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Enunciating Strategy: How to Talk about Strategy Effectively.

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About the author

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Targeted killing, annihilation, and freedom—one commonality among these three is that each has been used to describe a strategy when appended the formulation ‘strategy of’. Yet strategically this is in fact their only commonality, as otherwise they describe wholly different phenomena. Targeted killing is an operational method, annihilation is an effect to be gained through operations, and freedom is a potential desired political end goal of strategy. Why then was each combined with the ‘strategy of’ formulation? The latter was first uttered by George W. Bush at the Royal United Services Institute in London on 19 November 2003 and was subsequently picked up by scholars. Although Bush may perhaps be excused for the sloppy wording, overuse of a single formulation for describing strategy is indicative of the incompleteness of the strategic lexicon for thought and for theory, meant to be an aid to practice.

As the British maritime strategist Julian Corbett once noted, in strategy “every man concerned must have been trained to think in the same plane; the chief’s order must awake in every brain the same process of thought; his words must have the same meaning for all.”[i] When a single linguistic formulation can describe such various phenomena as targeted killing, annihilation, and freedom, Corbett’s communicative ideal is breached and it becomes impossible to anticipate what manner of phenomenon will follow. The

attainment or failure of this communicative ideal within theory is unlikely to translate into success or failure in and at war. Nonetheless, it may be significant for the future development of strategic studies as a field. As Giovanni Sartori noted in arguing for a basic vocabulary of social science,

We should not confuse the dynamics of *language* with the dynamics of *science*. Let us assume that a science has developed its vocabulary to a point at which its stabilization—not its eternal immobility—is taken for granted ... In such cases we see that the stabilization of the basic vocabulary has not obstructed, but indeed has favored, scientific growth ... By contrast, we social scientists invest more and more of our energies simply in *altering the cards*. If so, we are furthering not science, but sheer confusion. We are dismantling, rather than rebuilding, whatever cumulative or additive knowledge we have attained.[ii]

The inability to meet Corbett’s communicative ideal even in theory suggests that strategic studies has yet to reach the growth phase which a relatively common basic vocabulary may underpin.

This article therefore proposes a set of formulations for strategy, each of which separately describes one particular facet of strategy, but which in aggregate may describe the fundamental whole of strategy. The article starts with three formulations for each part of the tripartite ends, ways, means (EWM) model of strategy. It then goes beyond that model to consider strategic effect, assumptions, conditions, political rationales, agents, allies, the enemy, time, and geography. Cross-referencing among these facets is inevitable because each forms a fundamental aspect of strategy.

Strategy of (ways)

The most common formulation, ‘strategy of’, is most suitable for describing strategy’s ways, its most engaging element, which concerns action. What should the strategist do, how should he do it? In a certain perspective, which some consider to be its core element, strategy is way finding. That is, strategy is equivalent to ways, tactics to means, and policy to ends. Strategy thus comprises only one-third of the EWM model. Others take a broader perspective, that strategy is the full set of relationships among ends, ways, and means, rather than just one corner of that tripartite structure.

The perspective of strategy as wayfinding, whether as the only component of strategy or merely its most engaging, focuses on how to apply one’s power effectively enough to overcome the enemy. Effectiveness is the first priority, for effectiveness leads to success. Only after effectiveness has been assured or achieved can the strategist begin thinking in terms of efficiency, or of conserving power while still achieving the same end result.

Effectiveness highlights the question of mutual adversarial interaction, one of the major sources of non-linearity in war. It is one of the sources of Edward Luttwak’s paradoxical logic of war, embodied in the truism that a way which worked yesterday may not work today precisely because it worked yesterday and therefore the enemy will be on guard against it.[iii] Clausewitz also recognized this non-linearity in his wondrous trinity. One of the fundamental trinitarian forces upon war is “the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam”. This is wayfinding, it is operational art, and Clausewitz associated it primarily with the commander and his army.[iv]

Within adversarial interaction, ways are the operational methods to which strategists resort when engaging their opponent. One may think of Soviet Deep Operations, or American AirLand Battle. Targeted killing is a way, whereas annihilation, for example, is not. Annihilation is an effect, something which is not (wholly) under the control of the strategist but is dependent upon the pattern of mutual adversarial interaction. Ways are therefore the primary purview and competence of military professionals, albeit necessarily overseen by politicians whose political perspective is the ultimate reason for and purpose of strategy.

