
Chapter 2

Strategy: Ends and Means

“You [military professionals] must know something about strategy and tactics and logistics, but also economics and politics and diplomacy and history. You must know everything you can about military power, and you must also understand the limits of military power.

You must understand that few of the problems of our time have . . . been solved by military power alone.”¹

—John F. Kennedy

Strategy, broadly defined, is the process of interrelating ends and means. When we apply this process to a particular set of ends and means, the product—that is, the strategy—is a specific way of using specified *means* to achieve distinct *ends*. Strategy is thus both a process and a product. Any discussion of ends and means in war must begin with two basic points. First, as we have observed, war is an expression of politics. The ends or goals of any party waging war—even though those goals may be social, economic, religious, or ideological in nature—are by definition political goals. Second, wars are fought by political entities that have unique characteristics and often very dissimilar goals and resources. In order to understand any conflict, we must appreciate the ways in which the means and ends of the participants may vary.

NATIONAL STRATEGY

Our primary interest is in *military strategy*, the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force.² However, in order to place military strategy in its proper context, it is necessary to understand national strategy. Military strategy is subordinate to *national strategy*, which is the art and science of developing and using political, economic, military, and informational powers, together with armed force, during peace and war, to secure the objectives of policy.³ Of necessity, we must begin with national strategy and describe

how ends and means must be related at the very highest levels before we can proceed to determine military objectives and strategies.

At the highest levels, ends are expressed as national interests. Interests are a nation's wants, needs, and concerns. Specifically, national interests normally involve four main areas: survival and security, political and territorial integrity, economic stability and well-being, and stability. Conflict can arise as a result of a threat (or perceived threat) to any one of these four areas. Interests are central to a discussion of strategy because interests signal a nation's desires and intentions to other nations. As discussed earlier, nation and state are not synonymous.

Certain interests that a nation sees as essential are referred to as *vital* interests. Vital interests are distinguished from other interests by the fact that nations are usually unwilling to compromise on them and are often prepared to resort to conflict in support of them.⁴ Thus, when examining a strategic situation, a strategist must identify not only what interests are at stake but also which interests one or more of the participants view as vital.

National interests are often vague or consist of highly generalized abstractions. While national interests underpin national strategy, the specifics of the strategy must focus on more concrete ends. The specific goals and aims of national strategy are often referred to as objectives. Objectives are the ends a nation

must achieve to promote, protect, or attain its interests. Objectives tend to be more tangible than interests because they normally describe specific activities or conditions which must be attained. Objectives provide the departure point for national strategy in that they describe what a state is actually trying to do.⁵

In peacetime, national interests and objectives lead to specific policies and commitments. Policy is a pattern or patterns of actions designed to attain specific objectives. Policy can represent a broad course of action or intent. Policy is the ways (methods or patterns) by which strategy reaches its objectives. Commitments are expressions of a nation's intention to use its instruments of national power. Whereas policy might express general intent, a course of action, or restraints on action, commitments pledge nations to take specific actions at specific times and places. While conflict is always related to some national interest or objective, it is normally the outgrowth of a specific policy or commitment.

The articulation of national interests, objectives, policies, and commitments linked to use of the instruments of national power is sometimes referred to as "grand strategy," "grand national strategy," or, currently in the United States, "national security strategy." Grand strategies or national security strategies are implemented by subordinate strategies—political or diplomatic strategies, economic strategies, national military strategies, and so forth—for the use of each of the instruments of national power.

Knowledge of this peacetime strategic framework (figure 1) is required in order to comprehend the origins of any particular conflict situation. However, it is even more important to understand the links among national strategy, military strategy, and other supporting strategies during conflict. Without this fundamental understanding, it will be difficult to establish the appropriate relationship between policy and the military action intended to carry out the policy.

In war, the national strategy focuses the instruments of national power⁶ on achieving its political ends or objectives as

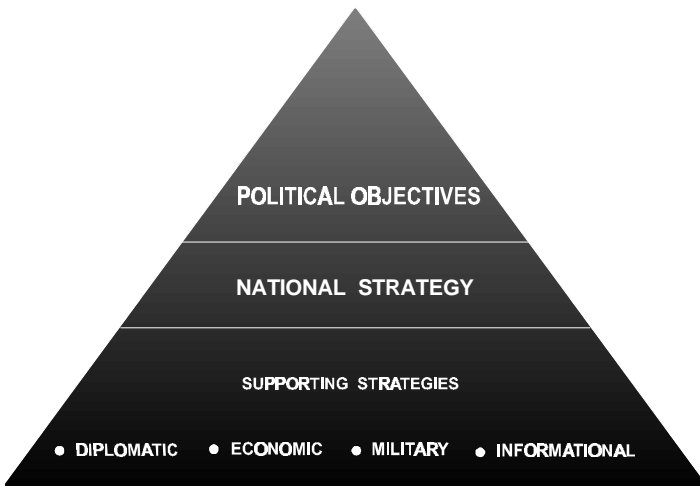


Figure 1. Relationship of political objectives to national strategy and supporting strategies.

