



Military Strategy and the Three Levels of Warfare



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Introduction

During its roughly two-and-a-half centuries of existence, the United States (US) has experienced many “decision points” that have shaped and defined its strategy in addition to strategic doctrine. Its collective experiences have also played a role in the manner in which strategy has been defined from an American perspective and subsequently how its military forces and capabilities have been applied in both times of war and peace, including in both offensive and defensive realms. This has meant the re-organization of force structure, force posture, and force composition and application even if the idea of victory is atavistically applied. However, despite its many years of experience, the US and its military branches have not always extracted lessons from either military success or failure. In some cases, successful outcomes of military operations and campaigns have glossed over the tactical and operational failures within them and that resulted in entire campaigns being brought to a screeching halt. Despite the outcomes of US military campaigns over the past years, decades, and indeed centuries, strategy has been omnipresent and remains an essential part of the warfighting and war making experience, and is an essential component of achieving, maintaining, and strengthening national and international security.

Conceptualizing Strategy

Two works employed here in addressing the evolution of US strategy are Richard K. Betts’ “Is Strategy and Illusion” and Williamson Murray, Alvin Bernstein, and MacGregor Knox’s *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and Wars*. Collectively, these works illustrate the complexity of strategy in conceptual terms and the perplexing nature of strategy as and in practice. They are instrumental for informing about strategy in manifold political and military contexts. Betts asserts that strategy, despite being an “essential ingredient for making war,” is not always possible and cannot guarantee a desired outcome in times of war. “[S]trategy,” writes Betts, “is an illusion because what happens in the gap between policy objectives and war outcomes is too complex and unpredictable to be manipulated to a specific end.”

Strategy can be defined as the performance of both conceptual and practical considerations for reaching a desired outcome in war, involving the organization, movement, and tactical, operational, and strategic use or commitment of forces against a given enemy. It is decisive even if its outcomes are not fully realized. In short, it is a plan in which political and military objectives work together to achieve victory on and beyond the battlefield theater of operations. An essential characteristic of this definition is means and ends while ensuring that the proper means are employed in ways commensurate with meeting the end(s). Two main pillars support the definition of strategy, those of: *planning/preparations* and *conduct*. Additionally, influence the two is a host of variables that can either be seen as facilitating or hindering conditions. However, given that specific events and their unfolding cannot always be foreseen or predicted, the idea of a range of conditions incorporates an element of risk into strategy and strategy making. This definition of strategy is accompanied by an engagement in the three main levels of warfare on which strategy is based; they include: *tactical, operational, and strategic*.

The Tactical Level

The tactical level of warfare is the one on which individual soldiers through to the divisional level engage enemy forces on the battlefield. This level of warfare is concerned with the short-term dimension of warfare and warfighting and involves a period ranging from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. This level is essential to strategy because it represents the practical orchestration of planning and a fundamental link in the strategy chain. It is here that the capabilities of a military actor should align with the merits of a larger strategic vision. However, operational and strategic success is possible in spite of tactical failure. The British Dardanelles campaign from April 1915 to January 1916 illustrates this dimension of warfare in that, “a peripheral amphibious strategy exceeded Allied tactical and operational capabilities.” Mistakes made at the tactical level can be decisively influential and destructive for an overall strategy thus resulting in ramifications that extend well beyond the realm of military force. Mistakes made at the tactical level can easily be forgotten or obscured by profound operational and strategic victories that become popularized or sensationalized.

The Operational Level

The operational level of warfare can be elusive; the outcome of the operational dimension of warfare is based on the various tactical results contained within it. The operational level extends beyond the divisional level and concerns such units as the corps, whole armies, and entire army groups (in the context of land warfare). The timeframe concerned with the operational level also departs from the scale of days and becomes a matter of military movement and engagement over weeks and months. Illustrating the idea that “strategy is an illusion,” the operational level can also yield a surfeit of unintended outcomes. Such was the case with Germany’s Schlieffen Plan employed in 1914 to defeat France in Western Europe while Russia was mobilizing for war in Eastern Europe. While this plan aimed at swift and “decisive victory at the operational level” in Western Europe, its unintended consequences at the strategic level came in the form of Britain entering the war against Germany. This radically changed the metric of tactical and operational calculation, and fundamentally altered the nature in which Germany managed and allocated its materials and personnel during the war. It also opened entirely new dimensions of fighting and theaters of operations, including dramatic naval battles such as the one that occurred off the coast of Jutland in 1916. Britain’s entry into the war and the full weight of the Royal Navy meant that no matter the tactical victories enjoyed by the German navy, the strategic balance remained firmly in Britain’s favor.