Strategy with (means)

Beyond ‘strategy of’, the lexicon swiftly dries up. To discuss means, the formulation ‘strategy with’ is proposed. Means is perhaps the most controversial element of the EWM model of strategy. Clausewitz identified battle as the fundamental means of war and strategy: “fighting is the only possible means.”[v] Strict neo-Clausewitzians follow this exactly, while others diverge. Arthur Lykke, the author of the popular EWM model, instead identified military resources. “*Means* refers to the military resources (manpower, materiel, money, forces, logistics, and so forth) required to accomplish the mission [defined as the military objective].”[vi] A useful compromise may be to think about means in terms of power—land power, sea power, air power, etc.

These distinctions matter. If means are tactics, then the strategist is not just a wayfinder but also probably in command of the battle itself, especially in Clausewitz’s original context. Yet if means are the resources alone, the strategist does not necessarily have any authority over their development. Raoul Castex, an

interwar French naval and strategic theorist, commented upon the distinction between the development of resources and their use: “Properly speaking, preparations of this sort constitute naval policy, and their realm borders that of policy as a whole”.[vii] Policy rather than strategy generates the resources, however influenced by strategic considerations policy may be. The danger of emphasizing resources, or to a lesser extent even power, as means is that the vital role of battle in strategy may be forgotten.

Nonetheless, there are also advantages to designating something other than battle as strategy’s means. One of the key problems of strategy is the question of predictability: “Without believing in some measure of predictability, one cannot believe in strategic calculation.”[viii] From this perspective identifying battle as the means is ill-suited, as all battles and their effects are not equal. This makes the strategist’s necessity of anticipation much more difficult than it perhaps needs to be. Even Clausewitz recognized this when he refers to the “dubious fortune of battle.”[ix] Yet resources are similarly ill-suited as means. This designation encourages lazy thinking, as if resources cause the effect, rather than what is done with them. Power, by contrast, occupies a middle ground between resources and battle. It is more than mere resources, for a power perspective must also encompass how those resources are combined and used through organization, training, doctrine, etc, all the way to tactics in and out of battle. Resources, power, and battle all occupy a single spectrum on which power occupies a flexible midpoint. Variations among types of power, whether land, sea, air, etc, reflect certain fundamental physical realities about how these forms of power interact and achieve effect. This allows a greater degree of predictability in theory without straining theory’s relevance to reality.[x]

Strategy for (ends)

Strategic ends require their own formulation: ‘strategy for’ what purpose(s)? What is the strategist trying to change (or prevent from being changed) by going to war? Strategy’s ends cannot be mere military objectives. Rather, the ends are the governing political goals. The idea of strategic ends has come under criticism in recent years: “‘ends’ don’t really end”.[xi] Or, as Everett Dolman has argued, “[t]he strategist can never finish the business of strategy, and understands that there is no permanence in victory—or in defeat.”[xii]

Yet this is a misunderstanding of strategy, at least in a classical sense. Classically, strategy must end because it is inherently tied to war, which itself is an extraordinary state of affairs between or among belligerents who are seeking to impose their individual or collective wills upon their enemies. The violent use of military power to achieve political goals is not normal politics, but rather the recourse to which politicians resort once they believe that normal political ways and means will not achieve their desired goals. Once the strategist successfully imposes the will of his political master, strategy ends. From a certain point of view, the whole purpose of strategy is to create a situation through use of force in which that use of force is no longer necessary. Strategy successfully practiced is inherently self-terminating because it brings about a condition in which it is no longer necessary. Politics continues forever, of course, which may in the future lead to a new necessity for strategy. Strategy will forever be relevant but will not always be actively practiced.[xiii]

‘Strategy for’ also encompasses the second great element of non-linearity in strategy, the currency conversion between the unlike phenomena of military force and political consequence, especially in the form of the enemy’s revised behavior. Some political consequences are more linear than others; it is far easier to occupy a territory, an act which has political meaning, than it is to convince individuals or groups to change their behavior. The triangular EWM model is a somewhat nebulous triangle, specifically because there is no necessarily linear path from ways and means to the ends sought.