articulated by the political leadership. Diplomatic, economic, military, and informational actions are linked through supporting strategies that contribute to attaining the objective of national strategy.

Military strategy, in turn, applies the military instrument of national power towards the accomplishment of the political objectives of the overall national strategy. The departure point for military strategy, therefore, is the objectives of the national strategy. From there, military strategy must identify a military goal or objective that will lead to accomplishment of the political objective. The military objective then provides the basis for the identification of specific ways to accomplish that objective. The selection of one of these courses of action and its further development results in a strategic concept that embodies the key components of the chosen military strategy. The military strategy is not developed in isolation from the other instruments of national power. The military objectives and strategy must also be compatible with the diplomatic, economic, and informational objectives and strategies.

Strategists must be able to analyze the overall strategic situation and appreciate the larger context in which military strategy is executed. In order to formulate and implement an effective military strategy, they must understand the ends and means of the larger national strategy as well as the strategies of the enemy, allies, and related neutral parties. In order to develop this understanding, we now look more deeply at ends and means within national strategy.

ENDS IN NATIONAL STRATEGY

Survival and Victory

There are only two fundamental national strategic goals in any conflict: survival and victory. Any specific aims that we may pursue will reflect one or both of these two goals. Survival is the minimum goal of opponents and a prerequisite for victory. Victory is normally associated with the achievement of the political aims of the war, but it also requires an end to the war and the reestablishment of peace. The strategist must strive to understand what survival and victory mean in the specific situation at hand to *each* of the struggle's participants.

Survival is the continued existence of the political entity that is at war. However, survival can mean different things to different political entities. Survival often equates to the continuance of a way of life or the well-being of the population. Threats to this type of survival are usually met with fierce resistance. Sometimes the survival of a particular individual or group will take priority over the interests of the whole. In such a case, strategies that seek to compel submission by threatening the interests of the nation or of its people may have little direct impact. Finally, some political groups or ideological movements are willing to fight on until they are destroyed. Their hopes of survival lie in leaving behind a heroic legend to

influence future generations or in making some other kind of lasting statement to humanity or God. For these groups, even the threat of annihilation may have little impact on their actions.

Victory can be as hard to define as survival. Victory normally means the accomplishment of the specific political aims for which the group went to war. In practice, however, victory may mean merely ending the war on terms less unfavorable to oneself than to the enemy. If the costs of continuing a military struggle come to exceed the value of the goal, meaningful victory is unattainable. Given the nature of war, however, such cost-benefit analysis is more easily described than accomplished. A major problem with victory as a goal is that victory is an emotion-laden word. The accomplishment of limited military and political aims that do not satisfy the emotions or seem to justify the costs of the war may not *feel* like victory. Because we cannot precisely measure the value of most wars aims or accurately judge the cost of their attainment, it is often difficult to perceive the point at which the cost of fighting exceeds the value of victory.

The main point in this discussion of survival and victory is that the problem of identifying what survival and victory mean to various participants in war can be extremely difficult. Our analysis must involve a multitude of considerations that are different in every conflict.

Political Objectives

Political entities go to war for a variety of reasons, ranging from the simple, such as seizing or protecting a valuable piece of territory, to the abstract such as “defending national honor” or “maintaining the balance of power.” Despite their diversity, political objectives in war can be labeled as either *limited* or *unlimited*. The distinction is fundamental. An unlimited political objective amounts to the elimination of the opponent as a political entity. A limited political objective, on the other hand, is one in which the enemy leadership can survive and remain in power. See figure 2.

