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Thomas Rijntalder

**Nuclear Deterrence Reconsidered:
The Emerging Threat of Limited
Nuclear Warfare**

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of Policy, War Aims, and War Plans**

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Editorial

Once in a while, you get the sense that the edition the Military Strategy Magazine (MSM) team has produced, thanks to the writers, is a really good product that moves the body of knowledge and debate forward. This is just such an edition.

Why? I cannot say. It would be unfair to credit one or some writers over others, but to this editor, it would seem that breadth and depth of the subjects is mostly the winning factor were it to be a competition.

It should be no surprise to our readership to hear, once again, my complaint that the word Strategy still lacks a useful definition and is vastly misused to mean “important” in its most abstract form merely to denote self-importance in authorship or appointment. Have useful definitions existed in the past? Yes. Should “Military Strategy” be a definable term? Yes. Should we talk more about that? Yes. Do all the articles we publish concern “the use of engagements for the object (purpose/Zweck) of the War?” Does all we publish commence from asserting that Strategy is conducted as a campaign within a theatre and is mostly based on bringing the enemy to battle under the most favourable circumstances for ourselves? No.

Okay, so what?

As it exists in this edition — and I suggest most others — “Military Strategy” provides the focus or anchor point for wider discussions that lie below policy and above battle. That might fall outside the more specific and useful definitions of strategy, yet it renders the articles no less useful and worthy of consideration.

From an editorial perspective, getting to that point of realisation was not an easy journey, and the 75% attrition rate for submissions, which blighted this magazine up until quite recently, stemmed from the fact that most articles could not conform to even the widest and most subjective definitions of strategy. Many still don’t, but it’s no longer 75%.

Anyone wishing to submit, and we are always short of material that passes review, should understand “military strategy” as that area of discussion which is below policy, as in the conditions and behaviours sought by politicians, and Tactics, as the conduct of battles and engagements. More to the point, if you think you have a better idea or explanation for imparting the same guidance, please feel free to contact us.

My sincerest wish is that reading this edition will lead someone to submit something for the next, and even if it fails peer review, they get right to something better at a later date. In a better-informed professional community, the well-informed should fuck up less than the uninformed.

William F. Owen

Editor, *Military Strategy Magazine*

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Nuclear Deterrence Reconsidered: The Emerging Threat of Limited Nuclear Warfare

Thomas Rijntalder – The Netherlands



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About the author

Thomas Rijntalder holds an MSc in Medicine and an MA in Philosophy and has recently completed the requirements for an MA in International Relations and War at King's College London. He served as a public health physician during the pandemic and as a policy advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Health. In 2022, he provided medical care to refugees in Ukraine, an experience that gradually redirected his focus towards geopolitical and military analysis.

Introduction

According to Clausewitz, war is ‘the continuation of politics by other means’,[1] and the use of military force is therefore guided by political objectives. A limited war, consequently, can be described as a conflict in which belligerents do not harness all available military resources and in which the utter destruction of the enemy is not the objective; it is confined with regard to the intensity of fighting, geography, and political aims.[2] There can be other things at stake, such as territory and power, and the sacrifices made must be proportional to

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the value of the political goals.[3] When one side decides that defeat in a limited war is preferable to escalation into total war and its consequences, the war comes to an end.[4]

Regarding limited nuclear war (LNU), a conflict involving the controlled and restricted use of nuclear weapons, there is no universally accepted definition. To some, including American strategist Bernard Brodie, the very notion of a 'limited' nuclear war is conceptually implausible. The destructive power and escalation risk of nuclear weapons, it is argued, make true limitation nearly impossible in practice. [5] For the sake of clarity, and in line with the concept of limited war, this paper proposes that an LNU would involve low-yield nuclear weapons (LYNUs), a limited number of warheads, for limited military and political objectives, and confined to a relatively small geographical space. [6] While an empirical answer to the question of LNU's feasibility cannot be established, this paper argues that the likelihood of states adopting an LNU strategy is increasing. Due to shifting global power dynamics and technological advancements, the use of nuclear weapons could, if specific conditions are met, achieve political objectives without the conflict escalating into all-out nuclear war in a way that Cold War dynamics did not. However, attempting to do so involves treading a fine line, and the risk of escalation remains substantial.

The Dilemma

The main problem with the concept of LNU is that, in the fog of war, it is difficult to convey to the enemy whether a first strike is truly limited or the initial step in an all-out nuclear war. Between the 1960s and 1980s, RAND Corporation and the Pentagon conducted multiple wargames that tested various LNU scenarios as an alternative strategy to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), since the latter left little room for gradual escalation control and was therefore seen as a flawed deterrent vis-à-vis the Soviets. However, as most of these scenarios escalated into total nuclear war, the theory of LNU partially receded into the background, despite several U.S. presidents occasionally considering flexible nuclear options.[7] It was followed by an approach to limited war that was fought with conventional weapons.[8]

In recent years, a limited nuclear strategy has been receiving renewed attention. The geopolitical landscape has changed drastically since the end of the bipolar order of the Cold War, which has implications for nuclear strategy as well. In a more complex world that is moving towards multipolarity, with the USA increasingly losing its dominant influence, and with different forms of governance possessing a nuclear arsenal, the international landscape is changing. The old theories of deterrence and escalation might therefore not

function as they used to.

Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Nuclear Landscape

The feasibility of LNU rests on several assumptions and criteria that all have to be met:

1. A state can achieve strategic goals with nuclear weapons that it cannot realize with conventional ones, such as the destruction of certain infrastructure or intimidating the enemy.
2. The first user requires a spectrum of nuclear capabilities, ranging from LYNUs to high-yield nuclear weapons (HYNUs). HYNUs need to be held in reserve as a deterrent, so that the employment of LYNUs will not automatically lead to large-scale escalation, such as the destruction of densely populated civilian centers. [9] If the target is a non-nuclear state, such a one-sided nuclear exchange is unlikely to escalate as long as it is not backed by one. If the target is a nuclear state or falls under the nuclear umbrella of one, escalation might ensue. Later sections will discuss the determining factors in this equation.
3. An attack must convince the opponent of its limited scope while simultaneously instilling enough fear to alter its behavior. Fred Kaplan, author on nuclear strategy, calls this paradox the 'unresolvable dilemma'. [10] This is where historical war games often escalated, such as the Proud Prophet war game of 1983, during which the USA attempted to escalate in order to de-escalate by deploying a LNU to halt advancing Soviet forces in Europe. This resulted in massive retaliation by the USSR.[11]

The concept of gradual escalation only works if both enemies act according to the same playbook: a limited strike might be carried out perfectly, but the enemy must follow the same logic and escalation patterns as calculated by the first user, or be more risk-averse than the initial user.[12] Whether deterrence works depends on the other party's strategic culture, mental framework, and acceptance of being deterred.[13] The mere use of a nuclear weapon might already be interpreted as taking off the gloves of limited war, thereby signaling the start of an escalatory spiral, since it is easier to determine whether the nuclear threshold has been crossed than to find out the underlying intentions of a nuclear detonation. 'It takes two to keep a war limited',[14] as stated by Lawrence Freedman, and once the nuclear red line has been crossed, it might become harder to signal to an enemy that limited objectives are still in place.[15]

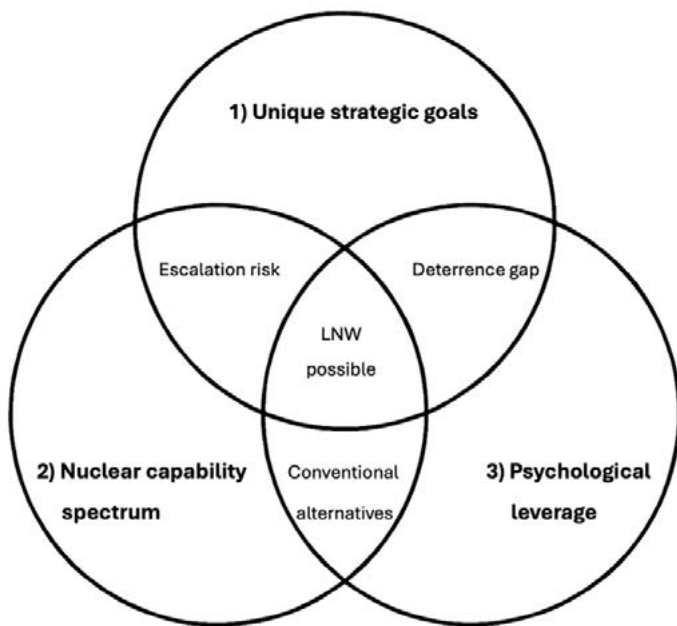


Figure 1: Core criteria for the theoretical feasibility of LNW

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Even if there is a slight chance that a limited nuclear attack could degenerate into a nuclear apocalypse, this might be enough to deter most rational actors from using even a LYNW first. Therefore, for LNW to be viable, it must be exercised with restraint and rely on a rational adversary, one who accurately perceives the intent to limit escalation and who is equally, or more, invested in preserving said limitation.

The Future Nuclear Actor

Who, then, might benefit from employing an atomic bomb first? At present, the USA is still the superior conventional military power. It has little to gain by starting a nuclear war itself, since these weapons can negate conventional superiority. Using them would upset the international order, weaken the nuclear taboo, and thereby undermine America's might. Conversely, nuclear devices are the 'ultimate instruments of stalemate... the ultimate weapons of the weak'.^[16] Few are needed and they are easy to hide: the perfect safety guarantee for modern dictators, for whom staying in power often holds primacy over the security of their countries.^[17] Having seen what happened in Libya and Iraq, autocratic leaders know that defeat could mean regime change. Losing must, therefore, be avoided at all costs. Research has indeed shown that leaders who manage a stalemate in war are twice as likely to stay in power and four times less likely to be punished.^[18] During a conflict, they might rely on a strategy that involves a first-strike nuclear attack to timely force an enemy to disengage.^[19] The more detrimental a defeat would be for their rule,

the larger their incentive for such a nuclear escalate to de-escalate strategy. Initiating a nuclear conflict might benefit such actors in several ways:

- If there is a suitable target, an atomic device might produce a breakthrough on the battlefield or on critical infrastructure that conventional weapons could not achieve. It could, for example, destroy an enemy port, air base, or a fortified underground position. This radical improvement in military position could translate into strategic effects and satisfy criterion 1.^[20] As per criterion 2, the first user must hold strategic reserves.
- It signals that they are willing to escalate and might thereby scare the enemy into relinquishing their objective. This usage could be worthwhile when facing a conventional military defeat or an enemy with superior conventional capabilities.^[21]

The probability that starting an intended LNW leads to an advantage must trump the risk of escalation that is associated with atomic deployment.^[22] In the ideal scenario, the shock triggered by crossing the nuclear threshold and the strategic gains that it creates on the battlefield are maximized, while the risk of escalation and retaliation from the other side is minimized.^[23] If enemy retaliation neutralizes tactical gains, or if the enemy decides to escalate vertically instead of backing off, the nuclear option becomes less attractive. According to American strategist Herman Kahn, this limited game of chicken is a dangerous strategy.^[24] As discussed, during the Cold War, it was concluded that the chance of escalation was too great to seriously consider a limited nuclear strategy. If these odds can be improved and criterion 3 (a nuclear attack must signal restraint while instilling enough fear to compel behavioral change) is met, however, LNW could become a viable strategy.

Managing Escalation

Shifting from the conventional to the nuclear domain is widely seen as vertical escalation in itself. Logically speaking, however, nuclear weapons do not have to be inherently incompatible with limited war. There exists a wide range in their destructive potential, and thereby their escalatory power, and the difference between LYNWs and HYNWs can be significant. In some instances, the difference in yield between LYNWs and HYNWs is greater than that between LYNWs and large conventional explosives.^[25] Depending on the cutoff points used, LYNWs have yields between approximately 0.1 and 20 kilotons (kt), while HYNWs range from 100 kt to several megatons (Mt). For comparison, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), the largest conventional explosive, first used in combat on April 13, 2017, in Afghanistan, has a yield of about 0.011 kilotons.^[26]

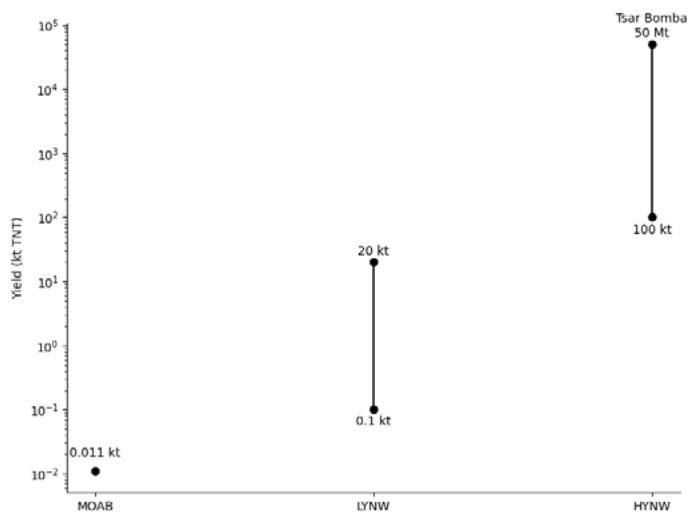


Figure 2: Explosive yield comparison of MOAB, LYNW, and HYNW (log scale)

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Apart from the nuclear taboo, it can therefore be argued that the effect of a nuclear explosion in terms of its destruction determines an adversary's reaction more than the size of the yield itself.[27] By controlling this outcome, a state can signal that an impending nuclear strike is meant to be limited. One method to achieve this is by adhering to the 1996 International Court of Justice's (ICJ) stipulations on the use of nuclear weapons in the context of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as much as possible.[28] Such a nuclear strike would:

1. Discriminate between combatants and civilians to the utmost;
2. Make sure the collateral damage is proportional to the advantage gained.
3. Be militarily necessary to achieve the military goal and cannot be attained through a less violent way;
4. Limit unnecessary suffering.[29]

Although not part of the ICJ's provisions, limiting the duration of the conflict minimizes the chance of escalation as well.[30] All of the aforementioned conditions may be addressed through the use of so-called 'clean' nuclear weapons, devices with a higher energy yield from the fusion part of the nuclear reaction. This limits radioactive waste, thereby making the attack more discriminate and proportional, while causing less collateral damage and suffering.[31] Due to technological advancements in intelligence gathering, delivery systems, and nuclear weapons themselves, it is nowadays more manageable to meet the preconditions for a successful limited nuclear first strike than in the past.[32] If a clean bomb is used exclusively on military targets, or detonated in the upper atmosphere to disable the enemy's electronic infrastructure (a nuclear-powered

electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack, which is nonlethal), for example, the terror effect of a nuclear weapon could be reached without evoking the same condemnation that is associated with the classical view of a Hiroshima-style destruction and without (massive) nuclear retaliation.[33]

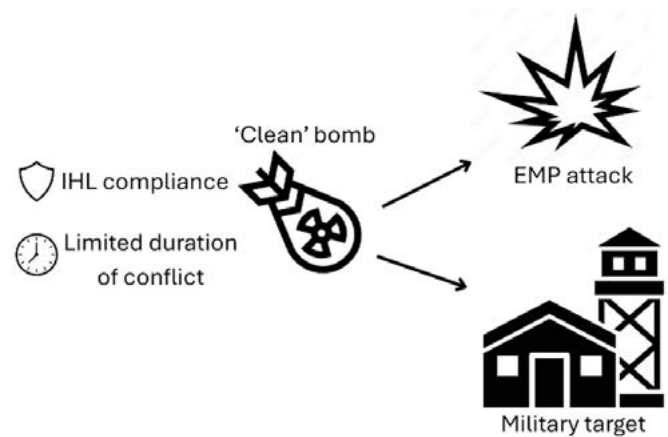


Figure 3: Factors reducing nuclear escalation risk

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Future Scenarios

In the current nuclear landscape, Russia would theoretically be well-situated to initiate an LNW, namely due to the autocratic nature of its government, the diversity of its nuclear arsenal, and its methods to manage escalation. While agreeing that global nuclear war would lead to MAD, nuclear weapons could have a more limited function in Russian doctrine instead.[34] In 2016, the RAND Corporation estimated that Russia could capture any of the Baltic capitals within 60 hours.[35] In such a typical 'jab and grab' scenario, Russia would have several limited nuclear options at its disposal that could indicate a willingness to adhere to the Law of Armed Conflict as much as possible. For instance, it could launch a clean LYNW on a US power-projecting base, such as an airfield, or decide on an EMP attack.[36] Taking these avenues would demonstrate an escalate to de-escalate strategy, and it is not certain that this would trigger a nuclear response.[37] In the case that one's opponents have no practical options to retaliate in a similar 'tit for tat' fashion to a limited nuclear first strike, the initiator will have the advantage.[38] Illustratively, the number of nonstrategic US nuclear weapons, described by the Congressional Research Service as devices with relatively low yields and short ranges, decreased by 90% between 1991 and 2009.[39] This reduction hampers the US's ability to escalate in a way that does not immediately involve HYNWs.[40] It might vacillate in using them because vertical escalation could be seen as disproportionate to the current situation.[41] Being confronted with a *fait accompli*, the USA and the rest of NATO might decide against nuclear reprisals, or even against full mobilization, since they do not consider the stakes high enough to risk full nuclear war.[42] Although NATO members are bound by Article 5 of the

North Atlantic Treaty, and although the Baltics fall under the nuclear umbrella of the USA, intra-NATO nuclear policies differ substantially.[43] With the USA taking a progressively isolationist stance in the world, thereby indicating that it is increasingly less invested in defending other states, it cannot be assured that the traditional deterrence by punishment strategy would hold. During the Cold War, the USA had but one existential threat. Now, the country has many limited stakes in different regions. According to the Russians, crossing the nuclear threshold at a regional level might not jeopardize the core interests of the United States, and there is evidence to support this conclusion. During the Obama administration, Tony Blinken, then National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, already articulated to the National Security Council that the USA might not respond with a nuclear weapon of its own if Russia dropped a tactical nuclear weapon (TNW), which is generally a LYNW that is used on the battlefield or for limited military objectives, on NATO troops. Instead, he opted for economic isolation and conventional retaliation.[44] When facing an opponent that is conventionally superior, yet less invested, and more averse to escalation, starting an LNW might be worth the risk.