Strategy to (effect)

Although the tripartite EWM model has been elucidated, there are other aspects of strategy which require lexical clarification. Of these, the first is strategic effect, or the effect that the strategist wishes to achieve through the use of force. This concept is distinct from the ends to be sought. Ends, as noted, are non-linear because they fundamentally differ from military means. Effects, however, should be directly achievable through military operations even within the context of adversarial interaction and the enemy’s perceptions and decision-making. Effects result from effective ways employing particular forms of power. Annihilation, one of the most popular examples of ‘strategy of’, is actually an effect. One does not have a strategy of annihilation, but rather a ‘strategy to’ annihilate the enemy. The distinction is vital as it relates to the limits of tactical and strategic agency in war; i.e. what is in the strategist’s power to achieve against resistance versus what is primarily contingent upon enemy action or decision-making. Control is another effect which one may achieve through direct use of military force, by constraining the enemy’s freedom of realistic action, even if the decision to take unrealistic action still resides with the opponent.

In a certain sense, effects may be the missing step in the nebulous triangle of EWM between ways and means on one side and ends on the other. This is not to say that the concept of strategic effect can transform the non-linear currency conversion, which is at the heart of strategy, into a linear and easily achievable process, but rather that it forces the strategist to consider the appropriateness of the effect desired in light of the ends sought. Why should annihilation, for example, compel the enemy to end his resistance? What does annihilation enable the strategist to do unto his opponent such that the choice to come to terms is more reasonable? Such are the questions which strategists need to ask of their desired effects.

Ways and effects are intimately tied together: effects are the results of effective ways. Yet they are not interchangeable because effects, unlike ways, are ultimately conditional, based on adversarial interaction. One cannot characterize a strategy in advance by desired effect the way that one can describe a strategy by its operational ways. A strategist may choose to employ what is recognizably AirLand Battle without the performance actually being good enough relative to the enemy to produce the desired effect. History is replete with examples where generals sought annihilation, only for it not to be tactically possible or politically sufficient to bring the practice of strategy to a successful close.[xiv]

A special word is required here about deterrence, for it sits uneasily apart from this ends/effects distinction. Deterrence cannot be an end by default, as successful deterrence must be maintained for as long as the would-be deteree remains a security threat. Deterrence is an effect. However, one cannot deter. 'To deter' is grammatically correct but strategically incorrect; the choice to be deterred is made solely by the enemy in a way that it is not with regard to effects such as annihilation, which can be imposed on the enemy through successful tactical and operational performance. Deterrence is therefore a conceptual outlier.

Strategy supposing (assumptions)

Every strategy is underpinned by assumptions, a fact which is obvious when enunciated but which otherwise often passes without much comment. Some assumptions may be generic, about the overall utility of force or more specifically of certain types of force, or about the enemy, or oneself, or the context, etc. Often these assumptions are a result of cognitive biases. They affect strategy at every stage, from the political direction to the tactics, even to the design of weapons and equipment.[xv]

Because of their origins in cognitive biases, assumptions are generally not malleable. Although military professionals may be taught to identify their own assumptions in the context of military planning, the same is not true of their political masters who choose to employ strategy to achieve their goals. The result is that many of the most damaging assumptions in recent Western strategic performance have largely derived primarily from the political sphere, although one should note that Western militaries are responsible for their relative failure to challenge these assumptions.

Although assumptions are not changeable, the ability to identify one's own assumptions and how they underpin one's strategy is vital. Identifying assumptions allows the strategist to recognize at least some of the limits of the strategy as conceived and hence to identify potential conditions for strategic failure, particularly if reality does not align with assumptions and especially if the strategist is not prepared to adapt.

Strategy if (conditions)

Alongside and somewhat overlapping the idea of assumptions, every specific strategy in conception and practice is contingent upon a certain set of conditions particular to it alone. These are the conditions under which a chosen strategy is believed to be successful in practice. If these conditions are breached, the strategy may quickly become inapt unless the strategist adapts to the changing circumstances. By identifying the conditions for success, as with the identification of assumptions, the strategist can also recognize at least some of the conditions for failure. Conditions, being potentially military, political, economic, about oneself or about the enemy, about neutral behavior, etc, may pertain to any aspect of a conflict.

