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Citation

Milevski, L. (2022). What to Expect of the Strategist: Can Strategy be Mastered? In C. C. Donovan (Ed.), *Strategy Matters…Essays in Honor of Colin S. Gray* (pp. 177-198). Air University Press. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3562946

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 8

What to Expect of the Strategist

Can Strategy Be Mastered?

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A legacy of the Western strategic experience of the past two decades has been rising doubt about the ability, viewed generically, of the strategist to perform his task. Many of the West's wars over this period achieved initial success before deteriorating into continuous warfare. Most immediate goals were easily met in both Afghanistan—although the Bush administration failed to destroy al-Qaeda—and Iraq. Yet Afghanistan has long since overtaken Vietnam as America's longest war, with little apparent success and for little appreciable gain, despite the dramatic demise of Osama bin Laden hiding in Pakistan. Iraq spiraled into insurgency and civil war, was only partially salvaged, and was then partially abandoned. Libya followed the same pattern: a success of sorts with Muammar Gaddafi's regime deposed and the man himself killed, but since then it has deteriorated into civil war, which has not only not yet ended but also has drawn in major regional actors busily arming their preferred proxies in the country. The West tried to manage the Syrian Civil War, failed, was surprised by the sudden rise of the Islamic State and its military successes across two countries, and supported local allies to push the Islamists back—before suddenly abandoning at least some of them and ceding the political high ground to Russia. The West has also been taken by surprise by Russia's resurgence and revanchism, starting in Ukraine in 2014, by the return of great power conflict, and, with reference to China, even by peer competition. Over the past two decades Western strategists have not covered themselves with glory.

By comparison, the experiences of strategic competitors Russia and China have differed substantially over the past two decades. Russia's two decades began admittedly poorly with wars in Chechnya, the first a disaster and the second only a poor success. The war against Georgia in 2008 was also a poor success, albeit (unlike Chechnya) sufficiently shocking to spur the Russian armed forces to reform. The resulting tactical and strategic performances in Crimea, Donbas, and Syria have been sufficient to achieve success and are certainly out-

standing compared to earlier years. By contrast, China's involvement in substantial hostilities has been limited first to reasonably effective pressure on countries around the South China Sea, which has enabled them to build highly militarized artificial islands, and second, a Himalayan spat with India in the summer of 2020, about which accounts are mixed but may indicate that China did not perform particularly well. Yet this relative failure is minor, and China's armed forces are only increasing in capability, with the specific intention to challenge the United States. Unlike their Western counterparts, currently, Russian and Chinese strategists are doing well.

The disparity in experience between the West and its current geopolitical opponents brings into question the West's expectations of its strategists and whether they are realistic. To explore this issue, one must first understand the strategist and the expectations attached to the role, followed by the opposite side of the coin: doubts about the practicability of strategy; the distinctions between strategy in theory and in practice; and a deeper examination of practicing strategy. The chapter concludes with what one should expect of strategists today, and why.

The Strategist and Expectations of the Role

In Western discourse, strategists and their role have perhaps become reified, with attendant expectations of both the vocation and its practitioners reaching new heights. These expectations may be explicit or implicit and may be identified from two sources: (1) academic portrayals of the strategist's character; and (2) definitions of strategy and the content of strategic theory.

A number of academic strategists have reflected on the characteristics that a strategist should have, imbuing the vocation at times with a sense of romantic, sometimes even superhuman, exclusiveness. Thus, Harry Yarger described "the pursuit of national security and strategy" as "the proper domain of the strong intellect, the life-long student, the dedicated professional, and the impervious ego—one which is well prepared and willing to wait for history to render judgment in regard to success."[1] Fred Charles Iklé wrote even more strikingly about the strategist's characteristics:

> The demands on intellectual integrity are so exacting because in the development of security strategy the contradictions out-

> weigh the harmonies, the uncertainties overwhelm the established facts, the proofs remain utterly incomplete, and yet the stakes exceed all earthly objectives. The strategist has to incorporate into his work the rich and precise facts of physics, engineering, geography, and logistics; he has to allow for the swirling currents and blurred edges of psychology, political science, and history; and he needs to fit all this into the dynamic of international conflict among nations—a dynamic of opposing objectives and clashing forces that is driven as much by human stubbornness as by human error.[2]

Yet Iklé, knowing that he was perhaps overstepping the line from demanding merely the nearly impossible to the almost wholly improbable, was also sufficiently aware ultimately to adopt a wry tone in discussing the strategist's qualities:

> To do good work on national strategy almost demands a rotund intellect, a well-rounded personality. He whose vocation it is to work on these issues of war and peace cannot suffer from intellectual poverty. His soul must be in harmony with this world of ours. He must not only appreciate different cultures and good art, but also find nourishment in things that are beautiful and be endowed with a sense of humor. He might have, perhaps, an eye for architecture or painting, an ear for the best music; he must have a broad understanding of philosophy, literature and, of course, history. And–why not?—let me have men about me that are sophisticated epicures.[3]

Colin Gray also weighed in on the strategist's qualities; he recognized that because strategy must be practiced as tactics, it must ultimately rely on individual command performance in war. Thus, character matters. Yet his approach differed; rather than focus on the strategist as a character, he emphasized strategy as a function. "There are grounds for doubt as to whether or not most strategists are heroes. However, the impediments to even adequate, let alone superior, strategic accomplishment are so numerous and so potentially damaging that there is little room for skepticism over the proposition that the strategist's profession is a heroic one."[4] The overall track record for strategists must be below 50%—broadly put, for every one who wins, there must be one who loses, and although some lose well, there are probably more who win through pyrrhic victories. Rather than

strategic virtuosity, Gray's preferred standard of success is, therefore, the merely good enough, which in itself is difficult. Strategic sense is about knowing "what ought to work well enough for the politically determined desired result for policy."[5]

Expectations also derive from theory, both from key definitions and from the content of theory itself. There is an implicit but not unjust assumption that what is written in strategic theory can and should be relevant to practice: "[w]hat could strategic theory possibly be for if it were not meant to be transferable to the world of action?"[6] Thus, expectations of the strategist's professional capabilities are inherent even in basic definitions of strategy. Paul Kennedy's version of grand strategy reasonably represents a particular kind of academic understanding of strategy, its grand inclination notwithstanding: "To begin with, a true grand strategy was now concerned with peace as much as (perhaps even more than) with war. It was about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even centuries. It did not cease at a war's end, nor commence at its beginning."[7] The professional expectations inherent in such a definition are in some ways even greater than the exalted descriptions of character from Yarger and Iklé and demand, perhaps, generational foresight.

By contrast, Colin Gray defined strategy very practically: "The use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy"—but contextualized this within 17 identified dimensions of strategy.[8] These 17 dimensions are grouped into three categories: people and politics, which comprise people, society, culture, politics, and ethics; preparation for war, which includes economics and logistics, organization, military administration, information and intelligence, strategic theory and doctrine, and technology; and war proper, which contains military operations, command, geography, friction, the adversary, and time. "My argument is that strategy has many dimensions, each of which is always in play to a greater or lesser extent. Strategy, by analogy, is like a racing car that has, *inter alia,* an engine, gears, brakes, tyres, and a driver; strategic performance is secured against the will and capabilities of other racers."[9] Although Gray never argued that the strategist can or even should pretend to control all these dimensions, both supporters and critics drew this erroneous conclusion from his dimensional conceptualization of strategy.[10] Such misinterpretations of Gray's 17 dimensions placed expectations and burdens on the strategist that were not warranted by his race car analogy.

The Viability of Strategy

Against the explicit and implicit exaltation of the strategist is a contrary trend in Western strategic culture—doubting strategy's practicability. Questioning the viability of strategy, in its various forms, has been a broad trend in the West since the disillusionment with war and with the utility of the force it engenders as experienced during World War I, if not earlier. A deep-seated resistance against using force emerged, especially strongly in Western societies of the interwar period, due to its apparent futility and its presumed injustice. However, there is a significant difference between then and now: a century ago, strategists still believed in the essential practicability of their task.

Yet throughout the past 70 years, since the founding of academic strategic studies, concern has occasionally been expressed among strategists about the practicability of their vocation and has led to some existential concern about the field. Bernard Brodie stated outright in 1955 that strategy had hit a dead end, and in 1979 Lawrence Freedman reiterated that statement as a question. In 2000 Richard Betts wondered whether strategy was an illusion, and in 2013 Lawrence Freedman returned to the topic by exploring and denigrating the notion of the master strategist.[11] Although all these commentaries discuss strategy, they not only differ in their interpretation of strategy as such but also focus on various aspects. Which of these are commentaries on the practicability of strategy *as such,* versus on the usefulness of the *intellectual tools available* to strategists, versus on the viability of particular *interpretations* of strategy as a concept?