The example of Russia is but one, and some scenarios would not involve them or the USA. Henry Kissinger already argued that with smaller nuclear powers, deterrence might not function the same as during the Cold War dynamics, since they 'have less to lose' and since their 'negotiating position might even be improved by a threat to commit suicide'.[45] Future nuclear conflicts are therefore thought to largely be regional.[46] Perceptions of rationality, moreover, differ across actors, cultures, and strategic paradigms, and are perpetually shaped by diverse other contextual factors. Different interpretations of the nuclear taboo can create asymmetries in the willingness to use nuclear weapons: modern conflicts can be regional and limited for one side, yet existential for one's opponents.[47] When losing a conventional war, a state such as North Korea could

wield a LYNW to break the nuclear taboo, thereby forcing a status quo ante bellum instead of having to cede territory or change its regime.[48] When a dictator is backed into a corner and has nothing to lose, given the asymmetry in escalation willingness, his opponents would be very careful in formulating a nuclear response themselves.[49] Coercion or deterrence through a limited nuclear strike might thus achieve strategic goals without leading to nuclear escalation.

Conclusion

Since their conception, only two nuclear weapons have been used in combat. Their destructive power is unparalleled, and friend and foe alike agree that MAD must be avoided at all costs. Against this backdrop, it is disputed whether LNW is possible and, if so, under which conditions and following which rules. This paper set out to argue that LNW is at present more likely than during the Cold War, due to technological developments and due to the changing nature of the geopolitical order. There are certain steps a state can follow to indicate that a nuclear strike is supposed to be limited and thereby lower the chance of vertical escalation. However, it should be emphasized that these arguments cannot be empirically verified and are difficult to encapsulate in war games. Following the rules of the Law of Armed Conflict as much as possible helps clarify intentions, but it provides no guarantees. Moreover, pursuing an LNW strategy inherently lowers the threshold for nuclear use, thereby increasing the likelihood of future nuclear escalation, even if the initial instance remains limited. Due to the lack of empirical evidence and the psychological nature of deterrence, the strongest conclusion that can currently be drawn is that LNW could be successfully employed by, for example, autocratic states that lack conventional military strength, or by actors confronting a more risk-averse adversary in terms of nuclear escalation, and that it is more likely now than in the past that this will happen.

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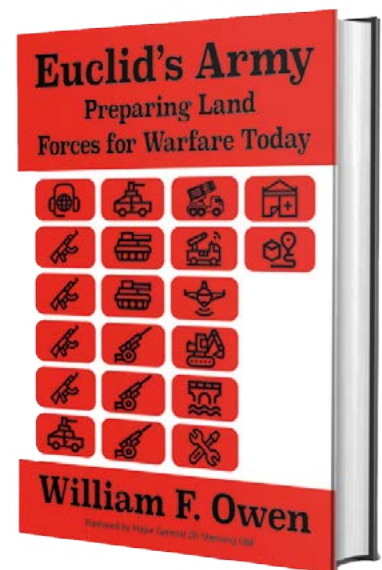
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Strategy and the Last Manager: The Case for Dissenting War Studies

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Introduction: War and Burnham

James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* is not, at first glance, a foundational text of war studies. Written in 1941 amid the cataclysm of the Second World War, it is most often treated as a work of political theory and historical prognostication. And yet, buried within its pages is a theory of war's evolving function within society—one that has profound implications for the study of war itself.

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For Burnham, war was not a mere eruption of violence or a failure of diplomacy; it was a mechanism of revolutionary transformation. It served as the crucible through which one form of social organisation—the feudal, the capitalist—was broken and replaced by another. In Burnham's account, the First World War marked the death knell of capitalist hegemony. The Second World War heralded the rise of a new ruling class: the managers. The age of aristocratic warriors and capitalist entrepreneurs gave way to an era in which technical experts, bureaucrats and policy planners would not merely run the machinery of government and war—they would become its rationale.

By 'managerialism', Burnham meant something precise.[1] It was not simply administration or expertise, but a whole mode of social organisation in which control is exercised less through ownership or charisma than through the command of specialised knowledge, procedures and institutions. The managerial class is defined by its capacity to administer systems—economic, military, political—through technical expertise, credentialed authority and bureaucratic process. Its social domination lies not in direct command or traditional property rights but in planning, optimising, coordinating and regulating. It rules by managing.

The value of Burnham to war studies, therefore, lies in his broader theory of how societies are structured and transformed—and how war is both a reflection of, and catalyst for, those transformations. Burnham compels us to ask: what kind of society fights a particular kind of war, and what kind of knowledge does it produce about it? More provocatively: what happens to the study of war when it becomes colonised by the class that manages rather than leads, that optimises in theory but ossifies in practice.

What happens, we suggest, is that war studies becomes a shadow play—an academic discipline that echoes official narratives, calibrates policy assumptions and mistakes methodological rigour for intellectual audacity. The field ceases to interrogate war's meaning and begins instead to fine-tune its procedures, offering not challenge but compliance. Strategy becomes branding. Critique becomes consultancy. And what should be a domain of hard-won insight collapses into 'impact' metrics and access to power.

This article attempts to trace the genealogy of war studies in light of Burnham's theory of managerial revolution. It does so not to indulge in historical determinism or academic taxonomy, but to lay the groundwork for a new kind of war studies—a dissenting war studies—that challenges the suffocating orthodoxy of managerialism and reorients the study of war back to the real politics it claims to serve.

Reading Burnham's Theory into War Studies

If war studies has become a managerial shadow play, then the place to begin is with Burnham himself, whose theory

shows how war and social order are never separable but mutually constitutive.

Although, *The Managerial Revolution* may not reside in the war studies canon, its analytical reach extends to a field that most needs perspective: the nexus between war and social transformation. For Burnham, war is not an anomaly in history—it is history's mechanism. As he puts it bluntly, war is not some 'special and peculiar' event requiring qualifiers like 'war economy' rather, all economies are war economies.[2] Societies make war in the manner of their political and economic structure. Thus, a capitalist society fights its capitalist wars capitalistically—until, of course, it no longer can.[3]

Burnham argued that the First World War marked the end of capitalist war, while the Second announced the dawn of managerial war. The demands of total war required the transformation of state institutions in ways that made the managerial class—technocrats, administrators, planners—not just essential to the war effort, but central to society's very survival. War became not simply another activity to be managed, but the accelerator of social revolution: from feudal to capitalist, and then to managerial.[4]

This recognition lends *The Managerial Revolution* a curiously prophetic character. It is not just about the Second World War, but about the structure of war itself—its embeddedness in the political economy of its age. Burnham's holistic analysis avoids the modern trap of hyper-specialisation: his approach to war is not subdivided into disciplinary boxes but embraces history, economics, political theory and strategic logic as one continuous field.[5]

This leads us to the crucial question: why does war studies look the way it does? The answer is because it reflects the society that produces it. If war is an expression of social order, then the study of war is likewise a function of that order's ideological, institutional and managerial imperatives. Burnham's 'cold analysis' (to use his own words)—devoid of moralising or reformist fantasy—helps us see how war shapes and is shaped by the ruling class of its age.[6] And today, that ruling class is managerial.[7]

Applying Burnham's Theory to War Studies

Burnham may not therefore, have written a war studies textbook, but he anticipated its future better than most. If his theory explains why wars change with societies, it also explains why the *study* of war mutates alongside it—particularly once the managerial class takes the helm.

Sir John Hackett's *The Profession of Arms* provides a striking, if unintentional, bridge between classic military thought and Burnham's political theory.[8] Hackett asked the essential question: What is the relationship between the military profession and the society it serves? His answer—

that war is the effective ordering of ‘force in the resolution of social problems’[9]—mirrors Burnham’s fundamental claim: that war is the crucible through which ruling classes emerge, transform and entrench themselves.

After the Second World War, Hackett recognised a ‘big jump in the application of business techniques to military problems’, increased specialisation of functions and an expanded drive for rationalisation.[10] In short, strategy was no longer forged in the minds of warrior-statesmen but in the spreadsheets of systems analysts—what Hackett himself explicitly termed ‘the managerial revolution in the U.S. armed forces’.[11] In military terms, he confirmed what Burnham’s thesis posited: the managers had arrived, and they were here to stay.

This is not a coincidence—it is convergence. Just as managerial society restructured the political economy, it restructured war, and, inevitably, war studies. The question—why does war studies look the way it does?—becomes less academic and more forensic. Like the society it mirrors, the discipline now prizes metrics over meaning, conformity over curiosity, and policy alignment over independent thought. The managers did not merely assume control of the state—they redefined the very terms by which war is waged, studied and remembered.

And this is precisely the problem. Today, war studies reflects not the enduring logic of war, but the intellectual pathologies of its managerial custodians. It has absorbed their worldview wholesale—technocratic, ‘depoliticised’ and reflexively self-justifying. What was once a field concerned with the clash of arms has become so fragmented across disciplinary boundaries that its central premise—the application of organised violence in pursuit of political ends—has been obscured in an academic smog of competing agendas and specialist silos.

The problem is not confined to the margins. Even within ‘the world’s largest faculty devoted to the study of war’ the managerial malaise is evident.[12] One current scholar has observed that, in a faculty of more than a hundred academics, fewer than five could effectively analyse a contemporary or historical military campaign.[13] The figure is striking, not only because all are nominally committed to the study of war, but because it illustrates how far the discipline has drifted from its animating spirit. [14]

To understand this drift, Burnham’s theory offers a map. With this in mind, then, let us turn, via Burnham, to the evolution of war studies in the predominantly English-speaking world as it passed through distinct phases, each reflecting the dominant social logic of its time. [15]

From Feudal Lord to Staff Officer: The Early Evolution of War Studies

The earliest phase of war studies was not academic but aristocratic. In the medieval world, political power was radically decentralised—better described as politically atomised, even chaotic. Sovereignty was not centralised in a single ruler but fragmented among a vast hierarchy of landholding nobles: dukes, earls, barons, and even ecclesiastical figures such as bishops and abbots. Each exercised *de facto* authority over their territories, which waxed and waned with their personal power and willingness to wield it.

As Burnham stated, a vassal obeyed his suzerain ‘about as much as his weakness or his schemes made necessary, and little more’.[16] In such a world, military capability was not delegated—it was sovereign power itself. A monarch’s ability to make war was less a function of central command and more an extension of his holdings and his capacity to compel loyalty from a patchwork of semi-autonomous baronies.

War, in this setting, was the natural function—the natural right—of the noble class. It was not only tolerated but valorised, shaping the social order and sanctifying its hierarchies. Nobles did not merely command armies; they constituted them. Their legitimacy derived from their personal participation in battle, and their social standing was reinforced by it. So too, then, was the study of war: such as it existed, it was embedded within experience rather than abstracted through theory. To know war was to have fought it, and preferably to have inherited the land that came with the spoils.

The literature of the time reflects this ethos. Texts like Flavius Vegetius Renatus’ *De Re Militari* (c. 4th/5th century),[17] Emperor Maurice’s *Strategikon* (c. 6th century),[18] Ramon Llull’s *Book of the Order of Chivalry* (c.1275),[19] and Geoffroi de Charny’s *Book of Chivalry* (c. 1387)[20] were not treatises in the modern sense, but handbooks of aristocratic comportment—framed as moral instruction, tactical guidance and spiritual edification in equal measure.

Martin van Creveld noted, such writings ‘seldom rise above the specifics of time and place’,[21] because they addressed the concerns of a caste; their goal was not universal strategic insight but the cultivation of honour, obligation and martial virtue.[22] Hence, why very little of this literature features in war studies today. Hackett captures the logic succinctly: ‘armies were dominated by the principle that officers were gentlemen and non-officers were not’—a principle that did no more than project the social architecture of the day onto the field of battle.[23]

Capitalism and the Professionalisation of War

The collapse of the feudal order brought not peace but consolidation of states, armies, and, crucially, the means of war. As kings and capitalists made common cause, forging stronger states and centralised economies, war, too, was brought to heel. The days of patrician amateurism gave way to the industrial age of arms.[24] War became a national enterprise, waged not by noble right but by bureaucratic decree involving the mobilisation of the ‘whole manpower of the nation’.[25] From the cavalry charge to the conscripted column, the battlefield was reorganised in the image of the factory.

In this context, war ceased to be a vocation of honour and became a profession of merit. The Prussian military reforms of the early 19th century, most notably Gerhard von Scharnhorst’s creation of the *Kriegsakademie*, lowered the drawbridge of class exclusivity.[26] Now, military command was available to those who could pass an exam rather than inherit a title. The officer corps became educated, systematised and increasingly technocratic—a premonition of the managerialism to come.

Alongside this institutional evolution, war studies began to emerge in a recognisably modern form. Canonical figures such as Carl von Clausewitz, Antoine Henri Jomini, Edward Bruce Hamley and Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote not as disinterested scholars but as officers analysing their own craft.[27] Theorists of a different persuasion—Norman Angell, Jan Bloch, H.N. Brailsford, William James[28]—warned of war’s growing irrationality in a world supposedly governed by rationality. The resulting corpus was divided but revealing: some sought to teach war’s principles of conduct; others to show that those principles, when applied, might prove suicidal.

War, as Hamley noted, had become a matter of operations—planned, repeatable, calculable. This was now machinery at scale, requiring systematic thinking about logistics and supply, in which operations were part of a large complex system.[29] There was now no room for ‘romantic interest’, ‘prescience’ or ‘intuitive divination’ given to ‘heaven born’ generals.[30]

But for all its logistical brilliance, this new era of military-industrial warfare could not mask an emerging truth: that modern victory often came at a cost so total as to make the term itself suspect.[31] The capitalist era had professionalised war, but it had also made it far more destructive.

That destructiveness was not just material but structural, exposing the limits of capitalist war-making and clearing the way for a new form of social and military organisation: managerialism.

Capitalism Begets Managerialism

The First World War did not simply bury an older generation of officers—it laid to rest the social order they represented. The aristocratic honour culture of the past, already diluted by the professional militaries of the capitalist age, now gave way to something altogether new: the rise of the war manager. Victory, it turned out, required less gallantry than planning. The chaos of markets and the dithering of parliaments proved ill-suited to total war.[32] In their place arose the apparatus of mass mobilisation, bureaucratic control and industrial coordination—the hallmarks of what Burnham would identify as the new managerial society.[33]

This transition was not lost on contemporary thinkers. Bloch and Angell had argued, with admirable, if premature, logic, that war had become economically unsustainable—so ruinous as to render it obsolete.[34] But if war could not be abolished by rationality, it could at least be administered. Hence, a paradox emerged: war was no longer a political duel, but a logistical problem. Victory became a matter of throughput and escalation management. As Burnham argued, capitalist societies might start wars, but managerial societies would be the ones to finish them.

Amid this shift, war studies itself began to bifurcate. On one side stood traditional military thinkers preoccupied with manoeuvre and matériel; on the other, writers who treated war as a civilisational pathology. Between J.F.C Fuller, Basil Liddell Hart, Giulio Douhet, Ernst Jünger, Heinz Guderian, Alfred Vagts, Bertrand Russell and Erich Ludendorff, one finds both the apostles of technological triumph and the prophets of its doom.[35] But whatever their differences, these figures shared a new orientation: war was not simply a contest of wills, but a problem to be solved by systems.