Many of the great strategic blunders of the twentieth century transgressed a strategy's conditions of success. Imperial Germany's unrestricted U-boat campaign during the First World War might have succeeded, but it was implicitly conditional on not upsetting neutral opinion to the extent that the United States would enter the war. Germany transgressed this condition, which ultimately resulted in its defeat. Germany once again transgressed strategic conditionality twenty years later, when its strategic performance while invading the Soviet Union was conditional upon the Soviet army really being as small as German leadership had assumed. It was not. In each case, Germany assumed conditions would hold even as they either ignored contrary evidence or actively imperiled those conditions.

When assumptions and conditions overlap is the moment when the strategist must truly think hard about the foundation of the conceived strategy. When assumptions are simultaneously also conditions for success, the strategist must strive to the ultimate to ensure that the assumptions do reflect the reality. Yet it remains true that assumptions are inherently extremely difficult to change even when vital to a strategy's conditions for success. Fred Charles Iklé observed the close connection between assumptions and conditions, noting that it is "commonplace in human affairs that men continue to labor on major undertakings a long time after the ideas upon which these efforts were based have become obsolete...Since one cannot constantly reexamine one's premises, it is easy to overlook a growing discrepancy between reality as it changes, and the old intellectual foundations of an ongoing policy." [xvi] Intelligence could have in principle informed the Germans that their strategy for defeating the Soviets was built on false hope, but Hitler was adamant that the Soviet Union was as strong as a rotting house. Intelligence may be good or bad, correct or not, but such qualities often do not matter to the leaders who are convinced about their assumptions.

Strategy because (political rationale)

The choice to resort to armed force is a political decision, one which initiates strategy as an active process. As a political decision, it requires a political rationale, which may well be distinct from the end(s) which the strategist seeks to achieve through strategy. The difference between the two is encapsulated in an important aspect of the debate surrounding humanitarian interventions: the issues of motive and intent. Motive is *why* one wishes to act, whereas intent is *what* one intends to accomplish by acting. [xvii] The political rationale is the reason one resorts to force and to practice strategy.

The choice to practice strategy may represent one of three essential relationships with policy. The first is Clausewitz's somewhat hackneyed and abused phrase that war is the continuation of policy by other means. In modern thinking, this observation represents a straightforward discussion about the causation of war. Yet even within the theme of causation, simple continuation is not the only relationship between strategy and policy. As Hew Strachan observes, "[t]oday we too often use [Clausewitz's] normative statement about war's relationship to policy as though it applied to the causes of war, and so fail to recognize how often states go to war not to continue policy but to change it. The declaration of war, and more immediately the use of violence, alters everything." [xviii] Hence, the political rationale may require not explaining why war is a continuation of policy, but why it is worth changing policy to accommodate the unique phenomenon of war and how war may contribute toward the security and political prosperity of a polity. The final relationship between strategy and policy which the political rationale may have to explain is even more extreme than mere change: "[w]ar for a non-aggressor nation is actually a nearly complete collapse of policy. Once war comes, then nearly all prewar policy is utterly invalid because the setting in which it was designed to function no longer corresponds with the facts of reality." [xix] Here the political rationale is generally quite clearly defined—we are attacked, we must defend ourselves—but nonetheless the political rationale must still be made.

Political rationales and political ends are two sides of the same coin, firmly anchoring strategy and war within the greater stream of time in politics at both the causation and termination points. Rationales and ends generally reflect each other, through one of the three potential relationships between war and policy. In principle, albeit not necessarily in practice, direct continuation should be the most straightforward. The choice of strategy to change policy may be anticipated to be less linear, and the conduct of strategy as the failure of policy still less linear. As the relationship between policy and strategy becomes less direct, the ends become more flexible. The collapse of policy implies that any end state better than occupation is acceptable, although the range of achievable acceptable outcomes itself depends on the relatively effective or ineffective conduct of strategy. After all, lying between rationales and ends are means, ways, and effects—the main part of strategy itself.

Strategy by (agent)

For every strategy there is a strategist, or a conceiving and directing organization of some kind, not to mention other organizations whose task is to contribute to strategic performance. For the practicing strategist, this element is inevitably somewhat self-evident, but it is nonetheless an important issue. Strategic agency has two sides: conceptual authorship, or who conceived the strategy; and executive responsibility, or who is responsible for implementing it in practice. Up until relatively recently, by historical standards, conception and execution were often combined in a single person: an Alexander the Great, a Julius Caesar, or a Napoleon. Even in a more modern era, individuals sometimes sought to take on this dual role, as Hitler increasingly did during the Second World War.

