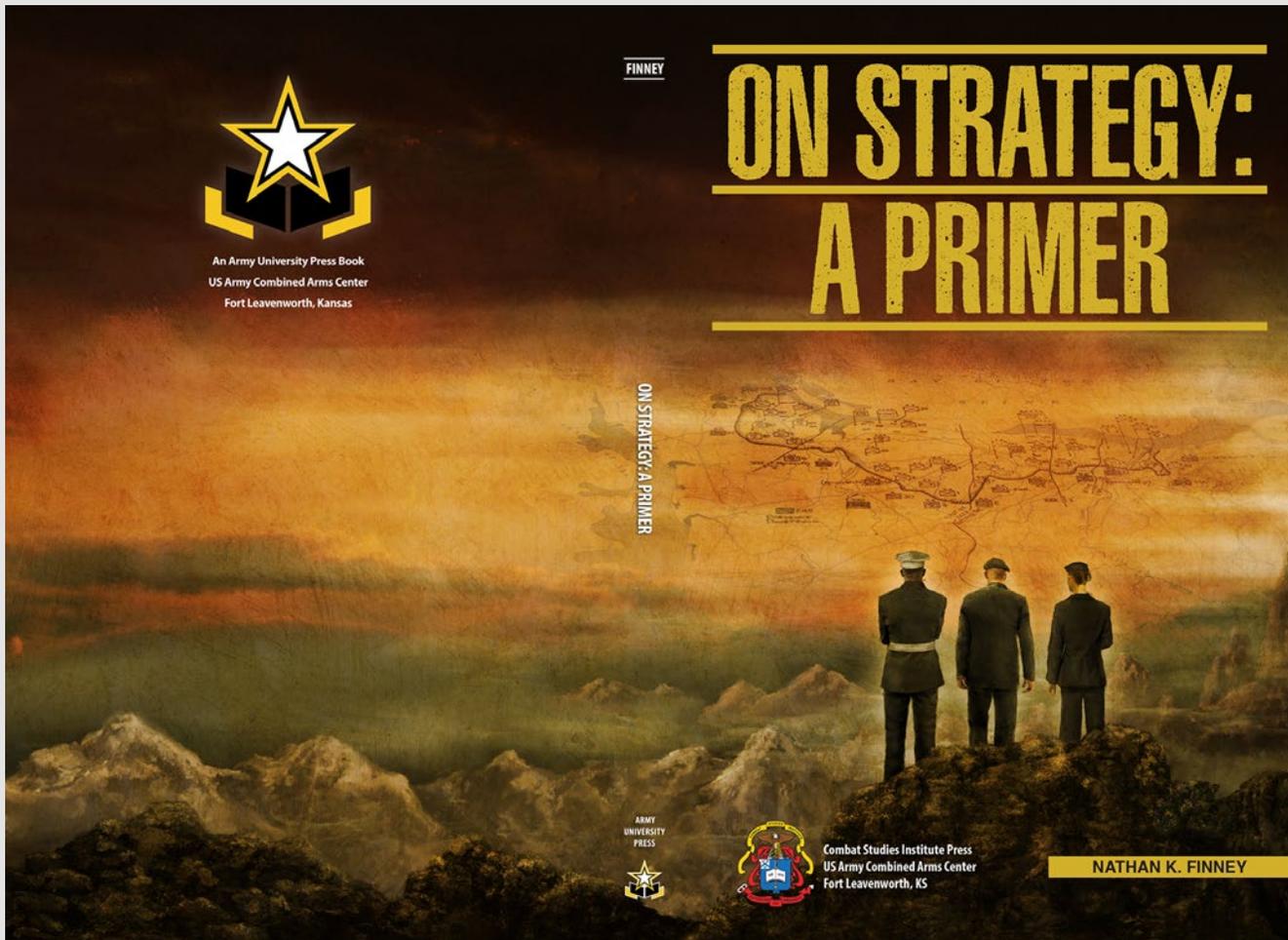
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Grand Strategic Coherence and the Relevance of the Operational Level of War

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Introduction

The relevance of the operational level of war to modern warfare is generally evaluated in the context of the authority at the civil-military interface that exerts control over military action.[i] The operational level of war is conceptually situated as an arena between grand strategy and tactics, wherein military leaders arguably dominate the application

of force without political interference.[ii] This conception of an impenetrable military dominion, however, neglects the theories of Carl von Clausewitz who espoused that "war springs from some political purpose," so political control must "permeate all military operations" to ensure "the political aim remains the first consideration."[iii] If war proceeds without civilian interference it tragically emerges as "untrammeled" in an "absolute manifestation of violence" that commandeers "the place of policy" and obstructs the political end.[iv] The modern literature on grand strategy, a concept for political dominion, comprises a framework to evaluate the relevance of the operational level of war on this Clausewitzian principle. As such, the means of statecraft, especially the military instrument, require restraint to ensure the purposeful application of ways can attain the politically chosen end—the essence of grand strategic coherence. This disciplining demands an imbalance at the civil-military interface that favors civilian authority, while appreciating the role of the military officer, in exercising restraint in the application of force.