When a political entity seeks an unlimited political objective, its enemy’s leadership is to be removed (perhaps merely deposed, perhaps exiled, imprisoned, or executed), while the

LIMITED

POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

OPPOSING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP SURVIVES

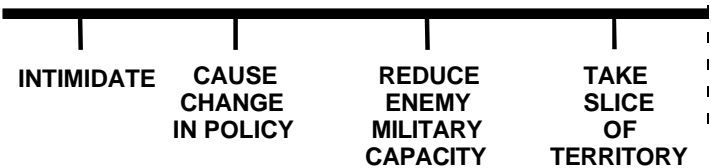


Figure 2. Limited and unlimited political objectives.

enemy's former assets (territory, population, economic resources) may be absorbed, redistributed, or eradicated. Absorption can mean many things. With the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia began an effort to systematically reabsorb each of the newly established states with the intent to reestablish a new Yugoslavia under Serbian control. On the other hand, the United States' invasion of Panama successfully disposed of the current regime but upon reconstitution left the Panamanian people in control of their government. Both cases provide examples of unlimited political objectives. The first demonstrates the desire to remove the current leadership and absorb territory, population, and resources. The second demonstrates the desire to remove the current leadership and redistribute the sources of power.

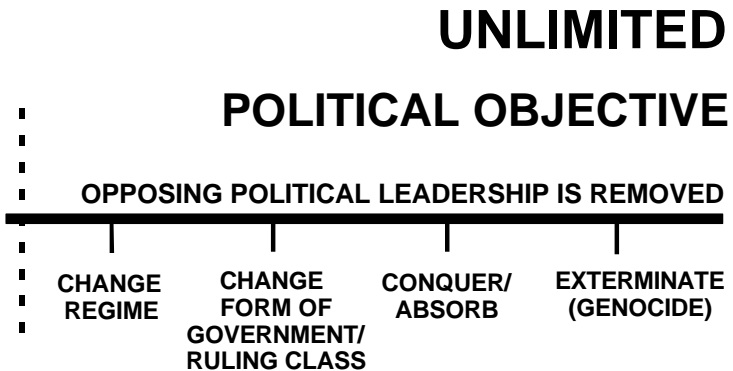


Figure 2. Limited and unlimited political objectives—Continued.

An unlimited political objective, then, may embrace anything from merely deposing a particular leader to physically exterminating an entire people or culture. Ideological revolutionaries, would-be world conquerors, and both sides in most true civil wars⁷ tend to seek unlimited political objectives. Occasionally, defensive alliances seeking to eliminate a habitual aggressor will also pursue an unlimited political objective.

Conversely, a limited political objective includes anything short of eliminating the political opponent. It is envisioned that the enemy leadership will remain in control after the conclusion of hostilities, although some aspects of its power (influence, territory, resources, or internal control) will be reduced or curtailed. Limited political objectives are characteristic of states seeking better positions in the international balance of power, clans vying for political position within a larger society, mafias or street gangs battling for “turf,” and reformist political movements.

MEANS IN NATIONAL STRATEGY

In the purest sense, the means in war is combat—physically attacking the enemy or defending against his attacks upon us. However, war is not limited to purely military means. In fact, military means are only one element used to implement a national strategy. The relative importance placed on the military

element of the national strategy varies greatly depending on the nature and the particular circumstances of the struggle. *All* of the instruments of power—diplomatic, economic, military, and informational—must be brought to bear and exploited to the fullest in war.

Diplomacy is the art of employing communications and establishing relationships in the global environment. Ideas, prestige, and commitment are the currencies of the field. The diplomatic instrument uses a nation's international position combined with diplomacy to achieve national objectives. Diplomatic tools may include negotiations, political recognition, treaties, and alliances. While the diplomatic instrument is normally emphasized before hostilities actually begin, it remains a key element of the national strategy in any conflict situation. In certain situations (especially military operations other than war), the diplomatic instrument continues to be the main effort, even after the commitment of military forces.

The economic instrument uses the application of material resources to achieve national objectives. Nations employ economic means to protect their own industries and markets, to improve the quality of life of their people, to stabilize the economy and government of friends and allies, and to deter destabilizing and hostile actions by other nations. Specific economic means include regulation of trade practices, loans and loan guarantees, monetary and investment policies, foreign aid, subsidies, and technology transfers. As with the diplomatic instrument, the economic instrument generally has primacy over the

military instrument during peace and is often used before military force during a crisis; changes in trade or monetary policy, economic sanctions, or some type of embargo are frequently the first steps taken in an effort to influence an adversary's behavior. However, economic considerations continue to be at the forefront of any conflict, and the use of economic measures to support the friendly war effort and to undermine the enemy's ability to resist continue throughout the course of a war.