And who better to solve problems, than managers?

Strategic Studies and the Cold Logic of the Managerial Mind

For Burnham, the Second World War was not merely another great-power conflict—it was the accelerant that propelled societies into the managerial age. In the furnace of total war, state ownership, centralised command and the indispensability of technically trained elites fused into a new and durable social order. The managers emerged from the war not as auxiliary staff to the state, but as its principal proprietors—ruling in all but name. Whether under the banners of Stalinism, Nazism, New Deal liberalism, or wartime technocracy, the governing ethos was the same: the ascendancy of those who planned, optimised and administered.[36]

The intellectual life of war followed suit. The publication of *Makers of Modern Strategy* (1943) signalled the legitimisation of strategy as an academic pursuit. War was now studied

as an indispensable instrument of statecraft, its theories merging with the disciplines of geopolitics, deterrence, and increasingly, the formal modelling of human behaviour.[37] Clausewitz, was now read alongside game theory, nuclear physics and systems analysis.

By the early Cold War, the field's luminaries—Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn—had translated strategic thought into a language of control variables, escalation ladders and cost-benefit equations.[38] Thermonuclear rivalry was reframed as a management problem to be solved by the judicious balancing of capabilities and intentions. The emphasis shifted from how to win wars to how best to avoid them—preferably under conditions dictated by the managerial overseers of the age.

It was within this expanding managerialised climate that the academy made its own tentative incursions into war's study. King's College London, which had nurtured a modest military studies programme since the 1920s, gradually grew into the Department of War Studies.[39] Yet even then, as it evolved through the post-Second World War epoch into the 1960s and 1970s, it remained semi-detached from the university's mainstream disciplines—a polite annex to the staff college tradition, now recast in the language of strategic analysis, but above all ostensibly concerned—as nearly all contemporaneous equivalent centres of learning were—with the theoretics of nuclear deterrence and the management of state orientated defence policies and their associated civil-military relations.[40]

In this emerging worldview, the very mission of the military was redefined. As Bernard Brodie remarked with lapidary clarity in *The Absolute Weapon* (1946): 'Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them'.[41] It was a vision of peace, certainly—but peace under new management.

Vietnam and the Lament of the Technocrats

And then came Vietnam—a war so thoroughly misread, mismanaged and misunderstood by the architects of modern strategy that it collapsed the entire edifice of confidence in the rational war manager.

No figure personified this hubris more completely than Robert McNamara, the former Ford Motor executive turned US Secretary of Defense. For McNamara, war could be budgeted, predicted and won through systems analysis.[42] With an arsenal of IBM machines, 'people sniffers', defoliants, electronic fences, and baroque metrics like 'pacified hamlets', he reduced military strategy to a quarterly progress report.[43]

Vietnam was not just a military defeat—it was an epistemic

humiliation. It revealed the brutal limits of a worldview that believed escalation could be micromanaged, that culture could be coded, and that war could be won without understanding what it was for.[44] As Burnham warned in *The War We Are In* (1967), managerial elites had become so beholden to abstractions 'Humanity', 'Peace', 'World Government'—that they no longer recognised the enemy, let alone understood the war.[45]

One of Burnham's most neglected predictions from his 1941 book concerned the consolidation of the managerial revolution. He anticipated it would be complete by the mid-1960s, half a century after the outbreak of the First World War. [46] The Vietnam War, reaching its height in that very period, stands as testimony to his timeline. Here was the 'dialectic of wills' in action: a contest not merely of armies but of political resolve.[47] The managerial instinct, he argued, was to sanitise war into a technical problem, constrained by 'zones of peace' in which certain enemies were untouchable—not for strategic reasons, but out of ideological squeamishness.[48] The result was a policy posture that was, in practical effect, pro-defeat—a refusal to recognise Vietnam as part of a global showdown, and a willingness to lose so long as it could be done politely.[49]

Indeed, for Burnham, the managerial class had not merely stumbled—they had embraced failure. Their 'strange lemming instinct' led them to treat every defeat as an opportunity for deeper entrenchment, every setback as a crisis in method—an error of process rather than a failure of vision.[50] Vietnam should have discredited the entire paradigm. Instead, it refined it.

What followed was a solidification, not a retreat. The Cold War military was increasingly redefined not as a fighting force, but in Hackett's view, as a 'constabulary' one.[51] The aim was no longer victory, but stability; no longer Clausewitzian purpose, but a process of the 'management of violence'.[52] The officer class was re-trained not to command through charisma or courage, but to manage through planning cycles, procurement systems and choreographed defence diplomacy.

As General Hackett discerned, modern war had become something increasingly managed by nine-to-five types who viewed combat experience as a vague historical embarrassment.[53] The ideal military leader was no longer a Patton but a project manager—with a security clearance. [54]

Burnham's insight remains: the structure of society, in this instance managerialism, does not simply change the study of war—it transforms war itself, reshaping its purpose, practice and meaning. As strategic studies grew ever more removed from the realities of political conflict, it created a simulacrum of strategy—one where the form endured but the substance had quietly vanished.

The End of War Studies and the Last Manager

The Vietnam debacle marked not the end of managerialism, but its adaptation. Its failures were carried forward, institutionalised and ultimately rebranded in the post-Cold War order.

With the Cold War over and liberal internationalism triumphant, the study of war was not abolished—but it was, in a sense, dissolved. What had once been a field concerned with the violent resolution of political disputes found itself reinvented as a sprawling intellectual holding company: part international relations, part development studies, part self-flattering moral theatre, with a few electives on military history thrown in for nostalgic flair.

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave war studies new horizons—complex emergencies, ‘new’ wars, smart power, network centric warfare, humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, the global war on terror, counter-insurgency—but also blurred its defining identity. In place of understanding war in its hard elemental form, students were nudged towards a polite avoidance of it—through a kind of policy-adjacent busywork that dignified an interest in war without confronting it directly. The result was a discipline that spun off into diplomacy, intelligence, global governance, and other orbiting constellations, all the while losing sight of its own gravitational centre.

With universities remodelling themselves as retail outlets for credentialisation, the employability gospel is sold to fee-paying aspirants.[55] Students are promised career pathways into foreign ministries, think tanks, intelligence agencies, NGOs and policy analysis. Pick up any elite university’s prospectus, and it will boast of its proven track record of graduate success across the alphabet soup of international and public service organisations.[56] Degrees proliferate, producing graduates well versed in the technical and progressive jargon that smooths entry into these worlds, yet ill-equipped to explain why wars happen in the first place.

What has emerged is less a discipline than a franchise: flexible, marketable and always ready to meet ‘stakeholder’ needs. Its final metamorphosis came with the rise of the policy ‘expert’—defined less by critical insight than by the ability to repeat the right-sounding platitudes, frame deliverables, and, above all, never stray from the institutional consensus.[57]

War has been refashioned along the lines Burnham envisioned into a form of managerial utility. In the post-Cold War age, war studies no longer asks what war is for, but how the degree can be parlayed into a desk, an allyship lanyard and a career in PowerPoint presentations—where the only bullets you will ever encounter are bullet points, and the only campaign you will ever fight will be the battle with the online expenses form.

Thus, we move from Fukuyama’s *End of History and the Last Man* to: *The End of War Studies and the Last Manager*—a figure better equipped to navigate a funding call than a battlefield.[58]

From Managerial Dominance to Intellectual Erosion

In Burnham’s theory, the transition from capitalist to managerial society brought not merely a new elite, but a new mode of control—one that redefined the very nature of strategic thought. Within war studies, this has not simply reshaped the curriculum or the funding landscape; it has rewritten the field’s intellectual DNA.

Where earlier military thinkers—from Clausewitz to Fuller—confronted the essence of war head-on, the managerial turn has replaced these agonistic problems with the language of access. Debates about strategy within war studies now means not so much thinking about war as demonstrating one’s fluency in the in-group rhetoric of whatever is currently fashionable: whole-of-government, the rules-based international order, hybrid warfare, grey zone threats, climate-security, or cyber-resilience. Political will—the animating force behind any decision to wage war—is discounted, if recognised at all.

The result is a form of intellectual neutering: dissenting or radical insights are invariably excluded because they cannot be plotted on a graph but usually because they jar with the consensus mood music. Why a war is fought is less interesting than how it is managed; contingency planning trumps political clarity, narrative management replaces national resolve, and the only real battle left is to keep pace with the latest orthodoxy—until yesterday’s certainty becomes tomorrow’s awkward silence.

The Cult of Failure without Consequence

This technocratic overreach might be tolerable if it delivered results. However, it does not. As recent experience shows, managerial strategy has presided over repeated—catastrophic—blunders. From Iraq to Afghanistan, Libya to Ukraine, the West’s strategic managers have created a perverse cycle of failure.[59] The ‘permanent war economy’ compounds the problem, rewarding each calamity with more funding and analysis, turning fiasco into a self-sustaining growth industry.[60]

We are thus caught in what might be called the ‘Doomed Expertise Paradox’: the worse the record, the greater the demand for strategic managers. The institutions that preside over disaster do not collapse—they metastasise. The result is a field emptied of insight, leaving only job security for those who got it wrong last time and a proliferating cadre of ‘experts’ whose numbers swell in step with their

misjudgements.

Here, Burnham's thesis reaches its ultimate expression. The strategic managers do not merely misjudge—they redefine success to suit their own continuity. Strategy becomes a self-licking ice cream cone: it generates its own purpose, feeds on its own failures, and—most crucially—never questions its own authority.[61]

The final hallmark of this descent is the rise of the 'insider'. As the journalist Tom Stevenson notes, today's strategic analyst is often less an independent mind than a carefully curated appendage of power. Think tanks, defence consultancies, university departments—all orbit the same gravitational pull: access to influence: what he calls the Defence-Intellectual Complex.[62] Platforms like *War on the Rocks* cheerfully admit this: 'For Insiders. By Insiders' is its motto.[63] And once inside, dissent is a reputational liability.[64]

This managerial capture hollows out the discipline from within. The field no longer speaks truth to power; it speaks PowerPoint to policy. And what it defends is not national security, nor intellectual clarity, but the interests of a managerial class—those who rule not by virtue of strategic wisdom, but by procedural mastery and bureaucratic permanence.

This is what *Dissenting War Studies* resists, the way war is studied, justified and managed—on behalf of those who neither fight it nor understand it.

Conclusion: Against the Drift

Burnham was clear-eyed in his analysis: the managerial class would not merely administer modern society—they would come to embody the accepted model of reason itself.[65] War, under their stewardship, would cease to be the violent resolution of political will and instead become a managed process, insulated by expertise and shielded by jargon. The tragedy, of course, is not that Burnham overstated his case—but that so much of it now feels unremarkable.

Today, war studies has lost much of its sharpness. Once a crucible of hard political reflection, it has become something far safer: an instrument of institutional continuity. Its idioms are polished, its privileges preserved, its conferences well-catered. Yet its real-world influence has dwindled. The field has not vanished—but its *raison d'être* has thinned into abstraction.

This need not be the final word. While Burnham traced a powerful logic of elite consolidation, we are not required to share his determinism—nor the Marxist teleology it was fashioned by.[66] History, however rationalised in

retrospect, is never inevitable in advance. And so we resist not merely the managerial system, but the fatalism that accompanies it.

To break free from this impasse, a few modest proposals may serve as signposts:

- **Resist the seductions of insider status**, which too often reward proximity over principle.
- **Cultivate scepticism toward official consensus**, particularly where consensus begins to resemble inertia.
- **Reclaim the power of question-framing**, rather than endlessly optimising flawed solutions.
- **Rediscover strategic humility**, and remember that even dissenting voices are not immune to error.
- **Reinvigorate war studies as a pluralist discipline**, open to moral, cultural and political perspectives—not just material capabilities or intellectual fashions.
- **Encourage lived experience**, not to fetishise the veteran, but to temper theory with reality.
- **Foster real public engagement**, without which strategy becomes a language spoken only among elites, about interests that no longer belong to the public.
- **Retain a core focus on what war is**, the application of violent force to achieve political objectives and resolve social problems.

These are not revolutionary proposals. They are, in fact, reminders of what the study of war can aspire to be as an endeavour to expand the boundaries of knowledge and understanding. A field necessarily grounded in hard truths, open dispute and political judgement. That it has become a domain of sterile, even bogus, 'expertise' and euphemistic failure is not an argument for despair—but a call for recalibration.

We dissent, then, not from war studies, but from its managerialist mutation—domesticated, technocratised, stripped of its essential political character and all too often diluted into a miasma of highly specialised sub-fields that either have little to say about, or actively negate any serious study of, war. Burnham may have predicted the managers' ascent, but we are not obliged to write their reports.

If war is too important to be left to the generals, then war studies is far too important to be left to the academic managers.

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- [15] This article purposefully confines itself to war studies within the English-speaking tradition. In this respect, we differ from the theoretical foundations of *The Managerial Revolution*. Burnham, by contrast, wrote within universals rather than particulars: his 1942 claims about the shift to a managerial society were dialectical and structural, with global scope and ramifications. We regard global pronouncements as tasks better suited to UN Charters and social science grant applications.
- [16] Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, p. 29.
- [17] Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *De Re Militari* (Concerning Military Affairs) (Driffield, Yorkshire: Leonour, 2012).
- [18] Maurice’s *Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (trans. George T. Dennis) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).
- [19] Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* (trans. Noel Fallows) (Martlesham, Suffolk: Boydell, 2013).
- [20] Geoffroi de Charny, *Book of Chivalry: Text, Context, and Translation* (eds., Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy) (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996).
- [21] Martin van Creveld, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 65.
- [22] Other examples in this genre would be Honoré Bonet, *L’Arbre des Batailles* (The Tree of Battles) (c.1387) (Charleston, SC: Legare Street, 2022); Christine de Pizan, *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry* (c. 1410) (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999); John Neele, *Knyghthode and Bataile* (c. 1460) (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1971); Jean de Bueil, *Le Jouvencel* (The Young Man) (c. 1466) (Martlesham, Suffolk: Boydell, 2020).
- [23] John W. Hackett, ‘The Profession of Arms’, *Survival*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1963), p. 32.

[24] Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, p. 67.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[26] John W. Hackett, *The Profession of Arms: The 1962 Lees Knowles Lectures* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1986), p. 18.

[27] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [1832] (London: Penguin, 1982); Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War* [1838] (London: Greenhill, 1996); Edward Bruce Hamley, *The Operations of War* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1866); Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660–1783* [1890] (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957).

[28] Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage* (London: Heineman, 1911); Jan Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible? Being an Abridgment of 'The War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations'* (London: Grant Richards, 1899); H.N. Brailsford, *The War of Steel and Gold: A Study of Armed Peace* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1914); William James, *The Moral Equivalent of War* (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1910).

[29] See Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[30] Hamley, *The Operations of War*, pp. 90–91, 433.

[31] James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (New York: Longmans, 1992), p. 202.

[32] See for example David French, 'The Military Background to the 'Shell Crisis' of May 1915', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1979), pp. 192–205.

[33] Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, p. 96.

[34] See Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible?* p. xvii.

[35] J.F.C. Fuller, *The Reformation of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1923); B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1929) and *The Strategy of Indirect Approach* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941); Giulio Douhet, *Il dominio dell'aria* (*The Command of the Air*) (Rome: Ministry of War, 1921); William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power, Economic and Military* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1925); Ernst Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (*War as Inner Experience*) (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1922) and *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (*The Worker: Dominion and Form*) (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932); Bertrand Russell, *Which Way to Peace?* (London: Michael Joseph, 1936); Alfred Vagts, *The History of Militarism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937); Heinz Guderian, *Achtung – Panzer!* (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1937); Erich Ludendorff, *Der Totale Krieg* (*The Total War*) (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1937).

[36] Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, p. 75, 180, 186.

[37] Edward Meade Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943).

[38] Bernard Brodie (ed.), *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale Institute of International Studies, 1946); Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

[39] See David Morgan-Owen and Michael Finch, 'The Unrepentant Historian: Sir Michael Howard and the Birth of War Studies', *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2022), pp. 55–76.

[40] See for example, Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Harvard, MA: Belknap Press, 1957); Kenneth E. Boulding, *Stable Peace* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981); Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). Only occasional works, like Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Macmillan, 1979), challenged aspects of the consensus during this era.

[41] Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon*, p. 50.