An examination of the grand strategic literature—advanced by twentieth-century British military thought—establishes a framework to evaluate the relevance of the operational level of war toward the attainment of the political end. The conception of grand strategic coherence developed by this framework connects the necessity of a disciplined military instrument with a theory of civil-military relations that validates the need for political control over grand strategy to balance national means at the operational level of war, in a restrained way, to accomplish the objective set by policy. Furthermore, an analysis of the theoretical origins of the operational level of war—in British and American military theory—identifies it as a descendant of grand strategic thought that links the orchestration of military force and use of maneuver, in exodus from attrition, as the most measured way for battle to serve as a surrogate to achieve the political objective. The outcome of the U.S. misadventure in Vietnam arguably disconnected this link and precipitated the emergent irrelevance of the operational level of war, since post-war military dominion and civilian abdication threatened an unrestrained and fanatical pursuit of battlefield victory that detached warfare from Clausewitz' political aim, the embodiment of grand strategic incoherence. The aforesaid framework applied to the First Gulf War reveals how this emergent irrelevance failed to develop through an analysis of American decision-making at the civil-military interface. Accordingly, the operational level of war will remain relevant to modern warfare if political authority at the civil-military interface restrains the military instrument to create grand strategic coherence in alignment with its theoretical origins.

Grand Strategic Coherence: A Restrained Military Instrument and Civil-Military Relations

Modern grand strategy is a conception of strategic studies with twentieth-century origins. Julian Corbett is arguably the chief progenitor of contemporary grand strategic thought, since he separated strategy into major and minor segments and validated the totality of statecraft in war.[v] Major strategy, considered tantamount with grand strategy, mobilized "the whole resources of the nation for war"—integrating its military, political, diplomatic, and financial instruments—to attain the political "object," which minor strategy facilitated through the application of military force. [vi] J.F.C. Fuller contributed to the evolution of the grand strategic literature by elucidating that it also encompassed civilizational development for the peace, as attritional slaughter produced individual and societal degradation in warfare, an unrestrained way that signified a blow against civilization.[vii] Consequently, Fuller asserted that battle, an operationalized military facet of grand strategy in war, should commence and conclude in a way that advances a "continuation of prosperity in the peace."[viii] Grand strategy endured as the "transmission of power in all its forms," but it hence buttressed the obligation to control operations in war as "a link with the policy which will follow victory."[ix] B.H. Liddell Hart similarly observed grand strategy as an effort that ensured prosperity following war. [x] His influence centered on a latent confliction between grand strategy and military operations, since the fanatic pursuit of "victory" without any "thought for the after-effect" disconnected operations from the political end and traded the ascent of a prosperous peace for the "germs of another war."[xi] Restraint in the use of force, consequently, ensured grand strategic coherence for a fruitful peace.

Grand strategic coherence is the consequence of a balance between means, ways, and ends.[xii] The military instrument, a distinct means of national power, requires restraint to eschew permanent damage to the political end, and control is required to discipline its operationally violent ways.[xiii] Civilian politicians are responsible for this control in democracies, for a coherent grand strategy is unquestionably a politically oriented concept, since it handles the mobilization of national means for war, regulates the ways of the instruments in war, and defines the course for the political end.[xiv] Grand strategy, however, is sometimes contemplated as an insulated concept in an unlinked chain, whereby ways coalesce at the operational level of war in isolation from this higher-level strategy.[xv] The disconnection of grand strategy from the operational level of war accommodates the dominant theory of civil-military relations, in which politicians abdicate control to a professional military.[xvi] This abdication is contested by scholarship that contends such a civil-military cleavage diminishes the political control necessary to discipline the military instrument for grand strategic coherence. [xvii] Political non-interference in the conduct of military operations is arguably a "dereliction of duty" in grand strategy, as any conflict in ways compels explicit civilian influence to ensure balance.[xviii] The military officer that appreciates the authority of civilian control is positioned to help guard the relevance of the operational

level of war, where military force ought to be applied for the purpose of achieving the Clausewitzian political aim and nothing further. Political authority disciplines the military instrument to ensure grand strategic coherence when it restrains the application of force at the operational level of war to attain the political end; a viable framework to evaluate relevance.

The Operational Level of War: Descendant of Grand Strategy and an Emergent Irrelevance

The modern origins of the operational level of war descend from grand strategic thought.[xix] This is captured by Hart's "indirect approach," which intended to discipline the military instrument to cohere the latent conflict between grand strategy and military operations by exploiting maneuver as a restrained way to avert a fanatic pursuit of victory in battle detached from the political end.[xx] This anti-attrition approach underpinned the operational level of war as an arena that strengthened the subordination of battle to the political objective, for maneuver stressed a more senseful manner for armed operations to balance "human and economic loss" with "the sake of preserving peace."[xxi] Though Hart is also considered a forebearer of British operational thought, an explicit reference to an operational level of war in Western military doctrine did not materialize until the Cold War.[xxii] Edward Luttwak observed U.S. attritional warfare as a "profit-maximizing industrial enterprise" that lacked acumen and risked the political end, as it senselessly applied strength against strength.[xxiii] Luttwak, consequently, coalesced Hart's indirect approach into the "need to follow the line of least expectation" and advocated relational maneuver, a "knowledge-dependent" modus that "promoted imaginative flair and operational paradox," to exploit "physical or psychological" fragilities.[xxiv] He fashioned the operational level of war into "Anglo-Saxon military terminology" as an arena for relational maneuver to achieve the political end in a more restrained way that avoided attrition.[xxv] This linked the modern theoretical origins of the operational level of war—where the orchestration of military forces unfolded with imagination and resolve—as a descendant of modern British grand strategic thought that supported a restrained military instrument committed to the political object.