The military instrument is the use of force or the threat to use force to achieve national objectives. Military power is the sum of a nation's weapons and equipment, trained manpower, organizations, doctrines, industrial base, and sustainment capacity. The military instrument can be employed in a variety of ways that are short of combat such as training allies, establishing presence, or acting as a show-of-force. However, the main use of military power is in conflict. While the military instrument is often the main effort during war, the nature and objectives of the particular conflict must be examined to determine the appropriate relationship between the use of military force and the application of the other instruments of national power.

The informational instrument (previously known as the psychological element or instrument) refers to the use of information and ideas to advance the interests and achieve the objectives of the nation. The objective in the use of the information instrument is to influence the perceptions and attitudes of allies, adversaries, and interested observers. Informational tools include the expression of intent and motive,

propaganda and press releases, information and personalities, food drops and medical care for refugees—in short, anything that affects the rational or emotional components of the human mind.

While less tangible than the others, the power of ideas and information is real and should not be underestimated. With the informational instrument, a nation can create a psychological impact causing responses ranging from awe or admiration to fear or loathing. This psychological impact can influence not only political and military leaders but the societies of the nations involved and world opinion. It can generate sympathy or antipathy inspired by the culture, ideas, values, and stated cause and objectives for which the parties are fighting.

The instruments of national power overlap and interconnect. Diplomats' power to sway other governments is greatly dependent on those governments' awareness of economic and military power and on their assessment of a nation's willingness to use that power. Economic power is bolstered by military power that can defend economic interests. Military power is often dependent on the diplomats' ability to gain basing rights and overflight permission from other countries or to enlist them in alliances and coalitions. Military power is directly dependent on the financial and technological strength of the nation's economy.

Military professionals naturally concentrate on the military means of strategy, but they should also be conscious of the other means that can be exploited and must be defended in the

larger political struggle. Most importantly, they must understand that *military force is an inappropriate tool for the solution of most political difficulties*. Force is at best a necessary means for clearing obstacles to more peaceful solutions. This appreciation of the role of force is a vital component of military professionalism, for military leaders have a responsibility to ensure that political leaders understand both the capabilities and the limitations of the military instrument.

In appraising the relationship between the military and non-military instruments of our national power in any given situation, we must be prepared to ask:

- How can our military capabilities complement or assist the other instruments of national power in achieving our political goals?
- How can diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of our national power aid our military efforts?
- How might our uses of force impede or imperil the achievement of our political goals?

We must seek to achieve our goals as economically as possible and with the right combination of means—diplomatic, economic, military, and informational. The way in which we combine these means in any given conflict will be greatly affected by the kind of strategy we pursue and by the strategic goals we seek.

ADAPTING ENDS TO MEANS, AND VICE VERSA

When discussing strategy in the abstract, we often treat means and ends as fixed. In practice, however, we frequently adjust both. The occurrences of war—successes and failures, lessons learned, new ideas, the entry of new combatants—may cause us to shift both our means and our goals. As our resources increase, as we gain confidence in our abilities, and as we find our enemy more vulnerable than we had imagined, we tend to expand our goals. On the other hand, when we find our resources or abilities inadequate, we cut our ambitions to match.

Given time, determination, and creativity, means can be developed to achieve many reasonable goals. Means are adjustable to some degree at every level. Moreover, our ends can affect the means available to us. War aims that evoke popular enthusiasm can give leaders access to resources otherwise unavailable. The emotions created by violence can help war to feed itself, as it energizes people to greater efforts and sacrifices than would be otherwise obtainable.

Another example of the different ways strategic means can be adjusted to match strategic ends can be found in the shifting American strategy of the Cold War. From the Truman administration on, the American government pursued the goal of

containing the Soviet Union. The means adopted, however, tended to shift from administration to administration.⁸

President Eisenhower's administration employed a strategy labeled "massive retaliation," which relied on the United States' nuclear superiority to deter Soviet expansion. The Soviet Union possessed huge conventional forces but could not match the American nuclear capability. Eisenhower wished to avoid building and maintaining large conventional forces, arguing that nuclear weapons provided "more bang for the buck." Rather than attempt to match the Soviet's conventional military power, massive retaliation threatened a nuclear response to any aggressive move by the Soviet Union.

Although containment remained the broad goal, President Kennedy's following administration had an entirely different approach to means. The strategic situation was changing to some extent because of the very success of the earlier massive retaliation strategy. The Soviets' nuclear arsenal was growing, and they had found a way around the American nuclear umbrella by sponsoring numerous "wars of national liberation." It became necessary to confront the Soviets with conventional and counterinsurgency forces as well as with nuclear arms. The Kennedy administration formulated the strategy of "flexible response," requiring forces capable of deterring and, if necessary, fighting the Soviets at all levels of conflict.