- [42] Antoine J. Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of War: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*. (London: Hurst, 2009), p. 149.
- [43] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2020), p. 185.
- [44] James W. Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Grove, 2007), p. 156.
- [45] By this point in his career Burnham had taken to calling the managerial class 'globalists'. See James Burnham, *The War We Are In* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967), p. 101.
- [46] Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, p. 73
- [47] Burnham, *The War We Are In*, p. 101.
- [48] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- [49] A point developed by those such as Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- [50] Burnham, *The War We Are In*, p. 101.
- [51] Hackett, *The Profession of Arms*, pp. 34–35.
- [52] Hackett, quoting Harold D. Lasswell, *The Analysis of Political Behaviour* (London: Routledge, 1947), p. 152.
- [53] Hackett, *The Profession of Arms* (1983), p. 197.
- [54] This point has also been forcefully made in the field of professional military education. See, for example, Michael Evans, 'Vincible Ignorance: Reforming Australian Professional Military Education for the Demands of the Twenty-First Century', *The Vanguard*, Occasional Paper Series, No. 3, December 2023, pp. 10–11.
- [55] For an excellent book on the rise of credentialism see Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also Lee Jones and Philip Cunliffe, 'Saving Britain's Universities: Academic Freedom, Democracy and Renewal', *Cieo*, 10 August 2020, <https://www.cieo.org.uk/research/saving-universities/>; Edward Skidelsky, 'It's Time to Stop the Rot', *The Critic*, 24 August 2024, <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/march-2024/its-time-to-stop-the-rot/>.
- [56] See for example <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-taught/courses/war-studies-ma>.
- [57] Tom Stevenson, 'At the Top Table', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 44, No. 19, 6 October 2022, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n19>.
- [58] Managerialism, in this respect, is the crisis of late modernity, neatly rebranded as the 'End of History'. See M.L.R. Smith, 'The Last Magicians of Modernity', *Bruges Group*, 18 June 2025, <https://www.brugesgroup.com/blog/the-last-magicians-of-modernity>.
- [59] Jennifer Kavanagh and Bryan Frederick, 'Why U.S. Interventions and What to Do About It', *RAND*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/why-us-military-interventions-fail-and-what-to-do-about.htm>.
- [60] Julia Gledhill, 'The Ugly Truth about the Permanent War Economy', *Stimson Center*, 2 December 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-ugly-truth-about-the-permanent-war-economy/>.
- [61] M.L.R. Smith, 'Why is the West So Rotten at Strategy?', *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2024), pp. 1591–1614.
- [62] Tom Stevenson, *Someone Else's Empire: British Illusions and American Hegemony* (London: Verso Books, 2023), pp. 39–51.
- [63] See <https://warontherocks.com/>.

[64] This point has been acknowledged by policymakers themselves. The former Greek finance minister recalled a conversation with Larry Summers, former US Secretary to the Treasury, in April 2015, who said: ‘There are two kinds of politicians: insiders and outsiders. The outsiders prioritize their freedom to speak their version of the truth. The price of their freedom is that they are ignored by the insiders, who make the important decisions. The insiders, for their part, follow a sacrosanct rule: never turn against other insiders and never talk to outsiders about what insiders say or do. Their reward? Access to inside information and a chance, though no guarantee, of influencing powerful people and outcomes.’ Quoted in Yanis Varoufakis: *Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe’s Deep Establishment* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), p. 8.

[65] See Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).

[66] Popper offers a contemporaneous argument against prophets who, instead of resisting their own prophecies of discontent, declare events inevitable and thereby make themselves instrumental in bringing them about. He singles out ‘managerialism’. See Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 4.



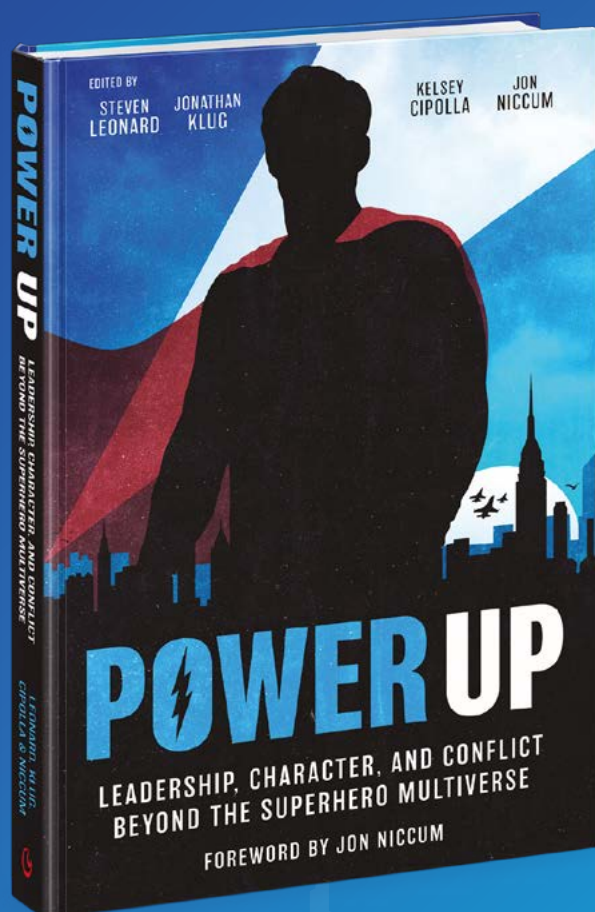
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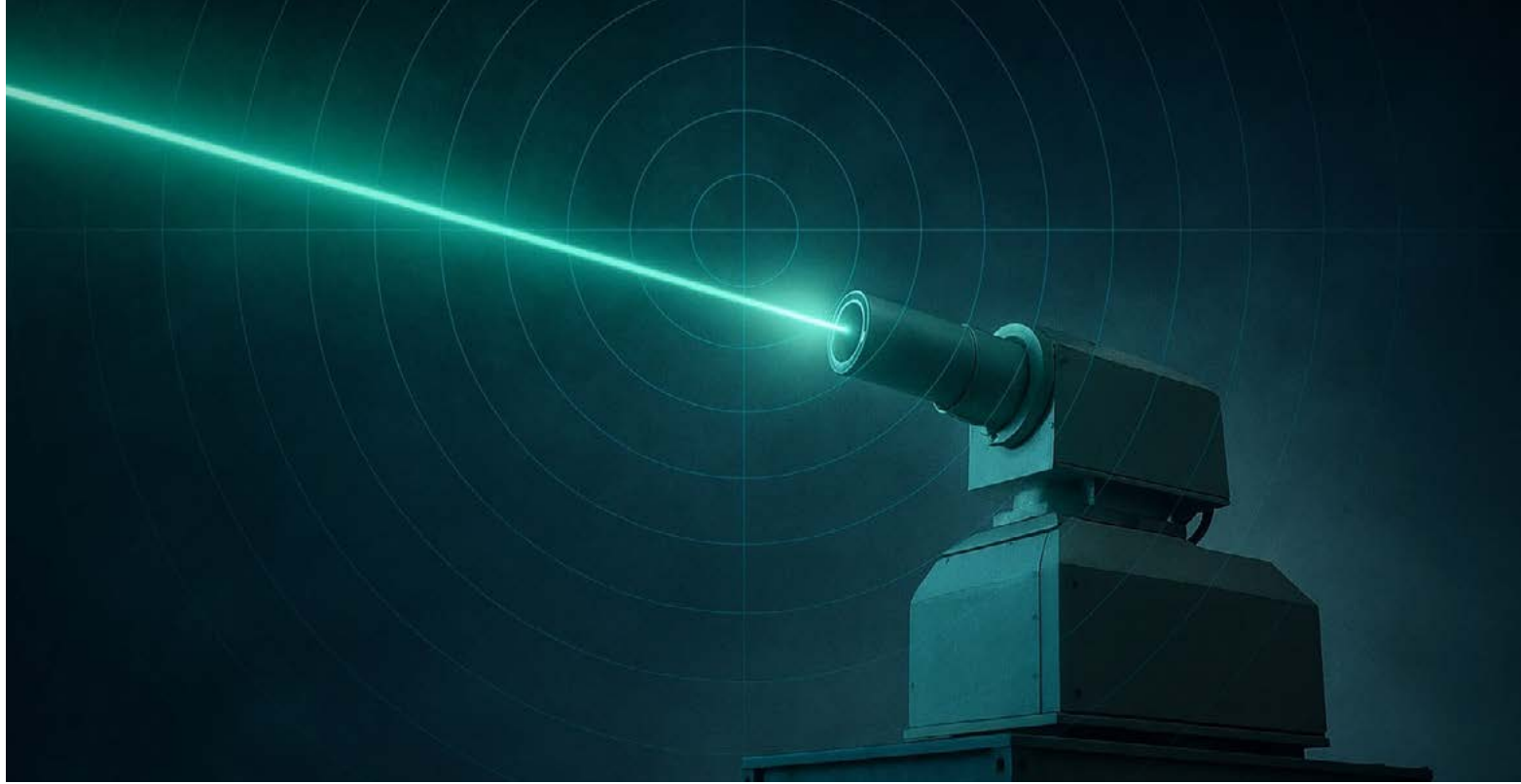
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Lasers and the Limits of Strategic Change

Jules J. S. Gaspard – Centre For Future Defence and National Security, Canberra, Australia



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"Well, in our country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you run very fast for a long time, as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the [Red] Queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you

must run at least twice as fast as that!"

Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Chapter 2

The relationship between technology and military strategy can be understood as a race—an international competition to develop superior arms. It is, however, either an odd kind of race or a category error. A race, be it a 100-metre dash or a marathon, makes sense if one can win. If one cannot win, what sort of race is it? As such, is the relationship between strategy and technology, in ordinary language, best understood as a race? Well, yes—but closer in kind to the race Alice encountered on the other side of the *Looking-Glass*. A world where things are reversed, where running helps one remain stationary. This is the world of strategy

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and technology, both in general and specifically here with high-energy lasers.[1] Not for the first time, lasers are being heralded as “game changing.” But in our world, *Through the Looking-Glass*, will they “change the game”, or do they simply help one “keep in the same place”?

High-energy lasers are not strategic game-changers. Instead, what they exemplify is the Red Queen’s race—adaptation without advantage. More profoundly, in the history of war and technology, lasers have come to represent a deeper failure to think politically about the relationship. First, I show that claims about lasers being truly “game changing” often fall prey to the technicist fallacy—the belief that tactical or technical performance translates directly into strategic effect. Second, I argue that this misdiagnosis has a concrete effect: it leads to the Red Queen’s race, escalation without resolution. Rather than winning a race, lasers will—like adaptations before them—provoke new forms of adaptation from adversaries, maintaining the treadmill of mutual adjustment. Third, I show that the recurring mistake of taking a metaphor for a mechanism stems from a deeper intellectual failure. Strategy shares much in common with biology, but it is not biology. By its nature, strategy is a political struggle, and without situating technology politically, we mistake technology for strategy and fail to see when it is time to stop running and *actually* time to start changing the game.

The Technicist Fallacy

From press clippings (reflecting press releases), the discourse is that higher-energy lasers will be a “game-changer.” [2] The idiom is a fitting one for our time—it captures the seepage of sports punditry into strategic theory.[3] High-powered lasers will be to strategy as Michael Jordan was to basketball.

On the one hand, high-powered lasers can be “game-changing”. Speed, precision, a huge reduction in cost per shot, unlimited ammunition—at the *tactical* level, the confluence of these effects can be transformative. Further still, getting to the point we are at now is no small technological marvel. In 213 BC, Archimedes’ supposed use of the Sun and mirrors, acting as a collective parabolic reflector to burn attacking Roman ships during the siege of Syracuse, has for centuries held the fascination of philosophers and scientists alike.

On the other hand, technological innovations, however brilliant, do not necessarily equate to “changing the game” strategically. Just ask Archimedes, who, despite his ingenuity in turning the sun into a weapon, could not stop the sacking of Syracuse. Few technologies, military or otherwise, reach the rarefied air of being truly “game-changing”.

Indeed, this is not the first time high-powered lasers have been heralded as “game-changing.”[4] On 23 March 1983,

then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan shared his “vision of the future”: a programme “to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive. Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today.”[5] Reagan was referring to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a comprehensive nuclear missile-defence system.

Framed as dangerously “game-changing,” it seemed closer to sci-fi than strategy. U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy, alluding to the Death Star, referred to the SDI programme as a “reckless ‘Star Wars’ scheme,” giving the initiative its better-known nickname.[6] At the core of *Star Wars’* multi-layered defence against ballistic missiles was the proposed use of satellites and space-based lasers.

Certainly, in 1983, much like in 213 BC, reality was distant from the vision. The SDI never progressed beyond the design and test phase and was cancelled in 1993. However, the vision of an energy-based defence system did not die with SDI. Four decades on, the vision remains driven by the same impulses that animated Reagan: a faith in technology to alter a strategic status quo— “to change the game.”

In 2025, several significant technical challenges that beset the SDI remain, yet these challenges have not prevented several states from pursuing the technology. The U.S. has remained a key presence in the development of lasers. In May 2025, President Trump declared that the US “will truly be completing the job that President Reagan started 40 years ago,” as he announced Golden Dome, an ambitious new missile-defence programme. The \$175 billion initiative, echoing its predecessor, envisions lasers as one potential means of intercepting enemy missiles during their boost phase.[7] Golden Dome, like Star Wars, may never progress beyond the conceptual phase, but laser systems are already operational on individual platforms. HELIOS, a high-energy laser weapon system, is reported to have been deployed on the USS *Preble* (DDG-88) in 2019.[8] Additionally, LOCUST, a short-range air-defence system designed for rapid deployment and mobility, is being developed for the U.S. Army.[9]

The UK successfully tested its laser directed-energy weapon, DragonFire, in 2024.[10] A high-powered laser, nicknamed Apollo and developed by the Australian company Electro Optic Systems, it is reportedly capable of shooting down up to twenty drones per minute at a cost of less than ten cents per shot and has secured a contract with a NATO nation.[11] Ukraine has stated that the country’s laser system, *Tryzub* [Trident], has already been used against Russia, claiming it can take down aircraft at altitudes exceeding two kilometres.[12] Turkish weapons manufacturer Roketsan has introduced the Alka Directed Energy Weapon System, which it claims has successfully completed live-fire tests.[13] Other states – including Russia, China, India and Germany – claim to have systems already in testing or in service.[14]

Due to persistent threats from rockets and more recently drones, Israel has invested heavily in laser-interception technology. In October 2024, it earmarked \$530 million to accelerate the development of its laser air-defence system, known as Iron Beam.[15] The system was set to be integrated into Israel's battle-tested missile defence network, the Iron Dome, in 2025. Events quickly showed the dividends of that investment. In March of that year, Israel released footage showing it had used a high-powered laser system to intercept Hezbollah drones during fighting along the Lebanese border—claiming the first operational use of the technology.[16]

Like the SDI before it, Iron Beam consists of a laser gun, a command-and-control centre and a surveillance system. The beam is the diameter of a coin and can extend up to 10 km, using approximately 100 kW of power (the equivalent of the daily energy consumption of five to nine homes). Moreover, like many of the laser weapons mentioned above, it is designed to target short- to mid-range aerial threats such as rockets, mortars and drones.[17]

Laser weapons offer several comparative advantages. In Israel's case, using Tamir interceptors fired from the Iron Dome to interdict a crude rocket—which can be launched for as little as \$1,000—costs between \$40,000 and \$80,000 per interception. In contrast, the Iron Beam's operational cost is estimated to be as low as \$2 to \$3.50 per shot.[18] Another major advantage is ammunition. Tamir interceptors, like all advanced rockets, require precision munitions manufacturing, and once fired, their stock takes time to replenish. By contrast, Iron Beam does not require ammunition.[19] In turn, this means the absence of logistical supply chains for interceptors eliminates convoys as a critical vulnerability to the system.

Of course, lasers travel at the speed of light, so the time between firing and hitting a target is essentially instantaneous. Against short-range threats that characterise modern battlefields—like drones, which may only be in the air for seconds—this can prove decisive, as no alternative missile system can match this reaction time. Moreover, this speed of engagement enables both multi-targeting and rapid retargeting against adversaries seeking to overwhelm defences through saturation attacks, such as swarms of drones or salvos of rockets, both now common on modern battlefields.

Yet, despite their comparative advantages, Iron Beam and other laser interceptors have notable significant shortcomings. First, they cannot operate effectively in low-visibility conditions such as fog, smoke, dust storms or rain, since laser beams consist of light waves. A second shortcoming is known as “blooming”: the scattering and distortion of a laser beam due to atmospheric particles or heat over distance, which weakens its power, particularly across longer ranges. As a result, Iron Beam's estimated operational range is approximately 2 km, whereas Iron

Dome has a range of up to 20 km.[20]

Lasers are still nowhere close to the totalising defence system envisioned in the 1980s, but the technology is adapting to meet evolving security challenges, and with the advent of drones on the modern battlefield, lasers may still “change the game.” That is, at least, the hope.