The Strategic Level

The strategic level of warfare, what is sometimes referred to as “military strategy,” regards the orchestration of war at the highest level of planning/preparation and execution. It involves as much the political as it does the military dimension. The strategic level of planning considers the endgame of a given conflict or war. When speaking about this level of warfare, one is ultimately concerned with the how a war will be won, and what the specific steps are that will lead to victory. In line with the definition of strategy

mentioned previously, the strategic level of planning is instrumental in dictating strategy because it involves political decision-making, the allocation of national resources (both in terms of material and personnel), commitment of those materials and personnel and in what capacity or geographical locale.

Political and strategic level decision-making has also proved highly illusory throughout history with success often resting on hope or luck. Such was the case on the eve of the Allied cross-Channel invasion of France along the Normandy coast on June 6, 1944. The decision to invade at that particular geographical point was made at the strategic level, but it was infused with uncertainty and risk that in due course paid-off for the Western Allies. Further examples of strategic decision-making leading to short-term success but bearing immense uncertainty and risk include Hitler's June 22, 1941 crusade across the Soviet Union that resulted in a titanic four-year struggle. In spite of the looming specter of Napoleonic defeat in 1812, Nazi Germany's limit material and human resources were committed irrationally to a campaign of unprecedented scale expected to result in the collapse of the Soviet edifice in just a few short months of fighting. In a similar vein, Imperial Japan's December 7/8, 1941 surprise attack against the American fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor that brought the full weight of the US's mighty industrial capacity against the island nation. While tactical and operational errors can be fixed, often times the effects of strategic error are either long lasting or deliver permanent outcomes.

Distilling Strategy

The aforementioned levels are critical for building a definition of strategy that can be distilled and understood as a composition of different ideas and conditions. In an attempt to cultivate a desired result, in strategy there is no sure outcome; what might appear to be victory at a strategic level can be defeat in the long run. A string of victories, moreover, no matter how bedazzling and pristinely executed, can ultimately be meaningless without a sound grand strategy in place. Such was the case with Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial Germany in the First World War. It is important to note that these three levels can overlap and become blurred. Breakdown in any of the three levels can have disastrous consequences on the overall strategy of a given state. Disaster can also result if any of the three levels are orchestrated without maintaining commitment to the intended or desired outcome, and ensuring that planning and force commitment is commensurate with the final and ultimate objectives in mind. In this, it is also important that political and military considerations are synchronic, serving one another and remaining connected so that a plan can lead to a projected destination. "Strategy fails," writes Betts, "when some link in the planned chain of cause and effect from low-level tactics to high-level political outcomes is broken, when military objectives come to be pursued for their own sake without reference to their political effect, or when policy initiatives depend on military options that are infeasible."

Strategy can also be seen as a negotiation or balancing act between material and moral choices bearing both immediate and long term effects. While error at any of the three levels of warfare could have immediately negative consequences for a given strategy, its impacts may not be felt immediately. In the same vein, success at any single level may result in fortune at a point much further into the future. If "strategy is an illusion," a constructive definition of strategy should also refer to the final outcomes of a given strategy as illusory as well. That is, the full effects and implications of what might be perceived of as "victory" at a given moment might reveal itself in other (not-so-victorious) results at a later date. This idea can be presented in the case of the US its

movement from superpower during the Cold War to hyper-power in the post-Cold War period – a time when the US enjoyed unparalleled and unchallenged global supremacy.

The “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOt) (2001-ongoing)

September 1, 2001 (9/11), just a decade after the cessation of the Cold war’s *longue durée*, was a watershed moment in American history and represented a major turning point in US national security. American strategy in the “Global War on Terror” (GWOt) was based on political and military considerations for long-term engagement of an enemy dedicated to the destruction of both the US as well as the way of life of free and liberal democratic states. A key feature of the GWOt strategy was focusing on a tactic or preferred mode of violence rather than a specific enemy. As such, the GWOt strategy was based on enemy characterization or the nature of the enemy in an attempt to avoid direct provocation of the Islamic religion by referring to the inherent problems of the Islamic world. The strategy was initially conceived of as a narrow or confined war on the basis of pursuing those responsible for the egregious events of 9/11. However, this strategy quickly broadened, calling on allies of the US to confront international terrorism and totalitarian ideologies that threatened democracy and freedom. The nature of the enemy also called into question the means at the US’s disposal to combat asymmetric threats that included a full range of violent non-state actors (VNSAs), including al-Qaeda and its’ network of affiliate groups.