The U.S. misadventure in Vietnam exposed a toxic civil-military interface, which later risked severing this theoretical link and causing the emergent irrelevance of the operational level.[xxvi] The President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were each responsible, for a distrust of the armed forces incited political obstruction and the silence of the military officer.[xxvii] Tactical battlefield skirmishes came at a high overhead and failed to attain the political objective.[xxviii] American politicians and military officers emerged equally troubled after this tragic misadventure, yet "somehow the notion that

the military got it more right in Vietnam than the civilians" reigned.[xxix] The American military institutionalized the operational level into its doctrine to salvage its "*amour proper*" and "professional self-worth" shortly after Luttwak identified that military operations in Vietnam endured absent an "operational dimension" connected to a higher-level grand strategy.[xxx] This institutionalization, however, endeavored to shield military force from political interference through a primary focus "on professional skill" in pursuit of "military excellence."[xxxi] The insistence of the military, paired with a "subliminal" abdication of civilian control over the operational level, arguably supplanted political authority and fashioned "a way of battle rather than a way of war."[xxxii] This "politics-free zone" risked inciting grand strategic incoherence, for an imbalance at the civil-military interface in favor of absolute military control and isolated from political authority would unbridle violence and enthuse the fanatic pursuit of battlefield victory detached from the political objective. If this circumstance was enabled by the civilian authority and not advised against by the military, the operational level of war would emerge irrelevant; detached from its theoretical origins as an integrated link in the chain for grand strategy to serve as surrogacy for the political object.[xxxiii]

The First Gulf War: Guarding the Operational Level of War at the Civil-Military Interface

The instance of the First Gulf War demonstrates how an appropriate imbalance at the civil-military interface—whereby American decision-making favored political control and disciplined the application of force at the operational level of war, while the highest-ranking military officer advised restraint in pursuit of the political object—ensured grand strategic coherence by guarding the link between political direction and military operations. This validation for the relevance of the operational level of war began on 2 August 1990, when Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait without incitement or admonition.[xxxiv] President George H.W. Bush led the diplomatic development of a 39-nation coalition to achieve the political objective accepted by the United Nations: the departure of Iraq from Kuwait and reinstatement of the latter's sovereignty.[xxxv] International economic sanctions and a naval embargo were levied against Iraq, and the American Strategic Petroleum Reserve was readied to assuage the economic and political effect of a disruption in energy flow.[xxxvi]

The United States deployed military forces to the Middle East to enforce sanctions and "deter further Iraqi aggression" against America's energy rich regional partners.[xxxvii] President Bush convened a National Security Council review of the operational plan designed by the theater commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, should the coalition shift to the offensive.[xxxviii] Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor, expressed distaste with the plan, for an attritional "frontal assault through the heart of the

Iraqi strength to Kuwait" lacked maneuver and purpose. [xxxix] Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney concurred and directed planners back to the "drawing board."[xl] General Colin Powell, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and self-described "ghost of Vietnam," pressed civilian leadership for a wartime objective if sanctions waned and the coalition vacillated.[xli] The political objective remained Iraq's ejection from, and the restoration of, Kuwait, but an ulterior military objective emerged to diminish Saddam's offensive capabilities throughout the liberation process, without "trespassing" in Iraq, to foster an amicable balance of power in the Middle East.[xlii]

General Powell presented his "political masters" with a revised operational plan, developed in concert with General Schwarzkopf, that included a phased campaign orchestrated to destroy the war-making capacity of Iraq through air and naval attacks against its command and control systems and Republican Guard, Saddam's "praetorian protectors."[xliii] The bombing campaign would then transition to Kuwait—with Iraqi forces fixed from an amphibious feint and ground preparations—to physically destroy and psychologically fragment the occupation. The final phase encompassed a ground offensive, with a combined arms attack in Kuwait to deceive the main effort, that avoided strength and exploited the orchestrated Iraqi weakness with a "deep flanking maneuver" to destroy the Republican Guard and channel dislodged Iraqi forces from Kuwait "into a large killing zone."[xliv] President Bush agreed to resource the national means necessary to execute this operational plan to first and foremost eject Iraq from Kuwait and then to foster a delicate favorable balance of power.[xlv]

The United Nations authorized force against Iraq if it failed to depart Kuwait by 15 January 1991.[xlvi] Saddam maintained his forces and signaled that Iraq would remain despite this ultimatum. The American-led coalition executed the operational plan, with the political and military objectives for the application of force codified in policy guidance, after the deadline for withdrawal elapsed.[xlvii] The imaginative and paradoxical maneuverist ways of "the pre-war debates" bloomed in execution with relatively minimal coalition resources exhausted, though the operation did not unfold entirely in the phased manner intended.[xlviii] Decisions at the civil-military interface, however, were sufficient.