In terms of how far we have come from Reagan's vision to where we are today, there is much to marvel at: cost efficiency, unlimited ammunition and unparalleled speed and precision. If strategy entailed nothing beyond engineering, the several complex and challenging limitations that today's high-powered lasers have overcome represent an outstanding achievement. It is, and will continue to be, of significant value to science. From the technical level of science to the technical level of war, the tactical promise here is still the stuff of sci-fi. Lasers have the potential to make modern warfare look like a game of Modern Warfare. And yet, this tactical promise and scientific progress do not necessarily equate to strategic value.

The technicist fallacy names a recurring error in strategic thought, the belief that technological innovation automatically produces strategic advantage. Richard K. Betts was the first to exemplify the technicist fallacy as a “plainly wrong” yet popular idea embedded in international relations.[21] In a non-proliferation context, he defined it as the “widespread tendency to focus on the threat of proliferation as a simple function of the availability of requisite technology”—the treatment of technical instrumentation as the sole driver of the proliferation problem. [22] In short, Betts was suggesting that capability alone does not equal intent in nuclear proliferation.

The “simple yet misleading” fallacy represented a focus on necessary but not sufficient conditions in the pursuit of nuclear technology.[23] What matters strategically, of course, is *who* has them: “[w]eapons in the hands of a satisfied state or coalition have a strategic meaning different from weapons in the hands of a revolutionary, ‘super-rogue’, or even ‘crazy’ state...[t]his generalization holds whether the subject is knives or ICBMs.” [24] The technicist misplacement of focus “on ways to isolate weapons-related capabilities” fundamentally obscures problems that are conceptual and political in nature.[25]

Building on Betts's fallacy of emphasis with respect to nuclear non-proliferation, Colin Gray offered an even more thorough rejection of the techno-determinist approach to the relationship between strategy and technology in one of his lesser-known books *Weapons don't Make Wars*. Gray argued that the technicist fallacy – the belief that the utility and consequences of new weapons technologies could be predicted with confidence – was a mistaken belief that arose because we presume that we can foresee exactly how a new weapon will matter strategically, when in reality actual utility and consequences are always uncertain. [26]

The fallacy arises because when analysing the military world, the technician keeps everything stationary, bar the weapons system under consideration itself. [27] By “wrenching out” technology from its social and political context and peering into a weapon system to say things about the world outside it—frozen in time—we ignore the reality of movement, in which enemies constantly adapt, doctrines evolve, and politics shift. The contextual conditions, along with the technology, are always in flux. Therefore, a weapon’s usefulness cannot be assessed in isolation by knowing its comparative and operational costs, magazine depth, speed or precision. Its value depends on strategic context—political goals, doctrine, enemy behaviour and an overall theory of how a war is fought and won. Here, technology is a dependent, not independent, variable. [28]

Of course, a reorientation away from technician thinking is not to say that technology is unimportant to strategy. Watching Iron Beam in action renders the point obvious. [29] Technology, of course, does have an effect. But technology is the servant, and not the master, of politics. The technician tendency is to treat laser-beam power, recharge speed or interception rates as strategically decisive—“*game-changing*”—overlooking the reality that each adaptation sparks a counter-adaptation in an endless race.

The Red Queen’s Hypothesis

If the technician fallacy mistakes weapons for independent drivers of strategy, the Red Queen hypothesis takes this to its logical conclusion: even when technology works as advertised, it only accelerates an endless cycle of adaptation without resolution. The hypothesis, by way of Lewis Carroll’s famous novel, comes to us from an elegant theory in evolutionary biology. [30] It is perhaps one of the greatest ideas in that field since Charles Darwin’s natural selection, and offers a helpful way to visualise the cycle of adaptation between adversaries, with no side gaining a stable advantage.

Evolutionary biologist Leigh Van Valen, the progenitor of the hypothesis, suggested that for a species to maintain a particular niche in an ecosystem (and its fitness relative to other species), it must be constantly undergoing adaptive evolution. This is because the organisms with which it is coevolving are themselves undergoing adaptive evolution. [31] For example, foxes evolve to run faster, while slower rabbits are eaten and only the quicker survive; in turn, rabbits evolve sharper senses (such as larger ears to detect predators) while foxes adapt with keener hearing to track prey. Each gain by one side forces a counter-adaptation by the other, locking both into a cycle without lasting advantage.

The world of strategy is much like the complex world of biology—full of parasites, viruses, bacteria, predators, competitive species and natural disasters—all evolving

together and at the same time. If any species stops evolving in response to these conditions, it is doomed. As such, a species’ victory is not measured by a desired end state, but merely by its survival.

The Red Queen’s race, as opposed to an arms race, means success at the techno-tactical level of war does not necessarily equate to strategic success. Instead, what “game-changing” technology triggers is adversary adaptation on a continuing tandem treadmill. In this sense, high-energy lasers, like Iron Beam, represent continuity over change.

An illustrative, though not exhaustive, example of adaptation representing continuity over change can be traced through the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict as such: the failure to confront Israel via conventional war in 1948 gave rise to guerrilla raids, which provoked retaliatory raids. These were followed by hijackings, leading to tighter airport security and targeted assassinations. Suicide bombings in turn prompted checkpoints and a separation barrier, which were followed by rockets, then the Iron Dome, then tunnels and “smart walls,” and more recently drones, lasers, and so on.

Again, to reemphasise, this is an example of an abstraction relevant to high-powered lasers in a setting in which they have been used “in the field, successfully intercepting scores of enemy threats.” [32] The same logic might have applied to SDI, as an attempted adaptation to mutually assured destruction, following prior Soviet and American ICBMs, ABM systems and treaties, if it had worked.

We should be grateful that the USSR’s “moribund system” could no longer sustain itself and its economy collapsed. [33] It is useful to ask ourselves the counterfactual: what would have happened if the U.S. had successfully developed the Star Wars programme and the Soviet Union had not collapsed? Would Moscow have surrendered or adapted? Was this not the criticism, at the time, levied against the programme? [34] It was a potentially ‘reckless’ and ‘irresponsible’ escalatory act—why, in 1984, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved its Doomsday Clock forward to three minutes before midnight, the closest it had stood since 1953. [35]

What persists strategically through a sequence of tactical co-adaptation is not technological dominance, but conflict itself: survival and continued contest, not victory. What the Red Queen hypothesis shows us is that the tactical brilliance of high-energy lasers will not change the game but maintain strategic stasis. Running to stay in place.

Peculiar Means, Political Ends

Like all metaphors, the Red Queen’s race has its limits. Using a metaphor to represent reality can illuminate it but also

confines how we understand the world around us. The Red Queen hypothesis reveals a pattern of tactical co-evolution that would otherwise be poorly understood through the less apt metaphor of a race—but strategy is not biology. Strategy goes beyond the adaptive evolution of foxes and rabbits. States *choose* what winning looks like, how they win, when to escalate and when to change the game. All this makes strategy an irreducibly theoretical, not technical discipline, including the technicist view of technology, which itself rests on deep-seated philosophical assumptions.[36]

The identification of a “theoretical discipline with certain parts of its technical instrumentation” is the quintessence of the technicist fallacy upon which Gray and Betts built. [37] Their instantiation of the technicist tendency was, no doubt, influenced by adjacent and wider debates on the foundations of the social sciences and humanities in the mid-twentieth century. Georges Friedmann, in *Problèmes humains du machinisme industriel*, was among the first to introduce the idea of the “technicist doctrine.” [38] From here, the technicist fallacy would metastasise and exert significant influence on a discipline that is seldom preoccupied with opening its black box of method: history. The debate among historians lay between those who saw history as technical instrumentation and those who regarded it as a theoretical pursuit concerned with how knowledge and society shape one another.[39] From history, it would wend its way into strategic studies, where the fallacy meant conflating technical instrumentation, weapons, for a theoretical discipline, strategy. This conflation negated the idea that methodological statements made by practitioners are always philosophical, reducing knowledge to discrete facts and discouraging theoretical reflection.

For example, in strategic studies, we might take a closer look at the allure of high-energy lasers as “game changing” precisely because, time and again, they are framed as the ultimate defensive weapon. Archimedes, after all, did not use his weapon to attack the Eternal City but to defend his own. This is another face of the technicist fallacy: the examination of a weapon for specific characteristics—offensive or defensive—that it simply does not possess. [40] Those characteristics are derived from the strategic-political context alone, rather than from any inherent properties of a weapon itself. A hammer is not inherently a tool of construction or destruction—whether it builds a house or breaks a window depends entirely on how it is used. Technical skill and knowledge must therefore be situated *within* broader theoretical considerations.[41] Thus, the relationship between strategy and technology must be rooted in questions of purpose, rather than in technical specifications. As the great mason of *The Foundations of the Science of War* cautioned, “the more mechanical become the weapons with which we fight, the less mechanical must be the spirit which controls them.” [42]

This is how strategy foundationally differs from biology: the *intentionality* of the strategic world (to put Fuller’s famous quote in contemporary vocabularies). In biology, the rabbit

cannot choose to become faster, grow bigger ears or alter its colouring. Nor can it adapt outside its gene pool—it cannot, for example, become poisonous or develop quills. It cannot form alliances with other prey, target the predator’s supply lines or support base. Rabbits cannot bargain with foxes, signal credible deterrence or wage a proxy war via shrews. The rabbit exists in its inherited ecological niche and can only shift gradually within constraints.

All the phenotypic responses outlined above, in the strategic world, presuppose a level of higher-order reasoning, foresight and intentionality. They require an actor to step outside immediate stimulus-response, to model the opponent’s mind and reshape the very structure of a confrontation. When the relationship between strategy and technology is understood as a race, a deterministic metaphor is mistaken for an essential mechanism, and we risk losing sight of the fact that war is political, not biological or olympical. That strategy, as we understand from Clausewitz, is the connecting of peculiar means *to* political ends. [43]

Conclusion

Lasers could just as easily be swapped for AI, biotechnologies or quantum computing—and the argument here would still hold. They reflect the enduring search for a “silver bullet”: the belief that technology alone can “change the game”. [44] Beneath this faith lies a deeper pattern—a recurring way of imagining the relationship between technology and strategy. In many visions of future war, technology charges ahead while everything else—politics, doctrine, human will—remains frozen in time. This is the technicist fallacy: treating war as if it were changed by weapons alone and failing to understand that it is not fought by machines but by states with political objectives.

Granted, high-powered lasers are technically dazzling, but they are strategically conservative. Confusing tactical promise for strategic transformation ignores the adaptive nature of adversaries and misreads the relationship between technology and strategy. Technological advancement, however brilliant, is running in place to avoid extinction. It is merely playing the game, not changing it. The metaphor of the Red Queen’s race captures the treadmill, and the treadmill only: adapting reactively. The relationship between strategy and technology, however, must be understood reflectively.

Weapons are not arguments; their meaning is never technical alone, but political in nature. As Gray reminds us, technology is never self-interpreting—politics sets meanings. High-energy lasers must be understood on these terms. No one would deny the importance of adaptation, but avoiding extinction by a race of machines is not much of a strategy at all. Weapons *still* don’t make wars, and better weapons don’t win better wars. Politics does, because only politics can truly “change the game”.

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[1] This paper is not a technical disquisition. I speak holistically and strategically. As such, I refer to ‘high-energy lasers’, ‘lasers’, and ‘laser weapons’ here to mean one and the same, and to capture, more or less, other affinity technologies under approximate but differing labels: i.e., Laser Weapon System (LaWS), Tactical High-Energy Laser (THEL), Laser Air Defence Systems, Laser Directed Energy Weapon (LDEW), Laser Directed Energy Systems (LDES), High-Power Laser Weapon System (HPL-WS), and High-Energy Laser Weapon Systems (HELWS). Bearing in mind the argument this piece forwards, I wish to avoid both the use of acronyms and detailed differentiation between the cluster of labels that crop up in defence discourse around laser weaponry. These sorts of discussions, at the strategic level, are to me a perfect demonstration of the technicist tendency the paper critiques.

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Colin Gray, the RMA, and the Rise of Drone Warfare

James J. Wirtz - Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey



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Thirty years ago, strategists were buzzing about a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which was largely created by the integration of emergent information age technologies into military establishments. For proof of the revolution, one had to look no further than the Coalition victory in the 1991 Gulf War. Precision targeting and precision-guided weapons disabled Iraqi command and control, while a satellite-based

Global Positioning System enabled American armored divisions to navigate across a trackless desert to catch the Republican Guard by surprise. Ground combat in that war lasted about 100 hours. In 1993, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt announced that “Cyber war is coming,” that is, conflict and competition were about to fill a new “virtual domain” of human reality created by the software,

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hardware, and wetware (people) that were communicating exploding amounts of data across an increasingly global Internet.[1] Much like radio communications led to a war for and in the “ether,” the growing reliance on information age technology would lead to a war for and within the Internet. By 1996, William Owens had advanced the idea of a “system of systems,” or the emergence of a reconnaissance-strike complex that could identify, track, and destroy targets in a tactical, theater, or even global setting.[2] The elements of today’s techno-strategic environment were coming into place.

The RMA was about more than technology: it posited that a fundamental change in warfare was underway, produced by the convergence of three developments: new organizations, new weapons/technologies, and new doctrines governing the use of force.[3] Or, as Michael Vickers and Robert Martinage noted, RMAs “are periods of discontinuous change that render obsolete or subordinate existing means of conducting war.”[4] Scholarly discussions about the nature and impact of the RMA continue, although after thirty years, what once appeared to be revolutionary is now increasingly viewed as rather mundane.[5] Ever more exotic technologies – artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, hypersonic vehicles, space systems, stealth – now seem poised to produce another “discontinuous change” in the conduct of war.

Not everyone, however, was completely swept away by the RMA. In a 1996 article published in the *Naval War College Review*, Colin Gray offered several reservations about the scope and impact of the RMA.[6] In typical fashion, Gray, one of the leading strategists of our age who dealt with nuclear weapons, arms control, sea power, cyber power, space, special operations, technology, defense planning and planners and the theoretical and practical facets of strategy writ large, offered a nuanced and sometimes even equivocal assessment of the claims made by RMA enthusiasts.[7] Nevertheless, it is informative to consider how these observations have stood the test of time and what they have to say about the burst of disruptive military innovation currently underway over the Ukraine Steppe, drone warfare.

Calculating the Scope and Nature of Change

Gray dealt with the elephant in the room first. He noted that the RMA would not change the nature of war (“War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”). Nevertheless, he ventured that it might lead to a change in the character of war, that is, an “information-based” RMA might alter how wars would be conducted.[8] Those who are familiar with Gray’s work would not be surprised by his assessment, but our disciple of Clausewitz went one step further by suggesting that the RMA’s emphasis on information warfare was not particularly novel -- Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* had a similar perspective. He did pay RMA advocates

a backhanded compliment by noting their discovery of the importance of information in war was akin to Alfred Thayer Mahan’s “discovery” of “sea power.” Both codified a reality that was recognized intuitively. Ironically, contemporary critics of Mahan sometimes noted that his notion of sea power also captured the obvious, while admitting that things became especially obvious after reading his work.[9]

Gray also complained that the discussion of the RMA focused too heavily on technology, which ignored war as both a “political phenomenon and a social institution.” As a result, he suggested that the way the RMA would play out would be influenced by ideas about the changing character of war, the strategic culture of the American polity, and the dynamic challenges posed by international relations. This would be highly prescient in at least three ways. First, scholars have observed that strategic culture influenced how the RMA unfolded in various national settings; different militaries viewed its importance and impact differently.[10]

Second, Americans might have had a special penchant for the RMA because it addressed developments set in motion *for them* following the end of the Cold War. It promised to minimize the personal and material costs of using force at a time when threats to U.S. national security barely appeared to merit a response.[11] Or, as Edward Luttwak suggested, no more than limited force and minimal risks could be justified in responding to small wars and other minor disturbances facing the United States during the “unipolar moment.”[12] It also held out the promise of “more bang for the buck,” as several administrations cut Cold War force structure and military expenditures in search of a “peace dividend.” The RMA did not produce a smaller, less-expensive military, but a smaller military increased the appeal of the RMA.[13] Politicians, defense officials, and defense intellectuals find it hard to resist the siren song of cost efficiency.

