
Chapter 3

Strategic Opposites

“Grand strategy must always remember that peace follows war.”¹

—B. H. Liddell Hart

It is crucial to distinguish between annihilation and erosion strategies and to understand who is pursuing which goal and why. There are, however, a great many other dimensions to any strategic situation. The dynamics of a struggle are affected not only by the differing political and military goals of the antagonists but by similarities and differences in their character, the kinds of forces they employ, the techniques they use, and the ways they see—and are seen by—the world. In making a strategic assessment, such factors are more important than a simple numerical comparison of units and equipment.

In this chapter, we will examine several sets of strategic opposites that are helpful in understanding the nature of the strategic problem. All of these pairs of opposites do not necessarily apply to every strategic situation, nor do these approaches necessarily influence each other. For example, whether a strategy is symmetrical or asymmetrical has little bearing on whether it is annihilative or erosive. Nonetheless, a grasp of these concepts will help us to formulate the questions we must ask as we try to understand the specific problem before us.

DEFENSIVE AND OFFENSIVE STRATEGIES

The strategic attacker is the antagonist seeking to add to his relative power. It usually is the side that initiates a war, although defenders sometimes launch preemptive attacks. An attacker may be seeking to completely overthrow the balance of

power or may simply want an upward adjustment in his relative position. This distinction affects the kinds of strategies both sides pursue and the intensity of the struggle.

The strategic defender is the participant that wants to keep what he has or to maintain his relative position in a balance of power system. In many important respects, defense is inherently stronger than offense. The strength of the strategic defense derives from human psychology and the balance of power mechanism as well as the forces of friction and inertia. People are naturally willing to endure great sacrifices in defense of their homes and homelands and much less willing to endure such sacrifices in military adventures abroad. An aggressor's action frequently causes anxiety and hostility in neighboring allied and neutral countries; they often interpret a challenge to the existing balance of power as a threat and are more naturally inclined to support the defender. Friction and inertia are normally on the side of the defender as well: it is inherently easier to hold onto something than to take it away from someone else.

These political and psychological strengths of the strategic defense are present in all wars, even those in which territorial gains and losses are not a major factor. The strength of the defense is often reinforced operationally since the attacker is normally moving away from his base of supply and the center of his political power, while the defender is falling back on his.

Note, of course, that this superiority of the strategic defense is not an absolute. Obviously, a defender with few resources and poor leadership is not stronger than an attacker with vastly greater resources and good leadership. However, all other things being equal, the defender has the advantage.

At the tactical and operational levels, the roles of attacker and defender may frequently change hands or even be shared more or less evenly. At the strategic level, however, the roles tend to be fixed throughout any given conflict. In World War II, for instance, the Western Allies held the advantages of the strategic defense even as their armies marched into Germany. They were perceived as being restorers of the balance of power rather than as threats to it. However, in some situations, the roles of strategic attacker and defender can be reversed. When war is endemic in a society, when the origins of the conflict are poorly remembered, or when the war guilt has come to be equally shared, the advantages of the original defender tend to be lost. In such a case, the balance of power mechanism usually tends to support the current defender and to oppose whichever contender seems momentarily to have the initiative.

SYMMETRICAL AND ASYMMETRICAL STRATEGIES

Strategies can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. That is, the contending powers may pursue mirror-image ends or rely on similar means, or they may pursue quite different kinds of goals or apply dissimilar means.²

A symmetrical military strategy is one that attempts to match—or rather, to overmatch—the enemy strength for strength, to beat him on his own terms. An asymmetrical strategy is one that attempts to apply one category of means against another category, to use some means to which the enemy cannot effectively respond in kind.

Many wars are fought between very different enemies and are thus profoundly asymmetrical in character. For example, a terrorist organization may wage war against a government or even against the international community as a whole. The terrorist campaigns of the Irish Republican Army against the United Kingdom and the Palestine Liberation Organization against Israel are illustrations. Most states would like nothing better than for terrorists to act symmetrically and resort to open battle, which would make them vulnerable to the state's superior conventional military forces. On the other hand, terrorists may also seek to provoke a symmetrical response: the purpose of many terrorist attacks is to provoke governments into actions that antagonize ordinary citizens such as restrictive

security measures or even reprisals in kind. These acts undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the government and play into the hands of the terrorist strategy. Because of the fundamentally different natures of the adversaries, the political effects of these similar actions are dramatically different.