President Bush suspected Saddam would "withdraw from Kuwait before" the coalition could "grind down his armor and heavy equipment" without invading Iraq.[xlix] General Schwarzkopf arguably failed to bait the trap as the Republican Guard and Iraqi forces retreated, and U.S. field commanders—fanatically fixated on battle—advocated

the pursuit and wanton annihilation of a withdrawing force, which meant elevating the ulterior military objective above the political end.[l] General Powell, contrariwise, advised an eschewal of pursuit and annihilation to avert purposeless battle and loss, for military operations already achieved the political objective of ejecting Iraq from Kuwait, and President Bush concurred and ordered the sudden termination of military operations.[li] Saddam's capabilities arguably required further diminishment to guarantee a longer-term balance of power amicable to U.S. interests in the Middle East, but this ulterior military objective and action at the operational level of war emerged subordinate to the higher political objective.

Conclusion

Clausewitz theorized politics "is the womb in which war develops," and an examination of the grand strategic literature establishes a framework to evaluate the relevance of the operational level of war on this premise.[lii] The theoretical development of the operational level did not scheme to detach politics from warfare but it, instead, descended from grand strategic thought and intended to fashion an arena for the disciplined application of battle indispensable to the political objective. Nevertheless, this theoretical connection arguably emerged severed after the U.S. misadventure in Vietnam, when the military exerted, and civilian politicians abdicated, control over the operational level of war; risking war's very relevance as a political activity. The First Gulf War—a particular case of modern warfare—invalidated this irrelevance, for American decision-making at the civil-military interface favored political control, which restrained the military instrument to achieve the political end as it advanced undisciplined in the planning, execution, and termination of operations. This imbalance, wherein political leadership refused to abdicate authority while military leadership counseled restraint and adhered to civilian guidance, enabled military operations to serve as the integrated link in a grand strategic chain committed to the political objective, which its theoretical origins portended. Consequently, for the operational level of war to remain relevant in the future, the civil-military interface must remain imbalanced in favor of political authority with a military officer corps that also recognizes the centrality of civilian interference in the employment of force and the utility of restraint in its counsel; a surefire way to ensure grand strategic coherence and the achievement of the political end without excessively damaging the peace that might follow victory.

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Re-Thinking the Strategic Approach to Asymmetrical Warfare

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Asymmetrical Warfare: "Warfare that is between opposing forces which differ greatly in military power and that typically involves the use of unconventional weapons and tactics (such as those associated with guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks." Merriam Webster Dictionary

Asymmetrical Warfare: "Unconventional strategies and tactics adopted by a force when the military capabilities of belligerent powers are not simply unequal but are so significantly different that they cannot make the same sorts of attacks on each other." Encyclopedia Britannica

The Present Asymmetric Orientation

In October 2020, the US Army announced it was going to disband the Asymmetric Warfare Group[i]. Founded in 2003, AWG was formed to counter the improvised explosive device (IED) threat that emerged early in the Iraq War.[ii] AWG was composed of military experts who could use their extensive experience to formulate solutions to problems that were upending deployed units. Until 2012, AWG focused on the atypical means (notably IEDs) in which various insurgencies were preventing US success in both Iraq and Afghanistan.[iii] After 2012, the focus shifted to planning for potential environments soldiers might find themselves in. A recent example of this was AWG training 82nd Airborne paratroopers in subterranean warfare.[iv]

AWG members were innovative at a tactical level, but the group incorrectly defined and oriented its governing term: asymmetry. While they successfully provided symptomatic solutions to threats, they *did not* posture units or themselves to solve the systemic issues driving the symptoms. If AWG had been a pest control company, it was providing impressive insights on killing termites. However, it had no long-term solution for pests that were affecting the whole property.

The blame should not lie solely with AWG. The past and current *strategic* orientation to "asymmetry" favors expensive and immediate tactical while ignoring systemic tensions that allow for the asymmetric threat. The strategic orientation put AWG on a Sisyphean Hill without prospect for success. They deserved better direction from higher.

In contrast to the past strategic alignment, strategists must reorient asymmetric thinking to complement and enhance any tactical measures especially in asymmetric environments. Beyond Project Objective Memorandum (POM) cycles[v], contracting, and spending, strategists need to contextualize asymmetric threats radically different than in the past. Alternatively they can continue the current strategy which rewards the enemy, punishes the US populace, and fails to address these ill-structured problems. The following will examine the legacy understanding of asymmetric warfare, the consequences of legacy asymmetric thinking, why this thinking might persist, and considerations for reforming asymmetric thinking at the strategic level.

Modern Roots of the Term

"Asymmetric warfare" emerged as the axiom to explain the environment of the early Iraq conflict. It seemed apropos as the small Iraqi "David" was using their relative size against the US "Goliath" to move, act, and evolve quicker. An internet search of "Asymmetric warfare" appears to corroborate this assumption. Most definitions describe an asymmetric conflict as between weaker opponents frustrating stronger opponents via irregular means. It is a conflict where a jet-ski can frustrate a battleship. The US Iraq experience reflected this appeared to mimic this dictionary definition of a big person being frustrated by the smaller one. In hindsight, strategists should have avoided this definition as it predisposed them to think like a bug exterminator, not as a systemic threat to the bugs. Strategists failed to think asymmetrically like their opponents did. They should have been attempting to dictate the foundational terms of conflict regardless of the opponent's size, not just trying to spend it away. To redirect thinking on asymmetry, strategists ought to move away from the unsatisfactory "David and Goliath" metaphor.