Brodie's and Freedman's articles both pertain specifically to nuclear strategy and thereby occupy a special position because of their subject matter. It is hard to imagine practicing nuclear strategy at the best of times. In the context of superpower conflict and mutually assured destruction, it was nearly impossible. Hence Brodie doubted the usefulness of strategy as such, lamenting that "there is a stark simplicity about an unrestricted nuclear war that almost enables it to be summed up in one short statement: be quick on the draw and the trigger squeeze, and aim for the heart. One then has to add: but even if you shoot first, you will probably die too!"[12] Yet his work was notable also for casting doubt upon the ideas with which the United States had to grapple concerning nuclear strategy. "The old concepts of strategy, including those of Douhet and of World War II, have come

to a dead end. What we now must initiate is the comprehensive pursuit of new ideas and procedures necessary to carry us through the next two or three dangerous decades."[13] Freedman's analysis 24 years later essentially reiterated Brodie's basic concerns regarding the practicability of nuclear strategy as a form of strategy and the conceptual tools available to practicing strategists: "The main thrust of my argument thus far is that the relationship of mutual assured destruction, in which each superpower has confidence in his ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the other even after absorbing a surprise first strike, has encouraged the tendency to look at individual weapons systems, and indeed whole force structures, more in terms of their political functions than in terms of likely performance in battle."[14] The end of the Cold War has relegated nuclear weapons to the back of most people's minds, including those of most strategists. Instead, the heady days of the early 1990s demise of the Soviet Union led numerous observers to suggest conceptual amendments which could only make strategy more difficult to practice. In this vein, John Chipman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies suggested that the future of strategic studies lay "beyond even grand strategy."[15] Yet grand strategy itself had already taken on conceptual interpretations, which probably made the concept entirely impracticable.

The first serious consideration of the practicability of strategy as a whole emerged at the end of the 1990s, after the wars resulting both during and from the break-up of Yugoslavia. Betts powerfully outlined the arguments put forward by skeptics of the practicability of strategy, which hinge on a handful of certainly real core concerns: strategy's complexity and the difficulty of achieving desired political goals using the blunt instrument of violence; the difficulty of predicting the effect of a chosen instrument and action; and the lack of criteria by which to judge strategy in advance of its practice. These concerns touch both the practicability of strategy and the usefulness of intellectual tools that strategists use in conceiving and performing strategies in practice.

Today, strategic studies still faces substantially these same challenges. The two decades of Western strategic practice after Betts's summary only attest to the skeptics' accuracy regarding individual cases of strategic practice. Strategic theory can only address Betts's challenges with difficulty as so much of what was highlighted depends heavily upon the unique context of each individual strategy. It may be unrealistic or even impossible to answer the charges at the

level of general theory to the degree of precision which Betts's skeptics seem to be asking. A call for such precision pays little attention to either the basic uncertainties of adversarial relationships or to the malleability of policy independent of, yet always influencing, strategy.

In reaction to the works of strategists such as Yarger and Iklé, with reference to their exaltation of the strategist's character, as well as to Gray's 17 dimensions, Freedman's second foray into the practicability of strategy suggests that the master strategist is a myth. Freedman particularly takes aim at Gray, suggesting that Gray evinced "an exalted view of the strategist as someone who could view the system as a whole and take account of the multiple interdependencies and numerous factors at play to identify where effort could be most profitably applied." Freedman asked, "Could there be such a master strategist with this unique grasp of affairs?" After all, "a holistic view implied an ability to look at a complete system from without, whereas the practical strategist's perspective was bound to be more myopic, focusing on what was close and evidently consequential rather than on distant features that might never need to be engaged."[16] Furthermore, Freedman asserted that a military-strategic perspective was simply not enough:

> Master strategists, as described by Gray and Yarger, were therefore a myth. Operating solely in the military sphere, their view could only be partial. Operating in the political sphere they needed an impossible omniscience in grasping the totality of complex and dynamic situations as well as an ability to establish a credible and sustainable path toward distant goals that did not depend on good luck and a foolish enemy. The only people who could be master strategists were political leaders, because they were the ones who had to cope with the immediate and often competing demands of disparate actors, diplomats as well as generals, ministers along with technical experts, close allies and possible supporters.[17]

The question of practicability, its roots in academic strategic studies and new nuclear challenges, stems from a community which thinks and writes about strategy, usually without ever facing the potential responsibility directly to practice it in real life. Second, this concern is also born out of a much-expanded meaning of strategy. Strategy experienced a conceptual expansion from the late 1940s to the 1970s that pushed it well beyond the bounds of war and into peacetime deterrence and, ultimately, toward becoming a facsimile of inter-

national relations. This unfortunate trend was mostly arrested by the end of the 1970s, and, with the end of the Cold War, classical strategic studies and security studies divorced and went their separate ways.[18]

Freedman seems to acknowledge that a master strategist may be possible in the Clausewitzian interpretation of war. He noted, however, that war was a limited phenomenon. "Clausewitz did present war as a dynamic system but it was also remarkably self-contained. He was a theorist of war and not of international politics. He looked backward to the political source of war but that was not where he started."[19] Most mainstream definitions of strategy have stretched the bounds of the term far beyond its classical emphasis on the utility of military force. The upshot of such expansion is that the dynamic system that must perhaps be mastered grows exponentially larger and therefore exponentially more difficult to master. Strategy has thus arguably been reconceived into a practically unmanageable form by the same community of theorists who also worry about whether the resulting conceptual mess is practicable. This is counterproductive both to strategic theory—which has not caught up to those expanded definitions—and to the practice of strategy—which perhaps cannot, and need not, catch up.