Most real-world strategies are a mixture of symmetrical and asymmetrical elements, and it is often difficult to determine the overall balance between them. Thus any discussion of symmetry or asymmetry in war is a matter of degree as well as kind. The usefulness of the concept is that it helps us analyze the dynamics of a struggle. For example, the American strategy of containment during the Cold War always involved strong elements of both symmetry and asymmetry. From a military standpoint, Eisenhower's massive retaliation policy was fundamentally an asymmetrical strategy: the United States would reply to any type of Soviet aggression "by means and at places of our own choosing."³ This was generally interpreted to mean a U.S. nuclear response to a conventional Soviet provocation. From the national strategic standpoint however, Eisenhower's strategy was broadly similar to the Soviet Union's in that both relied primarily on deterrence rather than on the actual application of military force. The Kennedy administration's subsequent flexible response strategy was militarily a symmetrical strategy of matching the Soviets strength for strength. However, it also took advantage of economic and political asymmetries.

There is no innate advantage or disadvantage to either a symmetrical or asymmetrical strategy. The choice depends on the situation and on the constraints of time and creativity. The interplay between symmetry and asymmetry in any struggle is unique and covers a wide range of possibilities. In India's post-World War II struggle for independence, for example, British military power was overthrown by the most asymmetrical approach imaginable: Gandhi's campaign of nonviolence.

A particular strategy must take into account the similarities and differences between the opponents and must—when necessary or advantageous—seek to create new ones. The effective strategist is not biased in favor of either symmetry or asymmetry but is keenly aware of both and of the interplay between them.

DETERRENCE: STRATEGIES OF REPRISAL OR DENIAL

Deterrence means dissuading an enemy from an action by means of some countervailing threat. There are essentially two methods of deterrence: denial and reprisal.

To deter by denial means to prevent an enemy's action by convincing him that his action will fail. Conceptually, this is a symmetrical approach (although the actual means of denial may be either symmetrical or asymmetrical). For example, a

state may deter conventional invasion by maintaining sufficiently credible forces to defend its borders. It may deter the use of poison gas by training and equipping its forces and population to function effectively in a chemical warfare environment. Terrorists may be deterred from attacks on airports by tight security.

The second approach, reprisal, is conceptually asymmetrical. We may concede to the enemy that he is capable of taking what he wants from us but seek to convince him that his prize will not be worth the price he will pay for it. For example, a state weak in conventional forces may seek to deter enemy occupation by credibly preparing to wage a long, painful guerrilla war of resistance. Conventional invasion might also be deterred through the threat of nuclear retaliation.

There are overlaps between denial and reprisal. Tight airport security may deter terrorists by convincing them either that their efforts will fail (denial) or that they will be caught and punished (reprisal). A demonstrated capability to wage chemical warfare may deter a gas attack both by denying the enemy an advantage and by threatening to retaliate in kind.

As these examples indicate, in practice denial and reprisal are often more effective when applied in tandem. The ability of one side to deny its enemy an advantage cannot always be absolutely convincing, especially if the other side is inclined to take risks. Deterrence by denial also implies a certain passivity. An enemy may be willing to test the defenses if he believes that

failure carries no further penalty. On the other hand, while deterrence by reprisal compensates for some of the weakness of denial, reprisal has its own weaknesses. Retaliation, even if carried out successfully, may come too late to avoid suffering significant damage.

STANDARDIZED OR TAILORED STRATEGIES

Usually, when we talk about the conscious formulation of a particular strategy, we are talking about a specific way of using specific means to reach specific ends. This is a strategy “tailored” to deal with a particular problem. Our means are finely adapted to fit our ends, and vice versa.

There are classes of problems, however, that do not initially lend themselves to such tailoring. These problems usually fall

- First, we lack the time to tailor a unique response to a specific problem. This can be the case in rapidly unfolding strategic problems or when we are unwilling or unable to adapt for some other reason.
- Second, we lack the specific knowledge needed to craft a unique strategy but recognize the problem as fitting a certain pattern.

In such cases, we normally adopt a standardized strategy, whether or not it is truly appropriate to the specific problem.

Standardized and tailored strategies are not mutually exclusive. Often a standardized strategy provides the point of departure for a tailored strategy that evolves as the situation develops. If we run into certain types of problems often enough, we develop standardized responses that are generally appropriate to that type of problem. Experience has taught us they will work more often than not. In many cases, standardized strategies are designed to gain time to find an appropriate, specific solution.

