



Modern Errors in Discussions on Strategy

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About the author

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This article will be predicated around the meaning of the word "Strategy." "Strategy is the use of engagements for the objects of the war." This is how Clausewitz defined it. To quote Colin Gray, "Strategy is the bridge that relates military power to political purpose". In other words, strategy is the bridge that relates the outcome of engagements to the political objects of the war.

Military power is the use of force or the threat of force. More specifically, it is the use of violence, and/or the threat of violence. There is no such thing as a non-violent strategy and you cannot usefully reference a concept such as "the strategy bridge" unless you understand that strategy is about violence and it can only be executed as tactics.

Strategy is about Violence

Today it is common to suggest that strategy is more than the use of force. It is not. The use of force is what differentiates diplomacy from strategy. Diplomacy (which is politics) and strategy may work hand in hand, but violence is unique in terms of how it generates both results and cost. Only violence costs blood. No method can claim non-violent credentials if underpinned by the use of force, thus the Russian annexation of the Crimea, while non-violent for the most part, was underpinned by very high levels of threat. The "little green men" carried guns.

As strategy can only be done as tactics, then at the application level strategy is performed in a theatre as a campaign. This has never not been the case. Geography matters. Like tactics, strategy is about doing things in the physical world. It is not abstract, so strategy is applied by a level of command using physical resources usually allocated as part of a policy decision. For example, General George Marshall, the 15th Chief of Staff of the US Army did not do strategy. Building the US Armed forces for WW2 was not strategy. It was very clearly policy. It

was an entirely political and economic process. Nor was strategy allocating those forces between theatres. That was again a political decision, for example beating Germany first. Eisenhower and Montgomery were the actual strategic commanders because they commanded tactical forces.

The campaign even applies at the non-state level as a Narco-gang in Mexico, seeking to assert their authority in say Laredo, will kill people in Laredo (or those having any actual connection to it) and not anywhere else. The same is true for insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else, be that at the level of village, town, district, province or nation.

More importantly the use of violence for the objects of the war can only be applied against the armed objector to your policy.[i] A little quoted or even read passage of Clausewitz makes clear that,

*“T[he] impose our will on the enemy is it’s [the war’s] object. To secure the **object** we must render the enemy powerless; and that in theory, is the true aim of **warfare**. That aim takes the place of the **object**, discarding it as something not actually part of **war** itself.”*

Clausewitz’s subtlety and precision does not often make for clear writing, but the simple fact is that the purpose of any armed force is to render the enemy “powerless.” That may be to destroy, defeat, deter, exhaust, or render impotent, but unless the armed force is focused on the enemy, it is making itself irrelevant to the only competition that matters, but herein lies a major trap for modern theorists. Simplistic understandings of warfare (as distinct from war) suggest that it is a competition of armed forces. Again, to quote Colin Gray, “there is more to war than warfare.” While many modern military theorists, such as John Boyd, have struggled to explain how you can have air superiority and win every battle, yet still lose the war, Clausewitz would merely have shrugged. The simple reason for this is that only some policies accept the use of violence. That is to say, only policies that are by their nature likely to succeed if the armed objector of that policy is defeated should be those where armed force is used. So, for example, would Iraq and Afghanistan become stable pro-western democracies if the insurgents were defeated and, just as importantly, are you prepared to pay the blood, time and dollar cost of defeating them? The price of saving South Vietnam was too high for the US, so it simply gave up and removed its forces.

Thus, modern theory that attempts to frame the key to winning wars as being rooted in “warfare”, as in skillful execution, good technology and tactical brilliance is grossly simplistic, misinformed and almost always predicated on a number of abstract concepts not present in reality. For example, the tactical and strategic operations for an existential war are very different from those of a war fought for limited policy objectives. Due to the fact cost is rarely an issue if existence is at stake, the object of warfare is always to render the enemy powerless and do so for cost. That cost is set by the nature of the policy. Thus, tactics dictated that the British should defeat any Russian invasion of India in the 19th Century on the line of the Indus River, whereas policy called for it to be halted in Northern Afghanistan requiring a 1,200km line of supply. Unless the Army in India could pull that off, it was little good to the Government of the day. If you cannot defend the terrain that matters, then you cannot attain the required object.

The same is true of Israel’s defence of the Golan Heights, where the supposed concepts of mobile defence were simply not adequate to serve the policy demand of holding the terrain. If such operations are not deliverable via military means then a policy predicated upon them is untenable. Politics tells you how to fight far more than abstract military theory. To be of any use, such theory must serve the political objective.

Policy not Strategy

As previously explained, strategy is about violence. That violence should always be directed against an armed enemy who is the objector to policy. It is extremely important to understand that the policy may be quite limited even though it requires violence. Thus, an airpower campaign to prevent Libyan forces massacring the civilian population of Benghazi was a coherent use of force to meet that very limited political objective; that being, “no massacre.” The problems occur once that policy becomes more grandiose and ambitious.

There is a massive difference between using military force to prevent a massacre and using military force to remove all and any armed objectors in order to make Libya a stable pro-western democracy. In the first case the policy is achievable for cost. In the second, the cost would have been very high indeed. Critically the job of strategy is merely to remove the armed objector. Non-violent politics and diplomacy are required to make Libya a stable pro-western democracy.

What needs to be understood is that “strategy” is not, and never has been required to provide a coherent political end state. Policy must and should do that. Strategy just enables it to the degree of removing the armed objector. Nothing more.

Thus, to be considered “comprehensive,” a strategy has only to fulfill three basic tests. Firstly, it has to be focused on the enemy, extracting a cost from him in time and/or blood thus either destroying his means or his will or both.