The starting point is finding a suitable definition to derive subsequent actions and orientations. The Rand Corporation, though far from perfect, provides a suitable starting point: "asymmetric warfare is a conflict between nations or groups that have disparate military capabilities and strategies."[vi] While not as complete as it should be, this definition provides an opportunity to broadly think about the issue. The latter half of the definition requires keen consideration when it describes "disparate military capabilities and strategies." The terms "disparate" and "strategies" require special notice and investigation, because they can be the starting terms that guide impactful asymmetric strategy.

Unfortunately, the asymmetric focus defaults to "disparate capabilities", not "disparate strategies." This is consequential. Instinctively, it appears that to defeat an adversary's innovation, extensive resources are required to develop the capabilities to match or overcome it. In the case of IEDs, the US countered insurgent IED emplacement through a myriad of expensive counter IED methods. Rationally, this is Newton's third law of physics at work. The insurgent's action necessitated the US countering with an equal reaction. However, the reaction was not equal. It was profoundly in favor of the adversary. They were the ones dictating the conflict and inflicting both seen and unseen consequences on the US.

This was fine for the previous years as it was harmless: none

of the US's adversaries in these conflicts constituted a true existential threat. US Strategists and Planners should care about the future of this term and not relegate it as a tragic designation artifact of the early 2000's. These failures can be informative. Understanding asymmetry ought to re-emerge to understand and engage in future Great Power Conflict (GPC), not just a Middle Eastern based counter-insurgency. Asymmetric strategic thinking should force planners to think of inverting an adversary's resources and strengths. Merely trying to out-resource, the adversary's novel approaches are deleterious and unsustainable.

Rewarding the Enemy: Asymmetry's First Sin

The Iraq and Afghanistan insurgencies understood a conventional fight would be impossible with the US. What the insurgents needed was to invert the operational environment (OE) to their strengths and then "min-max"[vii] those strengths and metrics for victory. They effectively discovered this equation, defined the variables for victory, and put the US on its back foot. Cheap media and cheaper homemade explosives halted the world's then sole superpower. Both insurgencies successfully:

1. Bled the US' treasure[viii]

2. Elongated the timeline for any possible victory

3. Frustrated the patience of a once supportive US domestic populace

The US was in a deficit in these three metrics/variables during these conflicts.

While the US was able to stack bodies of insurgents via direct action, the insurgencies could easily suffer through KIAs if they continued to invert the power paradigm in the conflict. While every killed or captured High Value Individual satisfied a McNamara like vision of victory, it failed to generate US success. GEN Stanley McChrystal best illustrated this in his explanation of "Insurgent Math:"[ix]

> Following a military operation, two are killed. How many insurgents are left? Traditional mathematics would say that eight would be left, but there may only be two, because six of the living eight may have said, 'This business of insurgency is becoming dangerous, so I am going to do something else.'

There are more likely to be as many as 20, because each one you killed has a brother, father, son, and friends, who do not necessarily think that they were killed because they were doing something wrong. It does not matter – you killed them. Suddenly, then, there may be 20, making the calculus of military operations very different.

The USG was aware of this inversion, but failed to divine the variables that would similarly frustrate the insurgency. Strategists instead turned to finance over finesse and foresight.

The development of the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle (MRAP) exemplified this reactive turn to the printing presses. Championed by Senator Lindsey Graham[x] and then Senator Joseph Biden[xi], the MRAP was one of the notable solutions to the IED problem. Instead of being in a "soft-skinned" Humvee, soldiers would now ride in seemingly impervious vehicles. While the MRAP undoubtedly saved lives, consider the trade-offs. The more secure MRAP was less mobile and slower than the Humvee. Chasing down a four-door sedan was a problem.

The reaction of insurgents was more inexpensive homemade explosives. Regardless of the protections an armored vehicle offered the insurgents could respond by increasing their spending fractionally, and they did so. The better and bigger IEDs nullified the better and bigger vehicles.[xii] Regardless of the protections offered by Oshkosh, no one is surviving 500-600lbs of explosives beneath your feet.[xiii]

Even more damaging was the cost to the US. The purported MRAP cost as of 2012 was $45 billion dollars.[xiv] The average IED costs around $30.[xv] This divergence is stark. The enemy pays a minuscule sum and consequently exerts disproportionate resource costs upon its opponent. Did the $45 billion dollars spent on the MRAP eliminate the IED threat[xvi] or merely address the symptoms of a problem?

The MRAP is just one example of resource diversion. In fact, IEDs affected the entirety of the Department of Defense's (DOD) Joint Capabilities Integration Development System (JCIDS). JCIDS is the solution space that considers solutions involving a simulation of doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) required to accomplish a mission. [xvii] The table below will show how the IED affected the JCIED's DOTMLPF process:[xviii]