Standardized strategies are not fixed; they can be changed and improved, usually on the basis of experience. These strategies build a certain reputation that may strongly influence the behavior of friends, foes, and neutrals. Standardized strategies generally find expression not within a single war, but over the course of many conflicts. Such a strategy's immediate payoff in any particular case may be less than completely satisfying, but it can offer great advantages over the long term.

As an example, the United States has employed a standardized strategy of providing nation-building support to defeated enemies. During the period of reconstruction, the United States assists in rebuilding the defeated states' industrial base and infrastructure. Two notable examples are the reconstruction of Germany and Japan following World War II. More recently,

the United States provided postconflict aid to Grenada, Panama, and Haiti.

In its conduct of war, the United States pursues a standard strategy that includes respect for the independence of allies, relatively mild occupation policies, the generous and systematic reconstruction of conquered states, as well as a persistent economic isolation of hostile nations. These policies reflect a recognition that wars end and that the victors must live with the survivors. This approach also makes it easier for other states to act as American allies and difficult for enemies to create and sustain popular resistance to American power and influence. Combined with the American reputation for overwhelming firepower and a demonstrated willingness to use it in war, such policies have contributed greatly to America's strategic success.

STRATEGY BY INTENT OR BY DEFAULT

Not all strategies are the product of conscious thought. Warfare is driven by politics, and rational calculation is only one of many factors in politics. Strategies by intent are those developed primarily through the rational consideration of options and their likely implications. Strategies by default, on the other hand, are those dictated by circumstances or determined primarily by ideologies, unconscious assumptions, and prejudices

that prevent strategists from considering all of their options in what many would consider a fully rational manner. While conceptually distinct, the two are rarely mutually exclusive; most strategies involve elements of both intent and default.

Consider the Russian strategic response to invasion by Germany in World War II. The Russian intent was to defend their country at the border. The strength of their enemy forced the Russians into a strategy of delay and withdrawal until the invader could be worn down sufficiently to be defeated. Conversely, the Nazis' blind adherence to their racial ideologies led to their failure to take advantage of the indifferent attitudes of the Belorussian and Ukrainian peoples towards the Soviet regime. Had they pursued a rational policy towards the population of occupied Soviet territory, they might have undermined the growth of a powerful partisan movement behind their lines.

The functioning of coalitions offers another illustration of the interplay between strategies of intent and default. Coalition warfare is often entered into as part of an intentional strategy. However, strategies adopted by the coalition are complicated or even subverted by the ideological motivations of the participants. Dictatorships generally have difficulty participating in coalition warfare. However sensible it might be to cooperate with other political entities in pursuit of common goals, dictatorships by their very nature demand the right to make decisions unilaterally. They attempt to treat potential allies as servants, subordinating others' interests completely to their own. Theocratic states that find their justification for existence

in the demands of God may have a similar difficulty in making rational strategic compromises. Liberal democracies that are cooperative, compromising, balance-of-power entities internally are much more likely than dictatorships or theocracies to demonstrate these same characteristics in their external relationships. They are also more likely to attempt to treat very different kinds of political entities as if they shared those values.

What we have described are only tendencies. Insightful and strong-willed leaders occasionally overcome such tendencies. Strategists must seek to understand which elements of their own and the enemy's strategies are fixed by nature and which are subject to conscious change. A policy that seeks to convince the enemy to change his behavior will fail if he is incapable of change.

EVALUATING OPPOSING STRATEGIES

The purpose of presenting the sets of opposing strategies in this chapter is analytical rather than prescriptive. We must use these concepts to understand what we, our allies, our enemies, and relevant neutral forces are doing and why. They deepen our understanding and throw new light on sometimes inscrutable opponents. Faced with the possibility of war, however, the strategist must return to the fundamentals we described in chapter 2: *What are the political objectives of each*

participant? Are they limited or unlimited? How do the opponents perceive each other's objectives? The answers to these questions will have implications for the fundamental character of any resulting conflict and the adoption of a particular strategy. We must appreciate which elements of the situation are fixed and which are subject to conscious change. We must be prepared to deal with the constants and norms as well as uncertainty and ambiguity. Only then can we intelligently discuss the strategy-making process, as we do in the following chapter.