Secondly, it can only be done as tactics, so it has to be possible with military means in the real world. Thirdly, it must do so for costs set by the policy, in that the cost in blood, time and money should not be excessive. Should the strategy fail any one of those tests, in part or in whole, political success will move further away.

As previously stated policy has primacy over everything else. If tactics are unintentionally killing too many civilians, as opposed to the enemy, then while tactics may be at fault, the actual problem lies with the policy. The Geneva Conventions hold military necessity, within the context of distinction and proportionality, to allow for proportionate means to focus on the defeat of the enemy as in the armed objector. Clearly if the objector is not armed, then there is a policy issue (which Gandhi leveraged with his policy of non-violence) not a military one, but more to the point should the enemy place 100 civilians on the roof of their HQ, then the crime being committed is being committed by them, not those striking the HQ. The critical point to be understood is that done correctly, policy, not tactical command,

makes the decision to strike. Tactics has no view on the civilians, if the Rules of Engagement (ROE) allow for it, but the primary purpose of ROE is to align tactics with policy. Who you can kill/detain/search, where, when and why are ROE, and serve the ends of policy. They are political, not legal, because adherence to international law is, itself a political choice, as Russia and Iran's activity in Syria amply demonstrate. Ethics is merely politics. Iran and Russia believe they are acting entirely ethically. The reasoning for that resides in political argument.

Equally important to understand is bad ROE, being that which restricts force into irrelevance and actually renders your own forces "powerless", not the enemy, because they cannot inflict harm upon the enemy! Very clearly, the lines between tactics and policy can become blurred but this observation is actually obvious and banal because the field of endeavour that considers this is called "Strategy!"

As to the possibility of the fault lying with tactics, you cannot restrict force into irrelevance. If the policy does not allow you to kill the enemy, then the policy is, yet again, at fault.

Information Strategy

Given that strategy is about violence, there is clearly no such thing as information strategy. Information, as in the recounting or recording of events, only has political implications as concerns policy. Are the insurgents really executing civilians in the streets? Did a drone strike really kill everyone at a wedding? If nothing about an event is recorded or recounted then it will have no political, thus no relevant, impact. Conversely, events that never happened can be recounted or invented and have substantial impact on the policy/political level, be that babies thrown from incubators, or mortar shells hitting markets. The veracity of any claim will always have to be placed in the context of the policies at stake. Legitimate strikes that kill civilians may be required. That level of requirement is a political choice. Tactics will have to match the means with that requirement.

It is fairly obvious that social media or citizen journalists can never have any real tactical impact. Tweeting the location of an artillery battery may obviously have consequences, as would revealing any information of military importance on any media, but someone tweeting from a tribal war in Africa will be largely ignored, compared to a 7-year-old girl tweeting from Aleppo about to be overrun by Government forces, as the focus of political attention is on Aleppo. Social media really only impacts the "something must be done" sentiment that drives policy, but has almost no direct impact on things getting done. Millions on social media can be horrified and military operations continue regardless of that horror.

Conflicts, which are of little interest to western policy, have little presence on western media, social or otherwise. Fairly obviously, the supposed strategic impact of media is its potential to alter the policy. Yet the object of war remains rendering the enemy powerless, regardless of that fact. Social media, or media in any form, can do very little to render the enemy powerless, bar altering the nature of the policy at stake. That may be decisive but it will be so, only because policy has primacy.

Talking Strategy

So where does this leave a discussion of strategy? It may be more important to understand what is not strategy. Arguing about the number of F-35s is a purely political question, because there is no enemy, nor theatre, nor policy bearing on the discussion. Likewise, the number of US or UK aircraft carriers is purely a policy and economic discussion. It only ceases to be so when there is a specified enemy and that enemy has to be rendered powerless for cost, in regards to a policy, and in a time and place relevant to the policy.

Also, not "strategic" is the idea that "ISIS has to be defeated." In the US and UK, that is a purely political assertion born of party political ideas. How to defeat ISIS at cost, cognizant of a stated policy that allows for such a cost, is truly strategic, and requires a considerable level of military applications knowledge, but is relatively simple and easy to achieve. So, conversations of the type such as "We need to defeat ISIS" are political and more to the point, party political opinion, not based on strategic understanding.

As has been shown, good strategy requires good policy. A good policy will be one made real by someone rendering the enemy objector to the policy powerless for cost. It really is that iron bar simple. To quote Lord Wavell attempting to educate the journalist and amateur military critic Liddell-Hart,

"The principles of strategy and tactics, and the logistics of war are really absurdly simple: it is the actualities that make war so complicated and so difficult..."

So, unless "actualities" (enemy, terrain, weather etc.) are present then you are doing neither strategy nor tactics. Clausewitz never gave much advice about the raising of armies or their size and shape because he knew such things flowed from policy, not an imagined ideal of what an army (or navy) was supposed to look like, unless there is a policy to serve, such as protecting South Korea, or West Germany in the Cold War. Very obviously, the vast majority of professional study needs to be directed at the actualities of war and warfare. To this end, the little-known field of strategic history is head and shoulders above the essentially romantic military history popular today.

Conclusion

Much strategic discussion is irrelevant, abstract and nonsensical because it does not adhere to the coherent and logical definition that Clausewitz provided. More precisely it is difficult to conduct a meaningful strategic discussion with someone not well versed in Clausewitz, simply because there exists few, if any, such coherent bodies of strategic theory.

As has been shown, a failure to adhere to the largely simple constructs Clausewitz provided leads to a nonsensical understanding of the problems and thus confounds any attempt at solutions.

References

[i] Using violence against civilians for coercion is coercion. It is neither strategy nor war.

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