Strategy: Theory versus Practice

The field of strategic studies seems to have reached a culminating point where the explicit and implicit exaltation of the strategist through character descriptions and strategic theory has led to unmanageable expectations of the profession, spawning a countertrend which doubts altogether the practicability of strategy. This results from natural tensions between theory and practice, fields which differ substantially, but is also partly simply a consequence of bad theory. One basic contradiction between theory and practice is that theory tends to be comprehensive, whereas practitioners tend to be reductionist. This section reflects first on strategic theory, both its comprehensiveness and its frequent expansiveness, before focusing on the reductionism of concepts generated by practitioners.

Strategic theory has been an ecological endeavor at least since Clausewitz's *On War.* An ecological discipline, according to John Lewis Gaddis, is one which "values the specification of simple components, [but] it does not stop with that: it considers how components

interact to become systems whose nature can't be defined merely by calculating the sum of their parts. It allows for fundamental particles, but it seeks to place them within an equally fundamental universe."[20]

Strategic theory has four primary tasks: defining the field, breaking it into its constituent parts, connecting strategic studies (and the practice of strategy) to other fields and disciplines, and anticipating the future.[21] The prime purposes of these tasks are education and communication so that prospective strategists may understand their field and their task and be able to communicate effectively about both. Ecological comprehensiveness generally benefits these tasks and purposes more than practical reductionism does, as the latter may tempt strategists to lose sight of certain constituent subdivisions or connections. Clausewitz was one who emphasized the importance and desirability of comprehensiveness and noted that "theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of warfare in a thorough critical inquiry."[22] A comprehensive theory of strategy and war should contribute to command talent, thereby indirectly improving military and strategic performance. Therefore, a comprehensive view of strategy or war, such as that of Clausewitz or that inherent in Gray's 17 dimensions, does not logically mandate that a strategist need master every element.

Yet this is not true of another trend, that of the expansion of key concepts, most notably of "strategy" itself, partly within but mostly without strategic studies.[23] This conceptual trend began before the Second World War in the United States, where analysts or scholars such as Edward Mead Earle adopted broader definitions of strategy. "Strategy is not merely a concept of war time but an inseparable element in statecraft at all times; as such it is a legitimate and, indeed, an unavoidable concern of the social scientist. Only a narrowly restricted terminology would define strategy as the science and art of military command."[24]

The momentum of this trend to expand strategy only became overwhelming after the establishment of academic-strategic studies in response to the dawn of the nuclear age. As Brodie advised in 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. It can have almost no other useful purpose."[25] Thomas Schelling similarly

wrote that strategy "is not essentially a theory of aggression or of resistance or of war. *Threats* of war, yes, or threats of anything else; but it is the employment of threats, or of threats and promises, or more generally of the conditioning of one's own behavior on the behavior of others, that the theory is about."[26] This momentum has been carried through to the present day by scholars such as Paul Kennedy, through his definition of grand strategy, and others in the fields of security studies and international relations—although the post-Cold War divorce of strategic studies and security studies diverted much (but not all) of this momentum away from strategic studies itself.

Yet this trend, only thinly justified at the outset—although strongly contextualized in the late 1940s and early 1950s by the nuclear weapons problem—has evolved into a self-evidently desirable development. By the time he was writing about grand strategy, Kennedy could explicitly broaden the concept of grand strategy without justifying why he did so; it was merely assumed that it was appropriate. More recently defending strategic studies, Pascal Vennesson saw no issue with hailing the expansionary effects of the Cold War on the concept of strategy: "The Cold War *released* strategy from the confines of war"(emphasis added).[27] Although a reasonably fair depiction of the evolution of the concept of strategy, the language alone conveys the attitude: the Cold War released the concept as if from a prison in which it was unjustly confined.