The question of agency can be significant to strategic success or failure. Strategists may have specific strategic preferences, whether conceiving or executing strategy, as individuals or as organizations. Preferences may originate from individual cognitive biases, culture, or bureaucratic-organizational

considerations or background, among myriad possibilities. Roman strategy against Hannibal under such a man as Gaius Terentius Varro resulted in the disastrous battle at Cannae. By contrast, Roman strategy under Quintus Fabius Maximum Verrucosus, whose strategy emphasized avoiding the battles which were Hannibal's greatest strength, favored a long war of exhaustion. Understanding the strategic preferences of individuals or organizations matters, as does ensuring that the person or organization is in the right position at the right time.

Strategy alongside (allies)

Alliances are closely tied with the question of strategic agency. Most Western strategy in the modern era has been and is conducted alongside allies, which adds a vital political dimension which raises myriad questions about virtually every other formulation of strategy already mentioned. Allies may bring specific means to the conflict and sometimes are requested to do so; or do so in the hope of strategically punching above their weight with the provision of a niche capability. Allies may have preferences or restrictions in strategic ways, such as rules of engagement which limit their ability to act in certain ways. In Afghanistan, Germany confined its effort largely to the north because it did not want to participate in actual fighting, while during the Second World War the United States and Britain had a long-running dispute over the timing of the invasion of Europe and what to do in the meantime. Allies may bring with them new assumptions or political rationales which must be acknowledged. Tony Blair's great narrative leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 concerned Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program, which compelled the United States to go to the United Nations at least to try for a new resolution.

The addition of every new political actor to a coalition or alliance, especially one carrying relatively significant weight, complicates the task of strategy because maintaining both political and strategic cohesion among partners becomes an increasingly important element within the politics of strategy. Often, smaller allies may seek to provide capability which they believe to be sufficient to acquire a voice at the table – input into actual strategy – or policy-making. It was for this reason that Britain tried strenuously and ultimately successfully to deploy a full armored division to Kuwait during the Gulf War, as the British believed that anything less would not allow them admission into the highest level discussions. A major aspect of the strategic discussion between Britain and the United States in 1943 and 1944 was the question of who would actually command the Allied Expeditionary Force into Europe and ultimately into Germany. For all that agency matters in a single strategic effort, it may be even more vital in a collective strategic environment, perhaps even acquiring significant political weight.

Strategy against (the enemy)

Discussion of the enemy is intrinsic to strategy, as strategy is inherently adversarial. For the strategist, the enemy matters in any number of ways, beyond banal pronouncements that 'the enemy has a vote'. Of course, the enemy has a vote—but how does this influence strategy? The strategist must tailor his work to the enemy, which is one reason why defense planning without an enemy is so difficult.[xx] Without an enemy, strategy becomes much vaguer both in overall conception and in more specific operational practice. The enemy provides something tangible against which to plan, rather than the predominant uncertainty often endemic to peace.

Beyond this tangibility, the strategist can learn about the enemy's weaknesses from the adversary himself, from his behavior. "If the enemy's actions can reveal his assumptions about what strategic ways he fears or values, the strategist should seek to exploit these in order better to achieve his ends." [xxi] Through the dimension of ways, the home of the adversarial interaction of war, the strategist engages with the enemy most directly. Within this interaction the strategist's chosen and implemented ways are tested through enemy fire and mutual adaptation to force and circumstances, to be found either effective or ineffective. If ineffective, they must be changed. If effective, this effectiveness must be safeguarded, with the question of efficiency a second priority.

The enemy is fundamentally the *raison d'être* of strategy—the enemy is created through political strife, which leads to the need to practice strategy, and the successful practice of strategy in turn removes the enemy through the effective employment of force, thereby self-terminating.