DOTMLPF Definition	Effects on DOTMLPF
Doctrine: *the way they fight, e.g., emphasizing maneuver warfare combined air-ground campaigns.*	Consider all the doctrine and literature revisions and development conducted at DoD learning institutions (e.g., Fort Leavenworth) needed to assist commanders and leaders with IEDs.
Organization: *how they organize to fight; divisions, air wings, Marine-Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs), etc.*	Consider the development of entities such as the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) in 2005 and AWG in 2006 to specially defeat this threat. Again, one is pulling away top, technical individuals to satisfy a problem and losing the capability to use those individuals in other ways.
Training: *how they prepare to fight tactically; basic training to advanced individual training, various types of unit training, joint exercises, etc.*	Pre-Mission Training now had to consider how to deal with IEDs. Think of the hours spent and resources required for properly training soldiers.
Material: *all the "stuff" necessary to equip the forces, that is, weapons, spares, etc. so they can operate effectively.*	How much was spent and re-allocated for IED detectors (E.g., Thor and Minehound Systems) and other materials necessary to defeat this tactical threat? Again, material choice taxes a commander's treasure and forces him or her to use resources that have been spent somewhere else to defeat the insurgency.
Leadership and Education: *availability of qualified people for peacetime, wartime, and various contingency operations.*	Education fixates on and becomes centered on a very specific problem (i.e. IED) set in a very specific warfare environment (i.e. COIN). Materials from that period
Personnel: *availability of qualified people for peacetime, wartime, and various contingency operations.*	Capable individuals are pulled away from project and positions to satisfy a very specific concern.
Facilities *real property; installations and industrial facilities (e.g. government owned ammunition production facilities) that support the forces.*	See "Material"

Figure 1: From Author

These small tactical insurgent actions rearranged operational and strategic priorities thus creating an asymmetric relationship. It is not that the insurgent was a smaller opponent with novel means battling a bigger opponent. They imposed disproportionate costs, defined the battlefield, and the metrics for victory. Even if the US is the wealthiest country on earth, there is no such thing as limitless resources. Spending will eventually exceed thresholds and capacities and sink the state. This reactive, money dump failed the US and will continue to do so in future conflicts.

That which is seen and unseen: Domestic Consequences of Asymmetric Thinking

In his seminal text *The Law*, Frederic Bastiat[xix] encourages economists to look beyond the superficial effect of a law or policy and broaden their perspective to consider secondary and tertiary consequences. His challenge to readers is to divine "seen and unseen" effects from a given choice or policy.[xx] Just like economic concerns, foreign policy problems are not hermetically sealed and solely relegated to the specific geographically defined battlespace. This separation is purely cognitive and incorrect.

Strategists need to acquaint themselves with Bastiat's lessons[xxi] as much as they do Clausewitz. They have a moral obligation to consider the unseen effects of current reactive measures towards asymmetric threats, and the effect on those it intends to safeguard, the domestic populace. The aforementioned MRAPs not only decreased soldier speed and lethality, but it increased costs, served as a bigger, more notable target, and negatively affected the domestic populace. In terms of the latter, the historic spending[xxii] has led to resource deprivations and inflation

directly affecting much of the US population.

Regarding the resource deprivation, consider expert personnel shortages (i.e., scientific, and technical experts) needed to fill the organizations charged to deal with the asymmetric threats. DoD has had to go to the private sector for these solutions. Even before the Global War on Terror (GWOT), approximately one-third to two-thirds of all technical researchers in the United States have been working for the military.[xxiii] The consequence is a reduced supply of comparable talent to serve civilian industry and civilian activities[xxiv] According to one study, the DoD luring science and engineering graduates with high salaries has reduced the quantity and quality of R&D undertaken in civilian-created laboratories[xxv] The US domestic populace (and the world population) might be missing out on technological and medical breakthroughs as civilian institutions do not have the personnel to move projects out of a nascent stage or towards completion.

Inflation is another destabilizing effect of the current asymmetric "capabilities" posture against the populace. When DoD needs funding that is in excess of tax revenues, they need to recall where money comes from. Strategists need to remember increased printing of dollars via the US Federal Reserve (aka the Fed) is not just an ink and paper cost. The Fed's printing of excess dollars (i.e. dollars that are not reflecting and representative of new capital creation) leads to a chase of too few goods, which requires more dollars to purchase the product. This disproportionately affects lower and middle income families who bear an increase in prices of goods (especially food and energy), that is easier to offset for the rich.[xxvi] These demographics remain stagnant while the upper classes in society continue to rise. This trend, which has been increasing for some time[xxvii] and exacerbated by financial commitments to these conflicts, is not desirable for an aspirational stable society and past research indicates it leads to unstable societies.[xxviii] Any spurious claim of being safer from this spending needs to juxtapose it against a volatile society with a widening distribution of wealth.

Why Strategists Stumble Asymmetrically

What might explain this limited mindset that leads to these consequences? There has been much written about the difficulty grooming and selecting strategic planners within the military. One critic notes those who rise to the top of the strategic decision-making pyramid are poorly qualified for the task[xxix] due to a personnel system that bases promotions on tactical competence over the first quarter century of an officer's career.[xxx] Unfortunately, tactical skill does equate or translate to great strategic skill and are often incongruous mindsets.[xxxi] It makes sense why a reactionary tactical approach manifests at the strategic level[xxxii] as it has served that leader well in the past.

Even more than this, structural critiques are a fundamental human reason. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman could explain the strategic creativity deficit due to "Loss Aversion." Within greater prospect theory, "Loss Aversion" postulates that the pain of losing psychologically motivates people's behavior as twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining.[xxxiii] When people do take risks, it is more likely to avoid a loss than to make a gain people are more willing to take risks (i.e., losses loom larger than gains).[xxxiv] In the case of asymmetric thinking, one can better avoid a loss by spending money to mitigate a problem. A plan to put an opponent in an asymmetric relationship just carries more risks, because innovation requires change and risk. Someone looking at their career progression might elect for something more rational with a stronger reward guarantee.