Third, the RMA vectored attention towards high-intensity conventional operations, the type of operation that the denizens of the Pentagon liked to contemplate. Gray noted that this focus on “making a better job of waging Desert Storm,” was odd given that many observers at the time believed that “low-intensity conflict” was the wave of the future: “the ‘reconnaissance-strike’ centerpiece of ‘I-war’ thinking may have only a distinctly adjunct role to play in most contexts of deeply political, low-intensity conflict.”[14] One of my students put the idea somewhat differently: “Precision strikes are not effective when the opponent’s ideology is the target.”[15]

These observations suggest that strategic assessments of emergent technology and novel weapons are shaped by several cognitive biases: (1) a tendency to assume the future techno-strategic setting will resemble the present; (2) the belief that strategic assessments are universal and are not driven by the somewhat idiosyncratic influence of strategic culture and the pressing political and bureaucratic imperatives of the moment; and (3) a tendency to embrace

a “one-size fits all” attitude that fails to consider how black swan events could upset the applecart. Indeed, that black swan took flight on September 11, 2001, a few short years after Gray tapped into another strategic theme of the day -- that low-intensity conflict was on the strategic horizon.

Factors that Temper the RMA

In hindsight, Gray seems to have believed that advocates of the RMA depicted it as a “silver bullet”: an information-based weapon, in the form of a system of systems, that would dominate the battlefield for the foreseeable future. [16] It offered a techno-strategic theory of victory, or in the words of Hilarie Belloc, “Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim and they have not.” [17] Gray believed that the reconnaissance-strike complex envisioned by the RMA would be impactful, even at times strategically determinative; nevertheless, he suggested that the dominant advantage offered by the RMA would not last long for the reasons listed below.

1. *Nothing Fails Like Success.* Gray suggested that it was unlikely that opponents would take the RMA lying down, so to speak. According to Gray, “War, in common with sport, has the characteristic that what worked yesterday might not work tomorrow, precisely because it worked yesterday.” [18]
2. *The Diffusion of Technology/Weaponry.* The diffusion of technology and innovative weapons is a constant in history; no one has yet devised a way to prevent the opponent from copying the technological innovations of others. Gray even noted that because the RMA was largely dependent on technologies pioneered by the commercial sector, techno-diffusion would be especially rapid in the case of the I-war-enabled RMA.
3. *New Capabilities Bring New Vulnerabilities.* The more dependent one becomes on information superiority, the more vulnerable one becomes to data interruption.
4. *Persistence of the Tried and True.* Although he acknowledged that the impact of information dominance in war is highly ubiquitous, Gray saw the resulting systems of systems not as a “stand-alone” capability, but also as an enabler of existing (traditional?) weapons and operations. Gray quoted J.C. Wylie to communicate this point: “The ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with the gun.” [19]
5. *Change is Nonlinear.* Gray stated, “you cannot predict reliably some significant characteristic of the world ten years hence from today through a ‘surprise-free’ future. 2006 may not be ‘like’ 1996 only more so.” [20] This observation should be qualified to reflect the fact that some trends, for example, demographics or urbanization, are more resilient than others. [21]

6. *Beware of Dubious Historical Analogy.* Gray included in this admonition his use of analogies to understand the RMA, although his article offered no systemic or deliberate comparison of the present to past moments of technological churn. Instead, he seemed to be suggesting that explaining war’s outcome was complex and that care had to be taken in using analogies to highlight some factors (e.g., information dominance, technological innovation) over others.

Gray had an uncanny ability to describe how just about everything is related to everything else when it comes to strategy, and he used this talent to critique the RMA project. This list of caveats responded to the techno-enthusiasm voiced by RMA proponents by suggesting that claims about the effectiveness of the RMA focused on its technological novelties, not the permanent embodiment of techno-military superiority. Novelty, almost by definition, is short-lived, especially when placed in the innovation accelerator created by wartime.

The Rise of Drone Warfare



“Elbit Systems 900 takeoff” (Israel)

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Today’s reader might be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss was about back in 1996. In many ways, Gray was prescient, but his reservations about the RMA reflected well-known observations drawn from military history. The Global War on Terror vectored the U.S. reconnaissance-strike complex towards the use of long-range, remote-controlled drones to target individual miscreants and small bands of terrorists. Although no one predicted this technological turn of events in the mid-1990s, there was an inkling of low-intensity hostilities on the horizon, which was reflected in Gray’s musings about the future. The RMA also played out unevenly among militaries around the planet as the weaponization of new technologies was shaped by individual strategic cultures and security challenges. For Americans, a tactical, theater, and even a limited global reconnaissance-strike complex became a reality, but as it matured, it seems to have lost some of its luster as a stand-alone “war-winning” capability. Increasing costs, technological diffusion, and vexing target sets, that is, opponents motivated by religion or ideology, all serve to

limit its availability and effectiveness. The RMA could not prevent the demise of the unipolar moment.

Nevertheless, I-War has recently been vectored along a new path – ongoing miniaturization of various electrical components and growing computational power have led to the rise of drones, semi-autonomous systems that are creating a new domain of warfare in the Russia-Ukraine War. A kinetic expression of cyberspace that operates at low altitude to hunt personnel and vehicles, drones were the stuff of science fiction back in the last century. To the best of my knowledge, the RMA debates of the 1990s did not touch upon the possibility of a weaponized singularity, that is, the subject of the 1984 movie *The Terminator* and a current issue of plausible concern.[22]

Today's drones are a far cry from the Terminator (one hopes), but they are wreaking havoc, especially on the conventional battlefield. In the most spectacular demonstration of the drone's potential, Ukraine recently smuggled aerial drones deep inside Russia to destroy irreplaceable long-range bombers that were used to launch cruise missiles against urban targets.[23] With only slightly less fanfare, Israeli special forces launched drones from inside Iran to degrade air defenses at the outset of its June 2025 counterproliferation campaign against Tehran.[24] While the success of these operations was based more on ingenuity and daring than the drones themselves, there is no doubt that semi-autonomous weapons are now a fixture of the contemporary battlefield.

Observers are sounding the tocsin as they offer competing characterizations of what is on full display in the Russia-Ukraine war. Michael Horowitz, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, suggests that an era of “precise mass” has arrived: “War will be defined in large part by the deployment of huge numbers of uncrewed systems, whether fully autonomous and powered by artificial intelligence or remote-controlled, from outer space to under the sea. The pioneering breakthroughs evident in today's conflicts merely foreshadow how wars will be waged in the years and decades to come”[25] Former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs Mark Milley and former CEO of Google Eric Schmidt take a somewhat broader perspective: artificial intelligence not only powers the drones, it is increasingly being used to exploit a deluge of multi-source data to identify and track targets with precision in real-time. They also note that drones are cheap, or at least cheaper than the weapons they target. For example, they note that “a simple first-person-view drone can cost just \$500. A team of ten of them can immobilize a \$10 million Russian tank in Ukraine.”[26] They cite the fact that two-thirds of the Russian tanks destroyed in the war were destroyed by drones to make the point that artificial intelligence, especially its kinetic manifestation in drone warfare, “is rapidly changing the character of war.”



“Ukrainian FPV drone with fiber-optic communication channel”

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It is probably too early to judge the general effectiveness of drone warfare across a full range of tactical or operational scenarios. Against a fully functional combined-arms operation benefiting from a superior reconnaissance-strike complex, electronic or physical countermeasures, or even drone killing drones, it is possible to envision a force blowing through the drone opposition before it can have much effect. Dispatches from the front already report that drones are more effective when accompanied by artillery barrages to disrupt electronic warfare, cripple air defenses, and send infantry to ground.[27] The strategic and political impact of drone use is also an open question, that is, how will drones interact with war as a “political phenomenon and a social institution.” Nevertheless, there is no doubt that drones are both a multifaceted opportunity and a dynamic problem that manifests at the blistering pace of wartime innovation.

Conclusion

It is not surprising if all of this sounds familiar. While keeping in mind Gray's admonition to use analogies cautiously, the rise of drones does appear to be the next phase of the information-based RMA that was first identified by Soviet theorists in the 1970s. As the impact of Moore's Law spreads across science, industry, and militaries globally, new domains opened by new technologies will be filled by war and information-enabled weapons. The fact that drones are relatively inexpensive and, for the time effective against conventional weapons and conventionally equipped infantry makes them even more attractive, reducing the opportunity costs involved in fielding thousands or even tens of thousands of autonomous weapons as quickly as possible. As Colin warns us, it is hard to say

what strategic problem or technology will come down the road next – hypersonic weapons armed with extremely lightweight, low-yield nuclear warheads made possible by computational advances in modeling and simulation would be my guess. Nevertheless, just as battlefield necessity led to the rapid eruption and dynamism of drone warfare, the interaction of the demands of some future battlefield and emergent technology will push drones into the background.

What about the elephant in the room? Milley and Schmidt reassure us that it is “an illusion to think that technology will change the underlying human nature of conflict.”[28] To this, one can add that technology is also unlikely to change the

nature of war itself. What remains to be determined is how autonomous weapons – and rest assured, they will possess increasing autonomy as computational power grows, and programming improves – will transform the character of war.[29] Will drones act as a mobile minefield on land, at sea, or in the air, attracted to some type of signature with a lethal payload? Or will drones battle to seize “command of the drone domain” so they can exploit it for their purposes while denying the domain to the opponent’s drones? Or will the drone bring us something completely different? To paraphrase Wylie, will the ultimate determinant in war be the drone on the scene with the gun?

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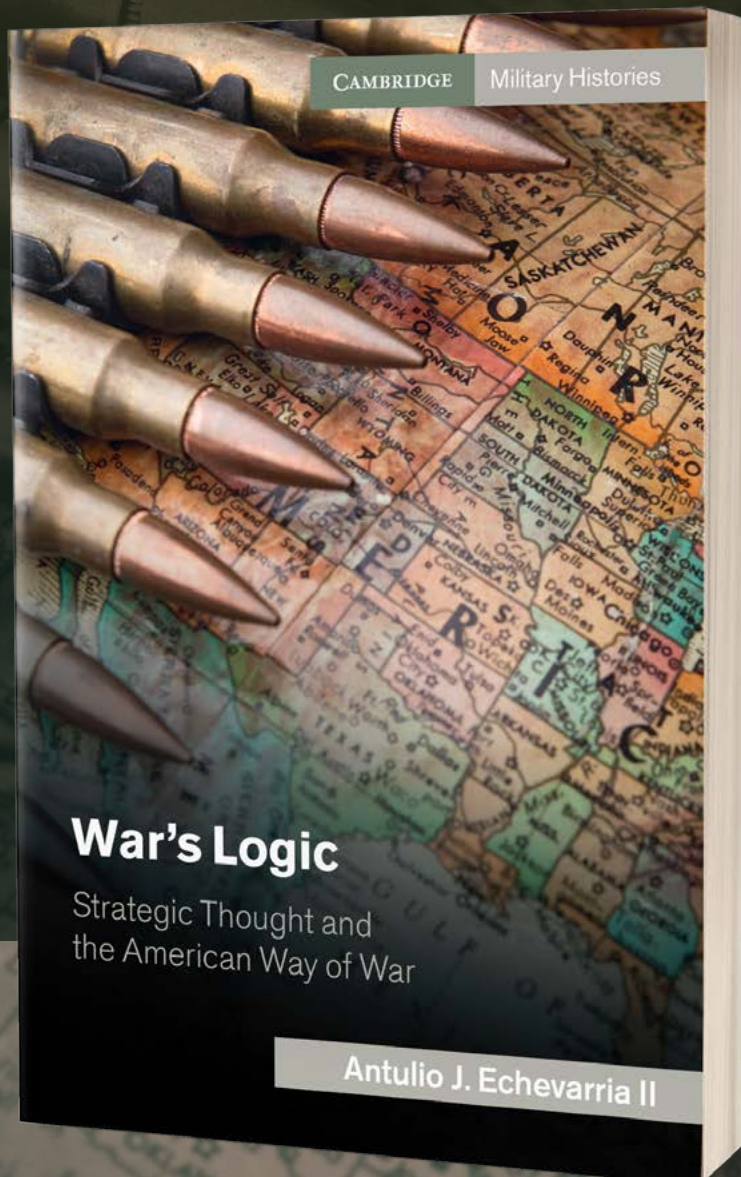
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Security Force Assistance without Strategy: A Clausewitzian Reassessment

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"We've trained and equipped millions. We've stood up armies, created partner brigades from scratch, flooded foreign ministries with civilian and military advisors, and written and developed entire doctrines and national security structures for countries not our own. Yet despite the scale of these efforts—spanning decades and continents—security force assistance remains an afterthought in strategic discourse."

Jahara Matisek and William Reno

Introduction: Advising in the Shadow of Strategy

The training, advising, and equipping of foreign forces is as old as warfare itself. During the Peloponnesian War, Sparta and Athens did more than just fight each other—they trained, supported, and leveraged allies to project influence and win wars. From Roman military missions to Soviet support for communist movements, to the modern American security assistance industrial complex (i.e., advisor units, private military contractors), the logic is perennial: build others to fight in your interest, or at least in your image.

Security Force Assistance (SFA)—best defined by Stephen Biddle in 2017 as the training, advising, and equipping of foreign security forces (e.g., armies, police, militias, etc.) by external powers—is an instrument of strategy that is missing from most strategic discourse.[1] SFA appears in doctrine, not strategy; it fills budgets, not grand plans. Even as the United States and its allies expand SFA as part of campaigns for deterrence, influence, and strategic competition, its purpose remains clouded, its effectiveness uneven, and its theory underdeveloped. Despite spending over \$600 billion on SFA since 2000, the collective West still lacks serious thinking around building foreign militaries.[2]

While our perspective is grounded in our positionality relative to the U.S. military—given both our professional affiliations and America's dominant role in most modern SFA efforts—the implications of this strategic oversight extend beyond national borders.

This article confronts the strategic gaps in efforts to make other militaries more effective. Building on Clausewitz's insight that war is an extension of politics by other means, we reassess Security Force Assistance (SFA) through a Clausewitzian lens: not as a technical military task, but as a strategic act with political consequences.[3] To do so, we bridge theory and practice—melding insights from Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and elsewhere—to challenge the assumptions that underpin contemporary SFA efforts. In fact, most arguments about SFA just contend it is a

strategic question of committing resources; small SFA investments have a small impact on the partner force, and a big SFA investment leads to a stronger partner force.[4] We counter that it is more about getting the proper strategy and rightsized SFA investment to maximize absorption by the partner force. This was the logic behind Cold War-era Foreign Internal Defense (FID), where partners often had political will and organic institutional capacity—even if they were not always liberal democracies.[5] What mattered was alignment of interests, not perfection of values.

Two U.S. Army officers writing about SFA noted that enduring relationships and readiness matter; however, these elements are not strategy.[6] Such virtues, while necessary, are not sufficient. Relationships are not strategy; readiness is not victory. And partner capability—without political alignment or institutional absorption—produces only fragile "Fabergé Egg" armies that shatter when advisors and contractors disappear.[7] Hence, we argue that most SFA failures stem not from bad training or insufficient equipment, but from the absence of political clarity and strategic coherence. As seen during the Vietnam War, the United States had a misguided focus on training days, equipment delivered, exercises conducted, etc., which substituted for real measures of effectiveness.[8] A major strategic disconnect proliferates when bureaucracies prioritize these types of bean-counting activities, when clear political objectives and feedback loops are missing.

What follows is a Clausewitzian interrogation of SFA, which is based on fieldwork and interviews with over 800 Western military advisors and foreign military personnel between 2017 and 2025. We begin by critiquing how SFA has confused tactical output with strategic success. We then examine the political terrain where SFA actually unfolds—where regime type, patronage networks, and elite interests shape outcomes more than any field manual. Next, we explore how the war in Ukraine has upended the traditional donor-recipient paradigm, revealing a model of reciprocal, recipient-led SFA. Finally, we chart a path forward: a strategic theory of SFA grounded in political realities, operational constraints, and a clearer understanding of war itself.

The Mirage of Tactical Success: When Strategy is Lost in Translation

SFA continues to be awash in metrics—numbers trained, equipment delivered, battalions certified. Yet these are input measures, not strategic outcomes. Tactical activity is not strategic success. But in the absence of a guiding strategic framework, tactical achievement becomes its own justification, a tendency that Gian Gentile identified in relation to counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan. [9] Worse, most military advisors have little incentive to be creative, given that their career path will not reward them for spending the time to improve the quality of training for

a foreign army.

The core problem is *strategic disintegration*. While U.S. doctrine clearly states that “U.S. forces must integrate SFA into the operations process at all levels” and that SFA “should be designed to work seamlessly with the host-nation government at all levels,” this aspiration often collapses under bureaucratic inertia, shifting political winds, and the tendency to treat SFA as a tactical afterthought.^[10] Advisors are left improvising, disconnected from any strategy linking their work to national objectives. Clausewitz warned that activity without strategy is noise in the fog of war. SFA often drifts into this fog, mistaking motion for meaning. As in Vietnam, when political objectives were vague or absent, bureaucracies defaulted to what could be counted (e.g., bombs dropped, patrols conducted, weapons distributed, etc.). Metrics of effort replaced indicators of effect.