Yet even if one accepts this notion that strategy was liberated, the development simultaneously throws strateg*ists* into a different prison, built from greater expectations derived from a broader concept. At the same time, owing to the conceptual expansion of strategy, the strategist simultaneously loses key conceptual tools in wartime, most notably the wisdom of classical strategy itself: "One of the most obvious uses of strategy is to provide us with the tools to understand better the nature of war."[28] Performing grander concepts of strategy more likely requires a master strategist, of the sort Freedman found unrealistic—and not just in wartime, but in peacetime as well, and potentially over extended timescales. The system a strategist must master grows exponentially larger with broader concepts of strategy, even as the strategist's intellectual toolbox shrinks.

In contrast to the comprehensiveness for which much of strategic theory strives because of the nature of theory and the concept-expanding impulse of many scholars, practitioners tend to value simplicity. As Michael Howard once noted, "The complex problem of

running an army at all is liable to occupy his [the commander's] mind and skill so completely that it is very easy to forget what it is being run *for*" (emphasis in original).[29] Conceptual simplicity helps focus and direct that organizational complexity toward the desired goals. Various concepts which practitioners have developed to aid them in their task reflect this, ranging from Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil*, to centers of gravity, and principles of war. These are concepts that attempt to simplify the strategist's task and reduce it to its basics or otherwise suggest that the greatest generals can simplify situations to their fundamental considerations.

Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil* is of the latter type. "*Coup d'oeil* therefore refers not alone to the physical but, more commonly, to the inward eye. The expression, like the quality itself, has certainly always been more applicable to tactics, but it must also have a place in strategy. . . . Stripped of metaphor and of the restrictions imposed on it by the phrase, the concept merely refers to the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection." Clausewitz later suggested that "the commander's *coup d'oeil*, his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, is the essence of good generalship."[30]

Despite recognizing that theory must be comprehensive, Clausewitz valued the ability to simplify a strategic situation in practice to its most important points and then act upon them. It was something Clausewitz believed could be at least partially taught. "Clausewitz believes that it is possible to formulate a theory of war that will promote the operation of genius through the replication of the effects of experience. Theory of this kind addresses the improvement of intuitive as well as deliberate thought—that is, the education of the unconscious as well as of the conscious mind."[31] Doing so requires comprehensive theory—such as Clausewitz's own *On War*—so that the practicing strategist can discern which elements are or are not important in any given situation, for few generals arrive at their station with the necessary innate qualities.

The idea of centers of gravity may be traced back to Clausewitz, but it has taken on a life of its own through vigorous debate, particularly in the past 40 or so years. The US Marine Corps originally argued that centers of gravity are the enemy's main vulnerabilities, the US Army that they are the core of the adversary's strength. Antulio Echevarria has reminded readers that the concept was borrowed originally from *physics*. "In general, a center of gravity represents the

point where the forces of gravity can be said to converge within an object, the spot at which the object's weight is balanced in all directions. Striking at or otherwise upsetting the center of gravity can cause the object to lose its balance, or equilibrium, and fall to the ground." A return to the original concept as Clausewitz argued it "shows that the identity and location of a center of gravity can be perceived only by considering the enemy holistically—that is, by drawing connections between or among an adversary's (or adversaries') various parts and then determining what 'thing' holds them all together."[32] Perhaps meant to work hand-in-hand with the notion of *coup d'oeil*, centers of gravity are an analytical tool by which strategists analyze the enemy from a comprehensive perspective before cutting to the core and reducing the adversarial challenge to only a few crucial elements—and preferably to only one.

The principles of war, as developed by successive strategists over the generations, similarly act to maintain simplicity of perspective against the complexity of practicing strategy. Their popularizer John Frederick Charles Fuller argued that "the value of principles lies in their power to eliminate self when judgments have to be formed, and so assist us to maintain that mental equilibrium which is only possible when the mind is attuned to the law of economy of force."[33] Mental equilibrium may be upset by the seeming need to consider too many factors before acting. Principles of war were conceived in response, to focus the thinking of tacticians and strategists:

> But, if he has trained his mind to think in principles, in place of thinking by order of conditions, directly he thinks of one principle he will think of the influences of the remaining eight. As conditions change, he applies them, and the quicker he can do so the higher will be his initiative, and by initiative I do not mean doing something, but doing the right thing—the common-sense thing. Thus is economy of force observed, and each small economy effected adds to the ultimate victory, or minimizes the ultimate defeat.[34]

The principles of war simplify the task of determining courses of action by identifying, rightly or wrongly, the fundamental concerns that a tactician or strategist must consider.