The eradication of terrorism became the overarching or strategic objective but much debate centered on the viability of such an aim. First, it failed to take into consideration the potential for terrorist groups to change their tactics or engage in other violent activities that had the potential to destabilize national, regional, and global security architectures. Second, the GWOt strategy had to adjust to a US population that eventually grew weary of war loss (the human costs of war), the length of military campaigns abroad, and the costs involved. Third, the strategy eventually came to terms with openly referring to the threat of radical Islamic and Islamic extremism. The GWOt program also vividly highlights the “white space” of conflict and war, the space in which unintended consequences or unknowns impact the strategic aim. At the strategic level, the GWOt was challenging in terms of allocating resources and determining a feasible timeframe for achieving victory. Moreover, the evolution of the GWOt strategy was challenged by attempts to understand and calculate amid entirely new problems that the US would face after 9/11 at home and abroad, including the use of new technologies including “unmanned” aerial vehicles (UAVs). The asymmetric and amorphous character of the enemy, in conjunction with those factors previously mentioned, coalesced to breed an environment in which formulating strategic solutions was deeply problematic. The result is illustrative of what Murray and Grimsley treat as a substantial disconnect between tactical and operational victory and strategic failure. The strategy was also required to account for what was known and not known about the strategy and intentions of the *enemy*, and engage in psychological warfare, including a propaganda war at home in an attempt to mitigate homegrown terrorism and the possibly radicalization as well as recruitment of disenfranchised citizens.

“Operation Enduring Freedom” – War in Afghanistan (2001-ongoing)

US and coalition operations in Afghanistan provides a lesson for the evolution of strategy first and foremost as one about going to war with a clear-cut strategy and view to a desired outcome. Before, during, and after the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, US strategy and strategic thinkers had to come to terms with enemies, whose strategic thinking was steeped in religious philosophy and extremist ideology. America’s strategy in Afghanistan was connected to the larger, if even idealistic objectives of eradicating terrorism, and therefore addressed this through military efforts to deny al-Qaeda and the Taliban their base(s) in Afghanistan. The strategy was also predicated on the strengthening of local governments and development of fragile states overseas. The initial goals were outlined the strengthening of Afghanistan’s security forces, building strong governance in the country, and transforming the economy. The strategy sought a strong, free, and democratic state that would deny terrorists a safe haven. This strategy, in accordance with Betts’ assessment of strategy, was deeply deceptive because it failed to take into account the determination of the enemy it sought to destroy. The Afghanistan strategy adjusted to, among others: (a) the dramatic increase in extremist operatives fighting in the country, (b) spectacular rise in suicide attacks, (c) the persistent use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and (d) the ferocity that the Taliban among others displayed in fighting American and coalition forces. Afghanistan provides a lesson that tactical and operational victories are not always determinants of strategic victory. Although the ruling Taliban were driven from power in 2001, Afghanistan has remained a violent theater of operations ever since and arguably stands no closer to being a strong, stable, free, and democratic state than it was nearly two decades ago.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom” – War in Iraq (2003-2011)

The US’s Iraq strategy was based on the US’s interest in eliminating Saddam Hussein’s supposed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and a potential ally and supplier of terrorists. The US’s string of tactical victories resulted in operational victory in Iraq shortly after the invasion. However, when it comes to fitting those victories into the overall strategic objectives and success of the GWoT, one finds much room for arguing that the US strategy not only evolved but was also forced to evolve in a way that military planners did not anticipate. The most considerable development in the US’s Iraq strategy was adjusting to a protracted counterinsurgency campaign far from home. Iraq, therefore, stands in contrast to the strategic victory and assumptions made by the US in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War – that the US would not be engaging in long or drawn out counterinsurgency operations or campaigns in distant regions akin to the insurgency the Italian forces occupying Albania faced during the 1920. This as an example supported by Betts contention that failure can grow out of tactical and operational considerations departing from political objectives and strategy. Escalating encounters with sectarian forces, foreign fighters, and local insurgents loyal to the former regime in Iraq compelled the US to greatly refine its counterinsurgency strategy.

The Paradox of US Strategy

The changing nature of warfare in Iraq led to the need to force the evolution of US strategy foremost by refining and making clear its strategic and political priorities in Iraq and the broader Middle East. Underscoring the potential danger in the “gap between policy objectives and war outcomes,” Betts’ reasoning about the complexity of war outcomes is crisply depicted by the situation that unfolded in Iraq with means failing to align with strategic aims as well as a lack of commitment to post-conflict reconstruction and development programs that eventually facilitated the rise of newer and more violent as well as dangerous VNSAs like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that presented manifold challenges for the US and its European allies in the form of terrorist attacks against civilians at home and the recruitment of foreign fighters by the thousands. On the tactical and operational levels, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq carry much weight in terms of success, but also demonstrate continuity in the American way of war, as Gray describes. They serve as examples of planning, preparation, orchestration as much as they do failure to manage, allocate, and execute operations while maintaining focus on an ultimate strategic outcome in the short and long terms.

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