These impediments do not necessarily prevent a successful asymmetric strategy; however, flag officers and strategists must identify and account for them in order to ensure they don't subvert necessary and proper strategy. After this, a radical rethinking and restructuring can occur to tackle asymmetric threats. If not, we see from the past conflicts advantages gained by the enemy and punishment to the domestic populace.

Orientating Asymmetric Thinking towards GPC

The following will not be an ambitious conception of re-building of strategy. Instead it will advocate for the incorporation of certain principles to better assist strategists conceive of asymmetric opportunities with GPCs or any other adversary.

Tensions

Center of Gravity (COG) analysis informs current problem framing in joint doctrine with its constituent vulnerabilities, requirements, and capabilities.[xxxv] While appropriate for force on force, COG should not influence asymmetric planning. As an analytical tool, COG inevitably frames an adversary in a "blue on red" context, which will push planners back to a symmetrical understanding of conflict and options in it.

COG's narrow conception of the environment fails to deal with the complexity that is an inherent aspect of an asymmetric environment. Instead of a channelized conception of weaknesses, looking at systemic tensions provides strategists a perspective which generates options to deal with an adversary. While abstract, systemic tensions provide a means to appreciate and understand the most significant and influential phenomena within a given environment that would contribute to an end state.[xxxvi]

Dr. Ben Zweibelson documented this in his role as a planning

lead for the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A). To better assist commanders and planners better understand the complexity of Afghanistan through radical recalibration in 2011, Zweibelson and his team followed a four step process consisting of (1) de-taciticalization,[xxxvii] (2) contextualization,[xxxviii] (3) problematization,[xxxix] and (4) improvisation.[xl] The eventual deliverables were a series of operational level frames for planners that emancipated them for merely conceiving of conflict solely within operational level variables (aka PMESII-PT).

The problematization step especially provides one of the better ideas for thinking asymmetrically. In this step, and seen in Zweibelsons work,[xli] strategists juxtapose oppositional tensions against each other on quad charts to spur future planning, redirect on-going operations, and/or re-frame a post conflict future to gain insights not previously divined.[xlii]

In the case of China in a GPC conflict, consider the initial hypotheses of possible competing tensions within China that could yield asymmetric insights:
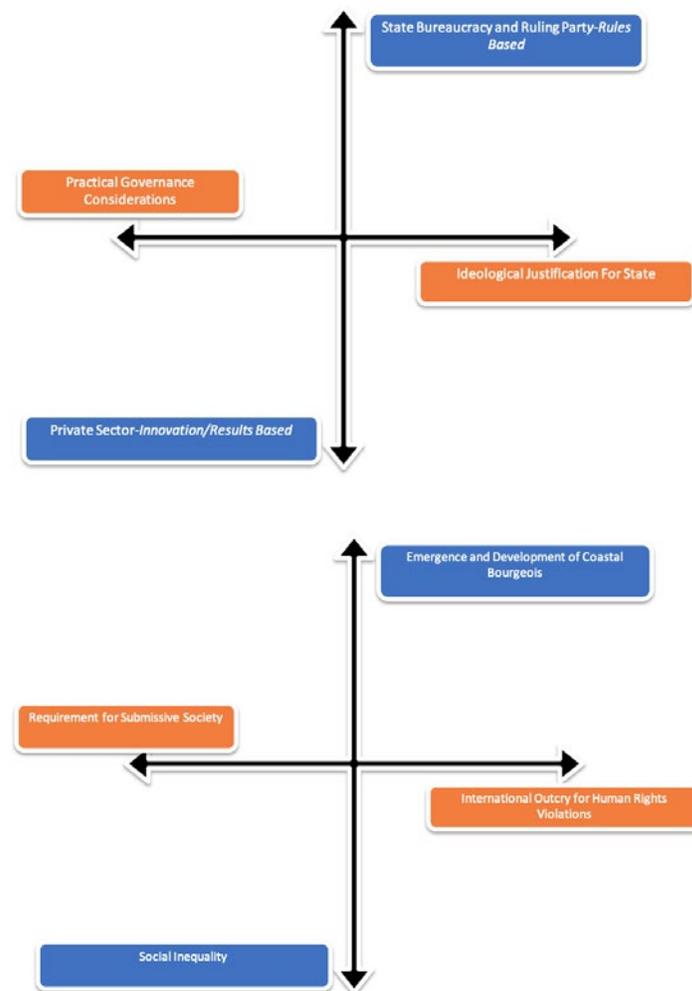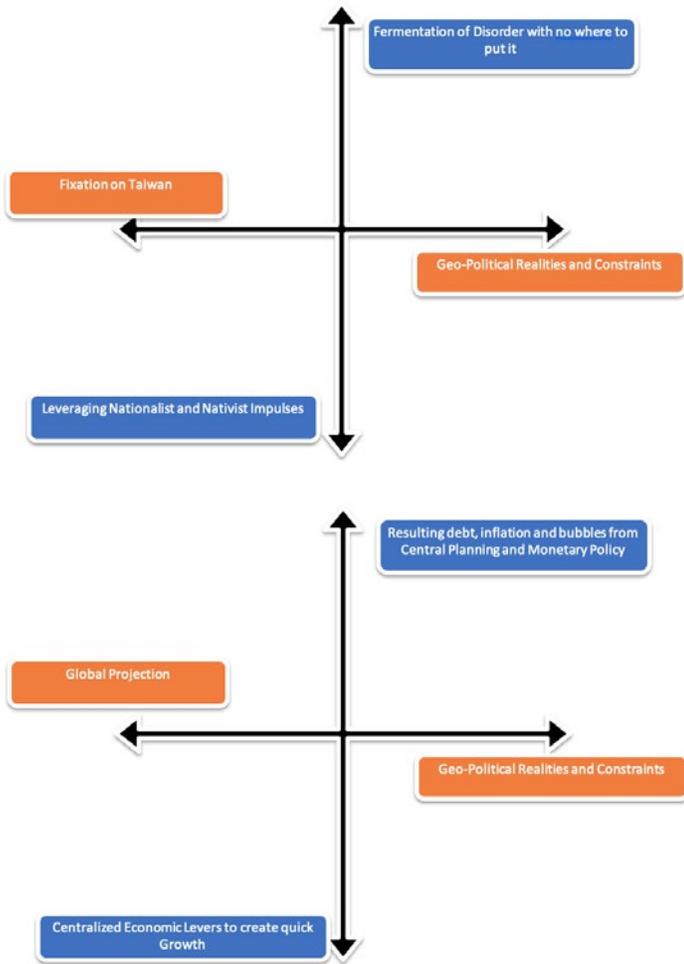
As one can see across the four examples, the tension charts kick start thinking not of course of action development. Over a longer period and with more participants, these initial quads would see the tensions re-arranged, introducing an addition of changing descriptive words and metaphoric images in the effort to divine asymmetries. The result would be a break from the paradigm of a classic great power struggle defined solely by capabilities, instead of a singular focus on a COG to generate options.