However, not all reductionist theories of strategic effect are created equal. The US Air Force's concept of Effects-Based Operations (EBO) is a case in point. "Effects-based operations are operations conceived

and planned in a systems framework that considers the full range of direct, indirect, and cascading effects, which may—with different degrees of probability—be achieved by the application of military, diplomatic, psychological, and economic instruments."[35] Theories of strategic effect that do not respect the human and the adversarial aspects of strategy's nature fall afoul of questions of causation: "Yet the military situation cannot be viewed, much less properly analyzed, as some kind of system. Humans are not machines. The enemy has his own will and may not behave as one wishes. He is bound to respond to one's actions. He is not devoid of emotions. He can react unpredictably and irrationally. Thus, in fact, EBO proponents are trying to take the art out of warfare and substitute it with science."[36]

Hew Strachan has indicted the thinking behind EBO: "EBO sought to plan by beginning with the desired outcome, with the implicit assumption that it might be gained by means very different from those suggested by capability-based plans. . . . It reverse-engineered from a desired future without making sufficient allowance for what might happen en route, or indeed for unintended consequences."[37]

The essential issue with these concepts is the leap from the need for some degree of simplification and reductionism in specific practice to enduring concepts whose purpose is to simplify or reduce, often with little respect for context. Theory emphasizes continuity, whereas practice is the realm of specificity and change.[38] Colin Gray explicitly set strategic theory against principles of war, as he argues, "A primary virtue of strategy's general theory lies in its ability to discourage capture of the entire process of creation and execution by a few principles."[39]

It comes as no surprise that some observers believe the strategist's task to be impossible. The historical track record is admittedly not good. Much of strategic theory is comprehensive and misunderstood as requiring the strategist to master every facet personally, whereas other concepts and theories are expansive and actually *do* mandate such a master strategist. At the same time, some of the most recent reductionist theories of strategic effect have tended to anticipate the effect before considering the means and ways to achieve it, thereby turning causation on its head. Moreover, the very notion of enduring, reductive concepts of how to perform strategically and wage war effectively may be suspect.

Practicing Strategy

Strategy must be practiced, but the steps and missteps of both theory and practice indicate the level of challenge. Practicing strategy is difficult, practicing it well enough to succeed even more so. This is true for any interpretation of strategy. However, much of modern strategy exacerbates the challenge by tending to define strategy broadly, encompassing all instruments of political power or by casting its effect far into the future—or both. Each definitional change increases the difficulty of practicing strategy.

Broadening strategy increases the number of variables the strategist must control to achieve effect, while potentially obscuring important differences of nature among these various instruments. Military force is unlike any of the other available political instruments, such as economic coercion or inducement, diplomacy, propaganda, etc. For this reason, Michael Howard has argued, "For after all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity."[40] War is a continuation of political intercourse but is distinguished from that intercourse by the primacy of military force as the engine for political consequence and change. The threat of, or actual, violence conducted by military force constitutes a unique consideration among all other instruments, different as they may be. Classical strategy was defined narrowly on the utility of force specifically so that its unique focus could be properly understood and effectively employed.

For strategic practice, casting strategy far into the future is similarly troublesome. First, although one may be strategizing for a distant future, one must survive the present in order to reach that point. "It is a persisting, unavoidable truth about national security and defence planning that security in the future is always incalculably hostage to decisions made today for today and the near-term."[41] In this sense, strategy for the long-term may well be impossible simply because it may be set awry five or ten or more years before its anticipated culmination, causing strategists to mortgage their polity's more distant future to secure short-term survival. Second, as time passes, the assumptions that underpinned any policy or strategy are inevitably shown by the course of events to have been flawed.

All strategists must adapt their chosen strategies to the realities of any given situation, but if strategy becomes entirely about the process of adapting a polity's policies over time, then it is functionally no

different from actual politics. Politics never ceases, being merely the distribution and employment of power, but it is thereby also without inherent content. It must ever be made and remade by the politicians who practice it. Concepts of grand strategy such as that put forward by Kennedy are consequently effectively indistinguishable from politics. Classical strategy largely avoided these pitfalls because, due to its emphasis on military force, it limited attempts to peer into, and change, the future purely to the conduct of war and questions of war—although admittedly some wars may last thirty or eighty or one hundred years, whose long decades are usually littered with failures necessitating change of strategy, even if not substantive alteration of objectives. As Hew Strachan has noted, "Once strategy moves beyond the near term, it struggles to define what exactly it intends to do."[42]

Even classically understood, strategy was always the most difficult of all social interactions between people and groups of people. It is, after all, a deliberately adversarial activity in which each party is attempting to impose its will upon the other. Moreover, violence and political consequence—particularly in the guise of political decision-making—are two mutually alien phenomena. Strategy must attempt to achieve a currency conversion from one to the other—violence to political consequence—while simultaneously preventing the enemy from similarly gainfully converting the former to the latter. Concurrently, every military action does have political consequences, frequently uncontrollable. "War is inherently a subset of politics, and every military act has political consequences, whether or not these are intended or immediately obvious. In the grip of battle, it is hard to remember that every building destroyed, every prisoner taken, every combatant killed, every civilian assaulted, every road used, every unintentional violation of the customs of an ally ultimately has political import."[43] These political consequences may be ironic, they may be counterproductive to the purpose of strategy or policy, or they may not meaningfully influence strategy and policy at all during the war or even in the longer term. The strategist's task is to balance the advantageous and disadvantageous political consequences of military action so that ultimately peace may be made on terms that are beneficial for the strategist's polity.