Strategy during (time)

Time is an unavoidable but often neglected aspect of strategy. It has multiple dimensions, which may complicate any strategic lexicon still further.[xxii] Time is neutral but not impartial, as strategists attempt to make what they wish of it; the same passage of time is of varying significance to various strategies. As the hackneyed insurgent saying goes, the counterinsurgents have the watches, but the insurgents have the time. Time is equally vital and malleable in conventional warfare. Sometimes its meaning is to ensure that the strategist has enough of it or the enemy not enough, for whatever purpose. Much of Hitler's strategy in the final year or so of the Second World War focused on buying time for his anticipated wonder weapons to

be completed so that they could turn the tide. Yet even before the specific needs of practicing strategists are taken into account, all time is not equivalent. It is instead lumpy and uneven. Winter is not summer; Russia's winter is commonly credited with contributing to Russia's victories over Napoleon in 1812 and the Germans in 1941–2 and again 1942–43.

It is vital to consider time from various perspectives. The most common is instrumentality, usually for planning purposes: how much time does the strategist believe is required to defeat the enemy? How does the strategist weigh co-incidence/simultaneity versus sequence of actions? The adversarial perspective is again necessary even when considering time, as the adversary may weigh time differently and each side will seek to take advantage of time while preventing its enemy from doing so—as much as possible. The enemy's strategic performance is crucial to thinking about time. The political perspective is similarly important, especially when it clashes with and overrides the requirements of strategy. When this happens, it may be the fault of strategy, having taken longer than anticipated to succeed, or the fault of policy for demanding something unreasonable of strategy, or perhaps both. For strategy to be effective, it and politics must be temporally in sync.

Strategy in (geography)

Much like time, geography is fundamentally inescapable, but its strategic and political meaning varies with context and the strategist's perspective. Geography may affect strategy in two main ways. Most obvious and straightforward, geography affects the implementation of strategy as operations must take place in and across geography and terrain. Germany's mobile warfare during the Second World War worked well in the confined geographical and geopolitical spaces of Poland, the Low Countries, and France, but it ultimately lost itself in Russia's expanses.

Less obvious but possibly more important is that geography conditions the way in which people think about strategy, both in specific conception and in overall conceptualization. As a set of strategic preferences, Basil Liddell Hart's notion of the British way in warfare is a product of Britain's geographical position apart from Europe. France or Germany could and would never have developed a similar notion, as they did not share the basic geographical detachment from the continent which defined Britain and the British way in warfare. Further, even the definition of basic strategic concepts, such as strategy or grand strategy, may be influenced by geography. The comparison among the classic naval and maritime theorists—the American Alfred Thayer Mahan, the British Julian Stafford Corbett, and the French Raoul Castex—demonstrates this point, as Castex never developed such an expansive notion of grand strategy as did his American and British counterparts. France's geography minimized the chances of such an expansive idea developing.[xxiii] This is not to suggest that geography *determines* concepts any more than it determines strategy or policy, but it is a perhaps under-appreciated influence on the foundations of our basic concepts of strategy.

Conclusion

Ways, means, ends, effects, assumptions, conditions, rationales, agents, allies, enemies: each of these facets is more or less integral to the conception and practice of strategy. Some may inevitably be grouped more tightly together with specific others, such as effects and ends (*strategy to, for*); ways, means, and effects (*strategy of, with, to*); conditions and assumptions (*strategy if, supposing*); ways, the enemy, and effects (*strategy of, against, to*); agents and allies (*strategy by, with*); or time and geography (*strategy during, in*). Yet, depending on the focus of discussion, any formulation may be connected with any other formulation as necessary. A fully described strategy may unfold group by group, formulation by formulation, and each may alter what came before or what might follow.

Combining the formulations, the reader gains a full sense of the identified strategy as well as readily indicated avenues for in-depth study or discussion. By giving a comprehensive lexicon to strategy, it allows the creation of a rudimentary strategic script—borrowing Sir Lawrence Freedman's concept—or “a way of thinking about strategy as a story told in the future tense”, which all strategy ultimately is and must be. [xxiv] This set of formulations allows for such a story to be told and adapted to strategic circumstances: protagonists and antagonists may be identified; their motives, means, ways, intentions, and goals may be indicated; their beliefs and the limits of their designs explored. It enables a full narrative of strategy, one which may be understood in detail, for practitioners, yet also packaged for public consumption as a political narrative. If employed this full complement of formulations should improve our ability both to discuss and to think about strategy, by allowing strategists easily to identify elements missing from their strategic deliberations.

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