This vacuum is not theoretical. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S.-trained forces collapsed despite years of preparation. Why? Because SFA efforts were not nested within viable political settlements, institutional absorption capacity, or wartime strategic logic. Tactics were detached from strategy, and partners lacked purpose.

U.S. planners often conceive of operations in rigid phases—shaping, dominating, stabilizing, enabling—but these distinctions break down in war.^[11] So too in SFA: training occurs without clarity on what political order it is meant to sustain, or how it transitions into sustainable security provision under civilian control.

This is not just a flaw of sequencing. It’s a deeper conceptual failure. Army doctrine reminds us that “SFA is part of a comprehensive approach... [and] should include close collaboration with military and civilian joint and multinational forces,” with the host-nation playing the lead role.^[12] Yet in practice, the U.S. often marginalizes partner input and replicates its own force design in miniature. Western strategy often defaults to ‘problem-solving’ modes of thinking, reducing complex political-military issues to technocratic templates. Instead, they advocate a Clausewitzian ‘problem-framing’ approach that emphasizes context, friction, and adaptation over linear solutions.^[13] SFA is often imagined as a bridge between combat operations and peace. But a bridge to where? Without clear strategic objectives—beyond the buzzwords of “stability” or “partner capacity”—SFA becomes a mirage: activity mistaken for advancement.

SFA has been shifting from irregular warfare since the first Trump Administration, through the Biden era and into the second Trump administration—with similar focuses on large scale combat operations (LSCO) regardless of leadership. Indeed, the same pathology has persisted: unclear strategic ends lead organizations to emphasize what can be measured over what matters. Theater Security Cooperation plans remain disconnected from real

assessments of partner political will or absorptive capacity. National-level prioritization remains elusive, creating fragmented, stove-piped efforts that please PowerPoint but fail policy.

As Clausewitz observed, “everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”^[14] In other words, the problem isn’t what to do—it’s how to make it work in the friction of politics and institutions. The same could be said of SFA. Training a battalion is easy on paper—but absorbing it into a functional chain of command, aligning it with a political strategy, and sustaining it under fire is far more complex. The U.S. military often excels at the technical tasks of advising while underestimating the institutional and strategic terrain required for success.

In this context, the strategic value of SFA becomes circular: we advise to build capacity, and we build capacity to justify advising. Deeper questions like: What political settlement is this capacity meant to uphold? How does this effort support deterrence or shape the operational environment? These questions are often unasked, and if they are, most military advisors tell us that they are told that the next rotation will have to figure that out – or wait for the politicians to make these decisions (spoiler: they rarely do).

The irony is sharp. The more the U.S. invests in tactical preparation, the more strategic clarity becomes a liability—because it would reveal the incoherence of our aims, or the illegitimacy of our partners. This dynamic often results in what might be called a “train-and-pray” model of military advising: U.S. forces *train* a partner unit and then *hope* it holds together once advisors depart. In Afghanistan, Security Force Assistance Brigade advisors recounted how remote advising during COVID devolved into “dog-and-pony show” video calls, where Afghan units staged rehearsed briefings to satisfy checklist metrics.^[15] Lacking sustained presence and feedback loops, advisors struggled to assess real progress. The obsession with input-based indicators (e.g., training days completed, equipment issued, readiness levels reported) led to Potemkin formations: Afghan units that looked effective on PowerPoint but collapsed under pressure. This performative advising culture highlights how metric-driven SFA, when disconnected from political purpose and institutional absorption, can generate the illusion of capacity while masking deep fragility.

Practitioners inside the SFA ecosystem also see this problem. Returning to the thoughts of two U.S. Army officers, they stressed the importance of “readiness and relationships” in achieving enduring strategic effects through SFA.^[16] But again, they are not sufficient to achieve strategic effect without political alignment and operational integration. Without political congruence and a coherent strategic framework, even the most capable partner force may fail to deliver lasting security or influence.

If anything, the reliance on readiness and relationships

reflects a deeper unease: we've become better at managing the mechanics of military assistance than grappling with its meaning. This is not merely a bureaucratic failure of measurement—it is a strategic failure of vision. Without political clarity, even competent SFA programs become activity without direction. We may be winning the advising but losing the strategy.

Political War by Other Means: The Real Terrain of SFA

“War is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass,” Clausewitz observed, “but always the collision of two living forces.”[17] SFA, likewise, is never a neutral act. When the U.S. trains and equips foreign forces, it engages in political collision—not just military development. These efforts invariably favor certain elites, shape institutional hierarchies, and reinforce particular visions of state authority. Yet too often, SFA is treated as a value-neutral service export, where tactical proficiency is divorced from the strategic and political order it ultimately sustains. But attempting to render SFA apolitical is itself a political decision—one that often reinforces regime stability without strategic alignment or democratic legitimacy.

SFA is not apolitical and cannot be. As Clausewitz might put it, SFA unfolds within the grammar of politics, not just the logic of tactics. Mirror imaging by Western military advisors becomes the *de facto* approach to training a foreign army due to bureaucratic convenience and institutional biases. To build a military force is to shape who holds power, who commands loyalty, and who can wield organized violence within a society. It is to tip the balance between regime survival and collapse, between patronage and reform, between repression and legitimacy. And yet U.S. efforts routinely ignore the domestic political terrain on which they operate.

Most SFA efforts assume that partner militaries are institutionally autonomous and politically neutral—mirror images of a sanitized ideal of the U.S. military. In reality, many recipient forces are deeply embedded in informal networks of loyalty, corruption, and regime protection. They are not instruments of national defense but extensions of elite bargains. This is why doctrine emphasizes that “legitimacy is vital” and that SFA practitioners must recognize the limits of military instruments alone, which must be nested within broader political strategies.[18] As Joseph Roger Clark argues, military strategy cannot be divorced from the political dynamics that shape conflict environments. Any attempt to build partner capacity must account for how power, legitimacy, and institutional structures interact within the recipient state.[19]

This is where SFA becomes a form of political warfare. Not in the sense of Cold War-style influence campaigns, but in the way it unintentionally props up—or threatens—

domestic political orders. Training elite units in fragile states often reinforces a praetorian guard or creates enclaves of effectiveness that threaten ruling elites. The American trained “Danab” (Somali “Lightning Forces”) comes to mind when considering the creation of an effective military unit in an otherwise ineffective Somali state.[20] In other cases, when the U.S. provides logistics or Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) support, it may be empowering actors who prioritize regime survival over national cohesion.

Take Iraq after 2014. The rapid collapse of the Iraqi Army in Mosul was not merely a military failure—it was the predictable consequence of years of politicized SFA. Partner forces were hollowed out by sectarianism, absenteeism, and the quiet logic of survival under a dysfunctional political order. The problem was never just a lack of training or equipment. It was the underlying political economy of the Iraqi state.[21]

In Mali, similar dynamics unfolded. U.S. and French assistance flowed into elite units while the broader security sector languished. Rather than building national forces capable of defending sovereign territory, these efforts created islands of capability surrounded by seas of dysfunction—forces that could fight when advisors were present but faltered when left to their own devices.[22]

Effective SFA must account for ‘embedded conditionality’—how security forces relate to institutions, legitimacy, and elite interests. A brigade’s tactical proficiency matters little if it answers to a warlord, a corrupt minister, or an oligarchic patron. Regardless, the West should not stop SFA, but instead, assistance must be more politically literate. Advisors must be trained not only in tactics, techniques, and procedures, but also in recognizing the political structures within which their partners operate. SFA is not a military task, but a political act with strategic consequences. This raises a final question: is the failure of SFA primarily bureaucratic—driven by institutional inertia and mirror imaging—or strategic, stemming from the absence of coherent political goals? The answer is likely both. While these failures highlight the pitfalls of politically blind SFA, the war in Ukraine offers a contrasting model—one where the recipient’s strategic coherence and political will redefine the advisor’s role, revealing a new paradigm for assistance.

Reverse SFA and the Clausewitzian Pivot: When Partners Become Teachers

The war in Ukraine has not only revived Western interest in large-scale combat operations—it has exposed the brittle assumptions underpinning decades of SFA. For once, SFA has not failed. And that success says as much about Ukraine’s own strategic culture as it does about the emergency Western aid and assistance provided.

Unlike in Afghanistan or Iraq, where U.S. aid often tried to fabricate institutions on weak or artificial foundations, Ukraine entered its war with Russia with a hardened sense of national purpose and a growing appetite for operational independence. Yes, Western advisors helped by restructuring logistics, decentralizing command, and building out the noncommissioned officer corps. But crucially, Ukrainians adapted what was offered. They shaped assistance to their own strategic needs. They improvised under fire, modified doctrine in contact, and created operational effects that even surprised their donors.[23] In this way, Ukraine represents a modernized form of FID—less about suppressing communist insurgency and more about enabling resistance against great-power aggression, with political will and self-directed adaptation at its core.[24]

This isn't traditional SFA—it's reverse SFA: a model where strategic absorption runs uphill. We term this 'reverse SFA,' where the recipient actively shapes and adapts donor assistance to align with its own strategic needs, inverting the traditional donor-centric model. Ukraine's success rests on what Clausewitz might call the moral forces of war—cohesion, conviction, and genius in command—mirroring its strategic coherence, political will, and improvisation under fire. Western advisors have relearned the value of mission command, distributed decision-making, and bottom-up initiative.[25] The advisor has become the advised.

What distinguishes Ukraine from past recipients is not merely its will to fight, but its political clarity. The Ukrainian state, while imperfect, enjoys broad societal legitimacy. Its military institutions are tied to a national cause, not to regime protection or elite patronage. This allows Western assistance to be absorbed, adapted, and weaponized effectively.

Contrast this with Afghanistan, where the U.S. invested over \$80 billion in security assistance—only to watch the entire edifice collapse in a few weeks.[26] In Ukraine, far less assistance has generated far greater returns because the recipient state possesses three things most SFA efforts lack: strategic coherence, political will, and wartime improvisation.

Reverse SFA challenges the donor-centric logic that has dominated the field. It forces us to ask: what if the partner knows better? What if the recipient is not just a passive object of reform but a sovereign actor with its own operational genius?

This also has profound implications for the future of advising. The most successful advising occurs when the recipient innovates in wartime and the donor adapts accordingly. As doctrine affirms, "SFA is inherently a developmental effort," where success is measured not by training completions or kit deliveries but by the recipient force's increased "capability,

capacity, competency, commitment, and confidence." [27] If war is the final auditor of military assistance, then Western militaries must become better students of their partners—especially when those partners are actively fighting and innovating under fire. Clausewitz wrote that war is a duel between thinking adversaries, but we must also recognize that SFA is a dialogue between thinking allies. To be clear, Ukraine's success to date should not obscure the fragility of its position. Western assistance has enabled remarkable Ukrainian resilience against a much larger Russian military, but the long-term outcomes—military, political, and institutional—remain uncertain.

The Clausewitzian pivot, then, is this: rather than forcing our models onto others, we must recognize that effective assistance begins not with our templates, but with our partner's war—and their political logic. Ukraine reminds us that good strategy is contextual, not universal.

Conclusion: Toward a Strategic Theory of Security Force Assistance

Security Force Assistance (SFA) is not going away. If anything, its strategic utility is increasing—as a tool of deterrence, influence, and indirect warfare in an era of renewed great power competition. But for SFA to deliver on that promise, it must be rescued from its current condition: an operational reflex untethered from strategic thought.

Too often, SFA has become the military version of foreign policy autopilot—well-resourced and procedurally sound, yet directionally adrift. We send trainers, gear, and funding, and then watch partner forces collapse when advisors depart. The problem is not that we advise poorly. It's that we advise blindly—without a clear understanding of what political ends we're serving, what regimes we're supporting, and what wars we're preparing our partners to fight.

A true strategic theory of SFA begins with political realism. This realism was also central to U.S. experience in the Philippines and South Vietnam—where, despite uneven outcomes, strategic clarity mattered more than technocratic perfection. It asks not what we want partners to be, but what they are. It recognizes that military institutions do not exist in a vacuum—they are embedded in regimes, shaped by patronage, and constrained by political economy. And it understands that tactics do not scale unless the state can absorb them. Ukraine has shown that effective assistance is reciprocal. When partners innovate, we should learn. Clausewitz taught that friction tests every assumption. SFA must likewise become a strategic dialogue—not a blueprint to impose. Metrics should shift from counting battalions trained to assessing institutional cohesion and alignment with political objectives. Feedback loops, modeled on Ukraine's reciprocal approach, can ensure donors adapt to recipient innovations, fostering a dialogue that enhances strategic coherence.

The strategic gap at the heart of SFA is not a doctrinal problem. It is a conceptual one. We do not need better advising templates or more modular training kits. We need a strategic culture that treats assistance as an extension of statecraft, not just soldiering. Otherwise, we will continue to repeat the train-and-pray cycle of making technically proficient partner units that cannot survive the strategic vacuum of advisors departing. Technical improvements are necessary—but not sufficient—for achieving strategic success. Without political clarity and strategic alignment at the national level, even the best advising models will fall short. As Hal Brands argues in *The Twilight Struggle*—his study of Cold War strategic logic—success in long-term great power rivalry comes not from tactical brilliance but from a steady, politically informed approach that adapts across decades of competition.[28] Thus, strategists must link tactics to strategic ends, especially in gray zones and advisory contexts.[29] This means aligning SFA with clear political objectives, phasing assistance within broader campaign plans, and measuring success not in partner battalions trained, but in political-military outcomes

achieved.

As the case of Ukraine reveals, strategic assistance flows both ways. Effective SFA today must embrace the possibility of reverse SFA, where recipients shape the war, and in doing so, teach the donor what strategic adaptation really looks like.[30]

War is too serious a matter to leave to generals, Clausewitz warned. The same applies to SFA. If we continue to treat it as a technical mission divorced from strategy, we will keep producing hollow forces and temporary gains. This is not simply a failure of execution in the field—it is a failure of conception at the strategic level, where ends, ways, and means remain misaligned. But if we embed SFA in a Clausewitzian logic—one that centers political purpose and strategic coherence—it can become what it always promised to be: a lever of influence, a shaper of outcomes, and—at its best—a catalyst for strategic advantage in wars we don't fight alone, but with and through others.