Arguably, in some ways making that currency conversion has become more difficult since the days of classical strategy. War was made not by apolitical generals but rather by actual leading political figures—whether heads of state or government, or generals trusted by their

governments to act politically, and not just strategically. “Kings and emperors, along with some trusted advisers, still customarily went to war and directed its conduct in pursuit of an acceptable outcome. Strategy directed tactics with great immediacy and intimacy. The decision as to whether to fight or not, where to fight, how to fight, and how long to fight, as well as what risks were acceptable and what costs bearable, were made ‘on the spot’ by the head of state.”[44] One may similarly note that politics directed strategy with great immediacy and intimacy. Events on the battlefield directly impinged upon the minds of the primary political decision-makers of a polity. From the French Revolution to the present day, Western armies have grown, Western battlefields have grown, and Western policymakers have stepped increasingly further away from the battlefield, physically and mentally, perhaps making it more difficult to alter a foe’s political decision making because of this increased physical and mental distance.

Second, accelerated in part by the revolution in communications, many enemies faced by the West over the past two decades have been groups of like-minded combatants, each individually deciding when their fight is over, particularly if their organization has not been defeated or destroyed, but sometimes even if it has. Clausewitz cogently posited that in war, the result is never final. As M. L. R. Smith noted, if each and every individual active in a war must decide whether or not to continue fighting—let alone those who only witness the events of war and then decide to join rather than abstain in resistance—then the strategist’s task may well become exponentially more difficult regardless of how one defines it.[45] This tendency may only have been increased by the West’s desire to wage bloodless wars against the leadership while avoiding involving the people as far as possible. Although the lesson is surely more generalizable, in 1926 in *The War in the Air*, H. G. Wells had already prophesied that the outcome of targeting leadership would not be victory but chaos. “The Germans had struck at the head, and the head was conquered and stunned—only to release the body from its rule. New York had become a headless monster, no longer capable of collective submission.”[46] Western strategic practice may be counterproductively conceptualized and designed to atomize the enemy into M. L. R. Smith’s quantum world of literally mass individual choice.

Humanity’s history of strategic practice stretches back approximately 4,500 years. This history attests that strategy is difficult and that many, probably most, strategists failed at their task, not performing

well enough to win the war in question. However, for every unsuccessful strategist there is likely to be a successful one, someone who *did* perform well enough to prevail in each conflict. Failure is not generic to strategy, but it is endemic, owing to the adversarial nature of strategy relating two mutually foreign considerations one to the other. Today, whatever the West's recent failures have been, they have yet to be ruinously catastrophic for itself. A three trillion-dollar war such as Iraq that mostly failed to improve—and perhaps worsened—the regional geopolitical situation is by all standards a disaster, principally for the territory where it played out. Because of strategic disaster, many polities have entirely vanished from history, and only occasionally does one return after true catastrophe in war. The Western bloc, led by the United States, remains the most powerful collection of strategic actors on the planet, whose failures and disasters of the past two decades have not yet toppled it from this position. Instead, these missteps have narrowed the lead and allowed rivals to challenge it, generating anxiety over whether the United States is now capable of winning a great power war.[47]

Conflicted military and strategic thinking veers from comprehensiveness for education to reductionism for guiding practice. Both represent continuity, as opposed to the incessant change inherent in actual practice. Yet it is likely that comprehensiveness or reductionism—continuity or change—alone is insufficient. Pure focus on continuity results in over-many strategic surprises, shocks, and failures in practice, while wholesale emphasis on change produces poorly thought-out, unsystematic concepts and practices for every new challenge that appears. Strategy in practice requires both. First, comprehensive theory both creates a foundation for the strategist to focus on what is important in a particular situation and enables the strategist to be ready to shift focus from dimension to dimension as circumstances demand. Second, the reductive impulse enables the strategist to focus on what he or she believes to be truly important in their unique context. The product of such a mixture would be what Wayne Hughes, in discussing the command capacities of US Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, called "the mental equivalent of peripheral vision."[48] This is an awareness of the whole dynamic system of war that is at least sufficient to enable the strategist to identify what is truly salient for the circumstances at hand.