The resources and commitments necessary to carry out “flexible response” proved too costly for the Nation, and President Nixon’s administration again changed the means used to pursue the goal of containment. The strategy of détente was intended to convince the Soviets to restrain themselves based upon a combination of pressures and inducements. Among these pressures and inducements were the conduct of direct negotiations with the Soviet Union on issues such as arms control, the establishment of links to the People’s Republic of China, and a new set of policies toward United States’ allies which has been called “the Nixon doctrine.” The Nixon doctrine emphasized establishment of a series of bilateral and multilateral alliances to contain Soviet expansion. The United States would provide economic and military support to its allies, many of whom bordered on the Soviet Union or one of its clients. Military aid consisted primarily of air and naval support along with the implicit protection offered by the United States’ nuclear capabilities. As a result of the United States’ experience in Vietnam, however, the commitment of United States’ ground units would occur only in cases of long-standing treaty obligations such as in Western Europe or Korea.

ENDS IN MILITARY STRATEGY

Just as a national strategy will have a number of political objectives, a particular military strategy will have a number of specific military objectives. However, there are only two fundamental ends behind the use of military force. The first is to

physically overpower the enemy's military capacity, leaving him unable to resist our demands. The other is to inflict such high costs on the enemy that he is willing to negotiate an end to hostilities on the terms we desire. The first of these alternatives represents what we call a strategy of *annihilation*.⁹ In an annihilation strategy, our military objective is unlimited: we seek to eliminate the enemy's ability to resist, thus leaving him helpless to oppose the imposition of our will. The second alternative is a strategy of *erosion*.¹⁰ Here, our military objective is limited: we seek only to raise the enemy's costs so high that he will find ending the war on our terms more attractive than continuing to fight.

The goal of a strategy of annihilation is to deprive the enemy of the ability to resist, to make him militarily helpless. Annihilation does not require the complete physical destruction of the enemy's military forces. Rather, it requires that the forces be so demoralized and disorganized that they become unable to effectively interfere with the achievement of our political goals. What is being annihilated—literally “made into nothing”—is the enemy's physical means to oppose us.

Normally, a strategy of annihilation is viable only when one of the participants possesses some very great superiority over the other in terms of brute strength, military skill, leadership, technological capabilities, or morale. Without such an advantage, annihilation strategies often fail, resulting in protracted conflicts and requiring such a commitment of resources that one or all the parties find themselves exhausted before the enemy can be eliminated. The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the

Bosnian conflict from 1992 to 1995 are representative examples of what happens when states pursue annihilation strategies without the necessary advantages. Sometimes the necessary superiority can be obtained through surprise, although this is hard to achieve and dangerous to rely on. If the opponent has any strategic depth, he may recover from his surprise before victory is assured.

The objective of the second approach—a strategy of erosion—is to convince the enemy that settling the political dispute will be easier and the outcome more attractive than continued conflict. To put it another way, erosion strategies seek to present the enemy with the probability of an outcome worse *in his eyes* than peace on the adversary's terms. This is accomplished through eroding or wearing down the enemy's will to fight, rather than destroying his ability to resist.

Erosion strategies are used to pursue a limited political objective when one combatant is either unable or unwilling to destroy the opponent's war-making capability. In many cases, an erosion strategy is required simply because the enemy is too powerful or difficult to annihilate. In other cases, this approach is used because one party does not want or need to destroy the other's military capacity. Perhaps the goal requires such a modest concession from the enemy that it is reasonable to believe he will acquiesce after modest resistance. In another example, there may be a continuing need to keep the opponent's

military forces in existence as a buffer or as a factor in the balance of power.

Relationship Between Political and Military Objectives

Political objectives and military objectives are very different things. Political objectives describe, in a sense, where we want to go. Military objectives describe what we have to accomplish militarily in order to get there.

If the political objective is unlimited, the military strategy must be unlimited. Conversely, a limited political objective may call for a military strategy with limited objectives—that is, an erosion strategy. In Afghanistan, the Mujahidin and their Western backers sought a limited political objective: to get the Soviet Union to withdraw from the struggle. Accordingly, they pursued an erosion strategy, seeking to make the Afghan adventure too costly for the Soviet government to sustain.

Though our political objective is limited, it does not necessarily follow that our military strategy must also be limited (figure 3). The Gulf War provides an example of an unlimited military strategy applied successfully in pursuit of a limited political objective. The Coalition had a limited political objective: restore Kuwait's independence. In order to attain this objective, however, it was necessary to destroy all capability of the Iraqi forces to resist and forcibly eject them from Kuwait. Thus, the Coalition employed a strategy of annihilation, pursuing the total defeat of Iraq's military capacity within the Kuwait theater of operations.