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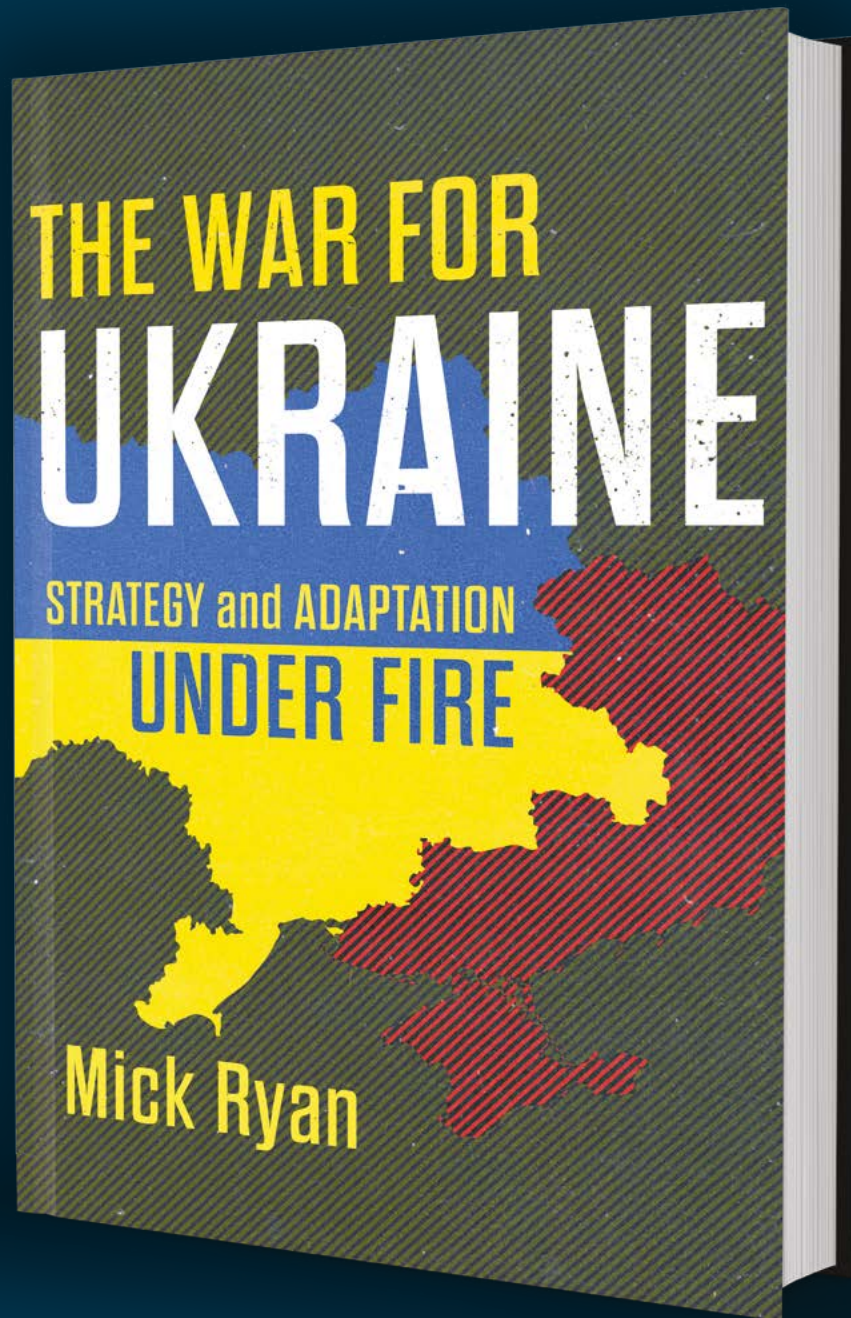
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Inchon's Real Story: A Misalignment of Policy, War Aims, and War Plans

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The Inchon landing in September 1950 remains a captivating case study of tactical brilliance masking profound strategic incoherence. Although celebrated as a daring and decisive military victory, the Inchon landing ultimately exemplifies an inversion of the policy-strategy-tactics paradigm. The operation's success, though undeniable from a tactical and operational perspective, occurred within a context of ambiguous war aims and political divisions within the Truman Administration driven by anxieties about provoking

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intervention by China or the Soviet Union. The lack of a clearly defined strategic framework allowed the triumph at Inchon to dictate subsequent war aims, fueling an overly ambitious expansion of objectives driven by the intoxicating momentum of victory and amplified by domestic political pressures. The result was a weakening of civilian control over the military and the creation of conditions ripe for strategic setbacks later in the war, demonstrating the perilous consequences of allowing tactical victories to drive strategic decision-making. Although Inchon was conceived as a way to shift the war's momentum, it did not predetermine the subsequent course of action. Other relevant factors, such as misinterpretations of Chinese signals and domestic political pressures, contributed to the decisions which ultimately led to Chinese intervention. Thus, Inchon's true significance emerges not from its overwhelming tactical victory, but from how that success eventually laid bare critical weaknesses in the overarching strategic framework and policy process, revealing a system that prioritized battlefield success above strategic coherence.

Inchon's Context

The Korean War, often overlooked in American historical memory, erupted unexpectedly in East Asia, jolting the US foreign policy establishment awake and igniting fears of a global conflict in the nascent nuclear age. North Korea's invasion forced the United States to confront the complexities of limited warfare. The amphibious landing at Inchon on September 15, 1950, stands as a particularly provocative turning point in the war, a moment scrutinized for its operational brilliance and broader strategic implications. Max Hastings observed that "For all its undisputed Korean provenance, the name Inchon possesses a wonderfully resonant American quality. It summons a vision of military genius undulled by time, undiminished by more recent memories of Asian defeat."^[1] The landing's impact was dramatic. It relieved the besieged Pusan Perimeter, reclaimed the strategically vital city of Seoul, and drew the attention of both China and the Soviet Union. However, Inchon's operational success was far from guaranteed, and the interplay of personalities, political pressures, and military considerations surrounding the operation warrants careful examination. The landing itself, the planning process, and the subsequent strategic decisions reveal timeless lessons about the complex relationship between tactics, strategy, and political objectives in wartime. An analysis of these factors illuminates the enduring tension between operational brilliance and strategic coherence, offering crucial insights for policymakers and military leaders navigating contemporary challenges. As one of the first major conflicts of the post-World War II era, the Korean War served as a formative experience in the development of limited war doctrine and challenged previously accepted norms of civil-military relations. Understanding

this evolving strategic landscape is therefore crucial to accurately assessing the events surrounding Inchon and the impact of the operation itself.

Operation Chromite, as the Inchon landing was codenamed, involved a daring amphibious assault on a fortified port city considered by many to be unsuitable for such an operation. The challenges were numerous: extreme tidal variations, narrow channels, high seawalls, and surrounding elevated terrain all favored the defenders. Despite these obstacles, General MacArthur pushed for Inchon, believing its strategic location outweighed the tactical risks. The landing force, comprised primarily of US Marines, faced fierce resistance but ultimately overwhelmed the North Korean defenders. The subsequent capture of Seoul, just 26 kilometers inland, delivered a psychological blow to North Korea and boosted morale in the South. While the operation inflicted heavy casualties on the North Korean forces at Inchon, it did not achieve the complete destruction of the North Korean army, a key element of MacArthur's broader strategic vision. The element of surprise, coupled with the audacity of the operation, contributed significantly to its tactical success, but the long-term strategic consequences remained uncertain and contingent upon subsequent political and military decisions.

Politics, War Aims and War Plans

At the beginning of the Korean War, American objectives were limited, and consisted of ensuring that the North Korean attack would not succeed.^[2] However, as the war progressed through the summer of 1950 and planning for Operation Chromite gained momentum, American war aims experienced a mission creep and became simultaneously expansive and muddled.^[3] Political support for intervention in Korea, whether it be through Inchon or another location, was a derivative of the Truman Administration's fear that it would be labeled as the administration that lost Korea while the loss of China to a communist regime was fresh in the minds of the American polity. Initial signals that there was a reluctance to intervene militarily were met with a scathing backlash from Congressional Republicans, and by the American populace who feared the spread of communism.^[4] Although these political pressures made MacArthur's Inchon plan more salient, they did not necessarily translate into clearly defined war aims due to competing considerations and the inherent difficulties in achieving political consensus during wartime. This was partially due to serious divisions within the Truman Administration over policy disagreements about a possible crisis mobilization and how the war would affect the 1951 defense budget.^[5] These divisions manifested in the stymying of policy formulation as the military prepared for a risky and bold maneuver. Clearly and publicly defining political objectives for the war prior to the Inchon landing could have drawn the ire of the Soviet Union or

China and potentially removed the prospect of greater U.S. strategic gains following the operation. However, it would have also affirmed the supremacy of policy over military strategy, enabling the Truman Administration to more effectively consolidate the gains acquired from a military victory at Inchon. Alternatively, the incoherent and ill-defined approach allowed the victory to result in unconstrained military actions. Instead of clearly defined political goals determining war aims to guide the planning and execution of war plans, the successful execution of war plans determined war aims within a framework of loosely defined political goals. Although Inchon's success created an environment ripe for mission creep and overconfidence, Chinese intervention was not guaranteed. A strategy focused on consolidating gains south of the 38th parallel and clear communication of limited objectives to China might have averted the escalation that followed. However, Inchon's role in dramatically altering the strategic landscape magnified the impact of subsequent decisions and created a momentum that proved difficult to resist within the context of unclear strategic and policy goals for the peninsula.

Contradictions of NSC 81/1

In early September, as planning and preparations for the Inchon operation progressed into its final stages, the authorities within the National Security Council (NSC) and those closest to the President concluded that the United States was in no position to commit itself to a single course of action.[6] This is further revealed by of National Security Council Report 81/1, a document titled United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea that was published a mere six days before the Inchon landing. This document was a product of several months of deliberations about the strategic calculus for the war. Its muddled and contradictory verbiage was indicative of the tenuous expansion of war aims.[7] NSC 81/1 stated that military actions north of the 38th parallel were "beyond the accomplishment of this mission." [8] Alternatively, the document also stated "the U.N. Commander would receive authorization to conduct military operations, including amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations in pursuance of a roll-back in Korea north of the 38th parallel." [9] Upon its publication, Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) Chairman General Bradley called the document a "masterpiece of obfuscation." [10] At the core of the NSC's hesitancy to provide more clarity was the unknown dispositions of the Soviet Union and China towards the war. Policymakers allowed the obscuration of this crucial variable to deter them from differentiating opportunities from risks within the various options in front of them.

Despite NSC 81/1's ambiguity and confounding language, the Truman Administration demonstrated an increased appetite for an expanded war before Operation Chromite.

This included even President Truman himself, who declared during a speech on September 1st, 1950, that "Koreans have a right to be free, independent, and united... Under the direction and guidance of the United Nations, we, with others, will do our part to help them enjoy that right." [11] Furthermore, although the phraseology of NSC 81/1 was contradictory, a net comparison of the positive and negative language in the document reveals a slight predisposition towards boldness and expanding political objectives. However, the subtle interests in the unification of the peninsula as a policy were never translated into a clear political end state prior to Inchon. The Inchon landing, rather than a means to a defined end, became an end in itself, deciding whether Korean War policy would pursue reunification or remain limited to the 38th parallel. [12] This shift occurred as Inchon's triumph solidified the view against allowing North Korea to salvage a draw, reversing the previously undecided sentiments about the peninsula's balance of power. Clausewitz tells us that "The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose... The aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it." [13] President Truman and the foreign policy establishment defied Clausewitz when they allowed political disagreements within their ranks and fear of the unknown to prevent them from defining a clear aim.

NSC 81/1's contradictory language, while frustrating to military leaders, also reflected the inherent challenges of formulating policy in a complex and uncertain environment. The document reflected the inherent tension between the ideal of clearly defined policy goals and the reality of politically expedient ambiguity by balancing competing political demands and strategic coherence. Ultimately, the Truman Administration clearly opted for political expediency to reduce the risk of provoking a wider conflict and of alienating domestic political constituencies.

Catastrophic Victory

Another factor that contributed to the elevation of tactics over strategy was the element of catastrophic victory that Operation Chromite's overwhelming success produced. Since most policymakers and military leaders likely doubted that the operation would succeed, they did not account for the consequences of a successful tactical outcome. Despite his bullishness on the plan for Inchon, even General MacArthur himself acknowledged the inherent risk in the operation and described it as a "desperate gamble." [14] The nature of complex amphibious operations, requiring the aggressor to combine surprise, firepower, airpower, combined arms, and joint operations in an often unpredictable environment, makes them dubious tactical and operational tasks in opportune conditions. The immense task of synchronizing these efforts during a condensed operational planning

timeline combined with the hydrographical complexities therein pushed Operation Chromite into the threshold of unacceptable risk. Murphy's law had likely never seemed so inevitable. The pessimistic outlook about Inchon's prospects for success were likely reinforced by the experience of those who participated in amphibious operations during World War II, when catastrophic failures like Tarawa stimulated doctrinal adjustments that resulted in successful amphibious operations later in the war.[15] Once the results of the Inchon invasion became apparent, members of the JCS were "perhaps somewhat overawed." [16] In the weeks following the landing, the JCS relinquished their hold on military decision-making as events unfolded rapidly, thus abandoning their mandate to advise policymakers about military decisions. A message from the JCS to MacArthur dated September 29th stated "we are proud of the great successes you have achieved," and "we remain completely confident in the great task entrusted to you." [17] The following day, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall sent MacArthur a message stating "We want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel." [18]

The same phenomenon occurred at the political level. Dean Acheson admitted that Inchon "succeeded brilliantly," and that "there's no stopping MacArthur now." [19] The success of the operation combined with the breakout of the Eighth Army from the Pusan perimeter intensified psychological and domestic political pressures on the Truman Administration to move quickly. [20] Truman's ability to personally exercise control over the war became even more paralyzed, and White House staffers agonized over how to get the President to "be more commander-in-chief and less captive to MacArthur's reputation." [21] These dynamics likely contributed to the eventual collapse of relations between Truman and MacArthur, as the latter felt increasingly emboldened to make consequential decisions with political and strategic consequences. This was demonstrated on November 6th, when MacArthur approved the bombing of Yalu River bridges without consulting with Washington or the JCS, which clearly violated the previously agreed-upon principle to steer clear of the Manchurian and Soviet borders. [22] More crucially, the gap in strategic thought defined by an inability to consider the consequences of success prior to Inchon created conditions that supplanted policy goals for military objectives and shackled the Truman Administration's ability to exercise control over the direction of the war.

The Limits of Operational Success

The Americans badly needed a victory on September 15th, 1950. General MacArthur risked significant political capitol and legendary status acquired over several decades of military service by gambling on Inchon. The military planners, staffs, and leaders who either opposed Inchon or were consigned to its execution likely felt an incredible sense of relief when the operation succeeded after months of intense preparations and personal investment. Inchon provided Truman with a political victory over those who questioned his commitment to checking communism abroad, despite his administration's incredulosity about Inchon's prospects for success. The military success resulting from the Inchon landing should be lauded. Its application of surprise, bold action, prudent risk mitigation, and operational art to achieve undisputed victory is a rare occurrence in warfare. Inchon's tactical and operational success prevented the outright defeat of American and UN forces on the peninsula and reoriented the course of the war.

However, its planning and execution within a broader context of unclear political objectives and a defunct strategy dulled the military victory. It created conditions for strategic pitfalls after Inchon by allowing tactics to reign supreme. In the absence of developed ideas for the United States' strategic and political objectives for Korea, MacArthur's restrictions associated with the 38th parallel and subsequent military action were reluctantly removed by policymakers. Consequently, American strategic objectives briefly morphed into infeasible ideas about a forcible unification of the entire peninsula. This contributed to the eventual Chinese intervention and exacerbated existing divisions in civil-military relations to the point of no return. The Korean War, and the Inchon landing within it, serve as a crucial case study in the evolution of limited war doctrine. The challenges faced by the Truman Administration and General MacArthur in navigating the complexities of this conflict helped to shape the development of modern civil-military relations and limited war strategy. By examining the events surrounding Inchon, we can gain a deeper understanding of the enduring challenges of fighting limited wars and the importance of adapting strategic thinking to the unique constraints of each conflict. Inchon's lessons for those concerned with matters of tactics and operations, strategy and policy, and war and peace are timeless and applicable to the unyielding nature of warfare as a political act.

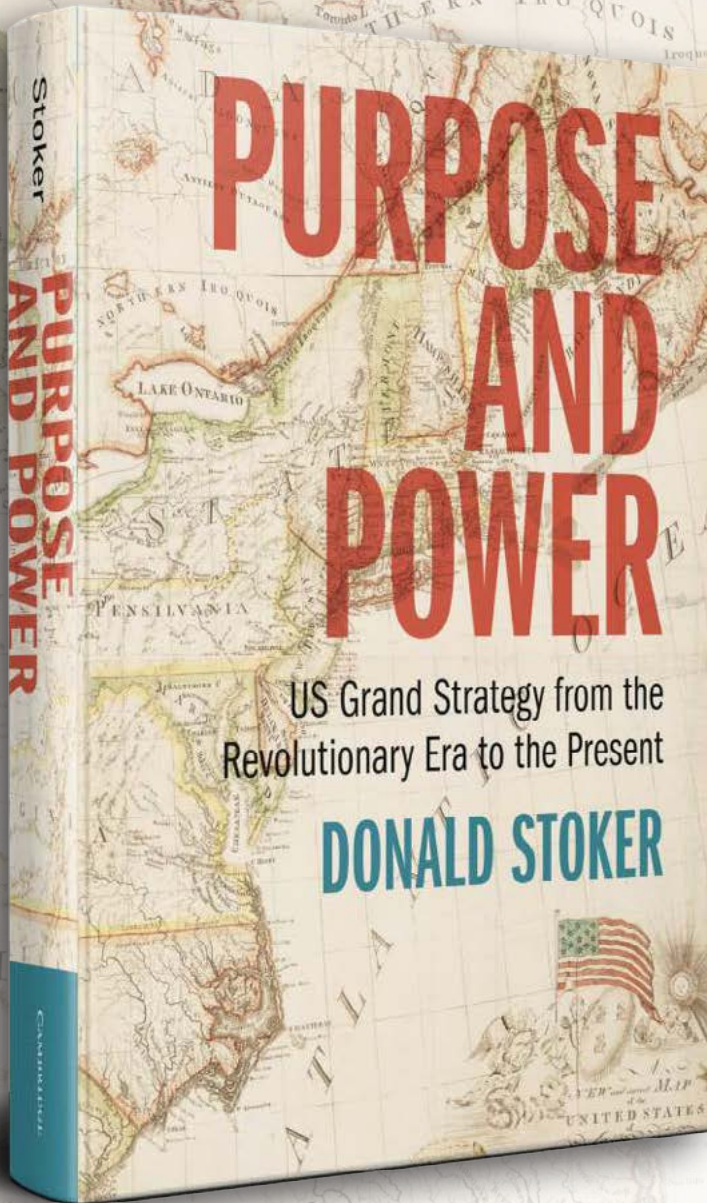
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