What to Expect from Strategists Today

Strategy, albeit difficult, *can* be successfully practiced. Before considering what should be expected of today's strategists, how does one define "strategist"? The distance created in modern times between the battlefield and political decision makers has been partially filled by a defense-related bureaucracy, which expands the set of persons who may arguably be considered strategists, even classically understood, while possibly also impelling the previous few decades' expansion in meaning of "strategy" and "strategist" while threatening to bifurcate strategy into separate concepts and processes, which may not necessarily interconnect effectively.[49]

Strategy is relational, instrumental, and adversarial, dealing with the political utility of armed force and violence between enemies. The simplest definition of strategist would therefore conclude that a strategist is someone who is positioned to consider that relational task or has actual responsibility for important segments of that task. Those who determine the political aims for force practice one aspect of strategy, while those who command the armed forces required to fulfill those political ends practice on the other side of Gray's strategy bridge. The time when one person or a small set of persons of similar background is responsible for the full expanse of the strategy bridge is well past. The core of practicing strategy is now the conduct of civil-military relations to ensure that one's own strategy is being effectively made and executed, while simultaneously preventing the enemy from sending it awry.

Strategists must understand armed force. They must appreciate its utility its limitations, and what it means to employ force. Depending on its character as land power, sea power, air power, space power, cyber power, and others, force may deny, take, or exercise control of the operational pattern of the war. It may change a regime, but it will not itself cause a change of political culture although it may enable circumstances allowing a gradual cultural shift. The use of armed force immediately indicates political will and goals, which must be understood. Moreover, possible interactive relationships between force and nonmilitary political instruments must be, but frequently are not, recognized and appreciated. As Lawrence Freedman rightly argues, "The view that strategy is bound up with the role of force in international life must be qualified, because if force is but one form of power then strategy must address the relationship between this form

and others."[50] Misreading these relationships results in mistaken policy, strategy, and statecraft, as occurred over Crimea in 2014.[51]

Strategists must also understand the adversarial interactivity inherent in the practice of strategy. Force is employed because there is a political competitor whose policies and actions will not change unless one imposes his own will upon that actor, who will inevitably resist and retaliate. The practice of strategy, that is the use of force, may cause escalation in war as each side seeks to out do the other. The enemy, an independent actor in war, forces strategists to adapt to an ever-evolving strategic situation, thereby also setting the bar for strategic competence. Colin Gray's good enough strategy is one that defeats the enemy. Strategies better than good enough merely defeat the enemy more efficiently. Tactical results of combat are an important indicator of how well one's strategy is working, but, because war is also relational, there will be cases where one's first defeat may be one's last, if political capitulation precedes military or strategic adaptation.

Strategists must understand a final aspect of strategy: relating military force to political consequences is an uncertain, nonlinear process of currency conversion whose conversion rate the strategist generally does not know. Wherever they personally may be on the strategy bridge, strategists must be prepared to engage with considerations on the other side of that bridge, as Eliot Cohen has stridently argued:

> Political leaders must immerse themselves in the conduct of their wars no less than in their great projects of domestic legislation; . . . they must master their military briefs as thoroughly as they do their civilian ones; . . . they must demand and expect from their military subordinates a candor as bruising as it is necessary; . . . both groups must expect a running conversation in which, although civilian opinion will not usually dictate, it must dominate; and . . . that conversation will cover not only ends and policies, but ways and means.[52]

Their counterparts, the generals, must similarly escape the apolitical shell of operational art to engage with the political aspects of the war. Tommy Franks' dichotomy of day *of* and day *after* has been shown not to hold in practice, nor can it.[53]

Any strategist with an understanding of these three key elements of strategy—force, adversarial interaction, and currency conversion—will be prepared to approach seriously the practice of strategy. Many

more influences, considerations, and variables remain—any strategist has an ethical code or religious or cultural inclinations; they will be limited by the realities of logistics and military administration; the tactics must be sufficient for the strategy to succeed, and so on. But many of these are relatively ancillary to the core nature of strategy, many will have their own professional experts, and many will simply be uncontrollable by any human agency.

Conclusion

Can strategy be mastered? Arguably yes, according to classical, relatively narrow, definitions. Classical strategy is practicable. It is a concept based upon actual experience of war, unlike the many academic definitions that sprang forth from the atomic mushroom. Strategy is and remains highly multi-dimensional, as codified by Colin Gray. If strategists understand the basic natures of war and strategy and the galaxy of dimensions that may influence strategy, they will have a firm foundation for thinking about strategy and for acting strategically.

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