Strategies of annihilation are conceptually simple. The focus of operational efforts is the enemy’s armed forces and the object is to render them powerless. Those forces may be annihilated through battle or through destruction of the social or industrial infrastructure that supports them. The main effort is the armed forces. The diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments of national power support the military effort. Victory is easily measured: when one side’s fighting forces are no longer able to present organized resistance, the other side has won.

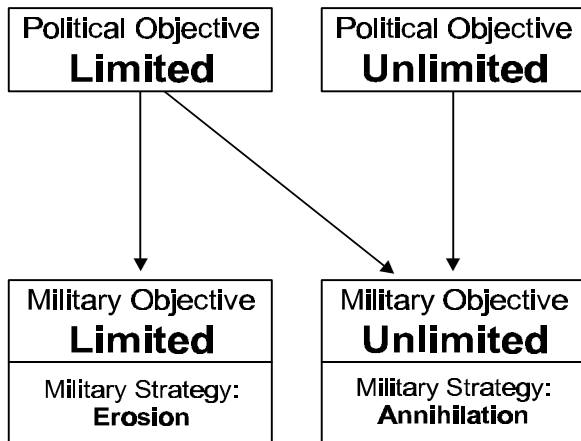


Figure 3. Relationship between political and military objectives.

By comparison, erosion strategies involve many more variables. In erosion strategies, there is a much wider choice in the designation of a main effort among the instruments of national power, the relationship of military force to the other instruments of power, and the definition of victory. Attacks may be focused on the enemy's armed forces, as in an annihilation strategy, or some other valuable resource such as territory, commerce, or financial assets may be seized, threatened, or neutralized. Military forces are normally the main effort in the seizing and holding of territory. Successful embargoes and the freezing of financial assets, on the other hand, often depend primarily on diplomatic and economic power. It may also be possible to undermine an enemy's domestic or international political position through the use of informational or psychological operations.

Victory in a strategy of erosion can be more flexibly defined or more ambiguous than is the case with an annihilation strategy. The enemy's submission to our demands may be explicit or implicit, embodied in a formal treaty or in behind-the-scenes agreements. Convinced that we have made our point, we may simply "declare victory and go home." A compromise may allow both sides to claim success. Victories in erosion strategies thus tend to be undramatic, but they can have tremendous political consequences. The West's success in its containment of the Communist bloc, essentially a very long-term erosion strategy, offers a powerful example.

Distinguishing Between Erosion and Annihilation Strategies

Although annihilation and erosion are conceptually quite different, in practice it is often hard to distinguish between them. There are several reasons for this ambiguity. First, annihilation and erosion become practically indistinguishable when one side or both pursue annihilation, but neither has an overwhelming military superiority. In such a case, unlimited political and military objectives can be obtained only through “slugging it out.” This guarantees roughly comparable losses on both sides and can lead to negotiated settlements, even though one or both sides originally sought unlimited objectives.

Second, these two strategies can overlap, or one can lead to the other. Sometimes it is the *threat* of annihilation that forces the enemy to make a deal. In that case, the difference between an erosion strategy and one of annihilation is that the enemy is offered an option of settling the issue before he is made helpless. Conversely, if an enemy cannot be worn down through an erosion strategy into accepting a settlement, it may be necessary to switch to a strategy of annihilation.

Third, a strategy that has not yet fully taken shape may be ambiguous. In some cases, this ambiguity reflects calculation: either the strategy is decided but is being disguised, or the strategist has goals that can be fulfilled via either approach and is waiting to see how his opportunities develop. In other cases, ambiguity reflects poor strategy making: the strategy maker does not know what he wants to achieve or how to achieve it.

Ultimately, however, a successful strategy must turn out to be one or the other. At war's end, a strategy that has neither eliminated the enemy's ability to resist nor worn down his will to continue the struggle is a strategy that has failed.

The distinction between strategies of annihilation and erosion is fundamental. The successful strategist must be able to distinguish which strategy is being pursued or should be pursued in a given situation. The ability to determine which strategy is appropriate in turn depends upon the strategist's understanding of the ends of national strategy and the means employed to achieve those ends. Without this foundation, it is impossible to arrive at the specifics of a particular military strategy: the determination of military objectives, the identification of the appropriate means to achieve those objectives, and the development of the strategic concept.