Value

Just as strategists should look to Bastiat for guidance, they should also look to economists such as Carl Menger, William Jevons, and Leon Walras. Within a few years of one another, these three economists posited value derived from utility, not from labor.[xliii] In overturning this Marxist proposition and simultaneously answering the "diamond-water paradox"[xliv] that had bedeviled Adam Smith, Menger et al argued that value is completely subjective.[xlv] The ability to satisfy human wants, accessibility (is it scarce or in abundance) and utility in its least important uses dictates a product's value.[xlvi] Value is thus reflective of the continuous and relative judgements men make to maintain the requirements for their lives and well-being."[xlvii] Value formation is a specific iterative process, not something that is a priori or determined by the "world of the forms."

This value description is not tangential but critical for thinking asymmetrically. Current Joint Doctrine asks planners to understand value in terms of a static, quantifiable, and utilitarian sense (see Jeremy Bentham's work on his conception of utility) that will yield a definable output.[xlviii] This understanding of value fails to understand the dynamic nature of value. It accepts an objective and utilitarian sense of value. The consequence of this is it sees value as fixed and requires a positivist means to validate it.

If strategists have this objective and utilitarian sense of value, they end up with a lens that defaults *all conflict* to a linear conflict, not asymmetric where more amorphous and unmeasurable concepts in the cognitive realm are of importance. The targeting of what is valuable to the adversary becomes the biased reflection of the Professional Military Education taught to strategists, not what is of value at that time and space to the adversary. It is easy to see how this misperception is consequential as it undoubtedly leads to resource misallocation and faulty objectives.

In the case of Vietnam, the misconception of value and tensions were on full display and assisted in defeat. Robert McNamara's penchant for objective measurement failed to discern the operational level variables requisite for success. In the aggregate, these measurements of progress, established at the highest levels, failed to tell the story of what was happening in the ground[xlix] and resulted in outputs understood in absolute terms[l] without the clarity of nuance.

As noted in Douglas Kinnard's *The War Managers*, what precisely did "37% of camps neutralized" mean.[li] How was that effective for US forces and deleterious for North Vietnam? GEN William Westmoreland remarked that the US failed to understand the motivations and perspective of the enemy.[lii] In a way, planners assumed what was of value to the enemy and ignored tensions in both North and South Vietnam that they needed to address or target. Instead, strategists conceived of the conflict consisted as two "symmetrical forces who valued the same things."

A dynamic understanding of value is required to think asymmetrically. Failing to understand what is of value, not just monetarily and not necessarily measurable, to key adversary decision makers and influencers makers, likely means a return to a fixed and unhelpful conception of power in a GPC relationship. To defeat a peer adversary with equal resources, requires the means to deplete their ability to earn or sustain value.

Future Asymmetric Warfare Group

Asymmetry's current orientation and subsequent responses have been ineffective and damaging to the larger US society. Strategists owe the US citizenry better. The future of Asymmetry must be radical and proactive, not a reactive spending spree. If DoD is dealing with a traditional GPC opponent, the US is not going to be able to outspend it.

Future asymmetric planners need to exact disproportionate costs[liii] on the enemy by better identifying systemic tensions and what is of value to the adversary decision makers within their time and space. Future research ought to articulate a methodology that provides a framework to help strategists think more radically. The motto of AWG was **Think. Adapt. Anticipate**. The new motto should be the following: **Clarify. Design. Subvert.**

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[xxxviii] Contextualization: description of the larger environment; "Does Design Help or Hurt Military Planning: How NTM-A Designed a Plausible Afghan Security Force in an Uncertain Future, Part I."

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[liii] This does not need to be just financial. Insights on effectiveness can be qualitative and beyond measure.

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