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## Chapter 4

# The Making of Strategy

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*“Modern warfare resembles a spider’s web—everything connects, longitudinally or laterally, to everything else; there are no ‘independent strategies,’ no watertight compartments, nor can there be.”<sup>1</sup>*

—John Terraine



**H**aving considered the nature of the environment within which strategy is made, the fundamental goals of all strategies, and some ways to categorize a strategy, we now consider how strategy is actually made.

## **THE STRATEGY-MAKING PROCESS**

Despite all that we have said about the nature of politics and policy, people generally think of strategy making as a conscious, rational process—the direct and purposeful interrelating of ends and means. In fact, strategy is very seldom if ever made in a fully rational way.

Each political entity has its own mechanism for developing strategy. While certain elements of the strategy-making process may be clearly visible, specified in a constitution and law or conducted in open forum, many aspects of the process are difficult to observe or comprehend. Participants in the process itself may not fully understand or even be aware of the dynamics that take place when dealing with a specific strategic situation. Thus, it is impossible to define any sort of universal strategy-making process. It is possible, however, to isolate certain key elements that any strategy maker must take into account to arrive at a suitable solution to a particular problem. We must focus on these elements if we are to understand the strategy and strategic context of any particular conflict.

Strategy making is in effect a problem-solving process. In order to solve a particular problem, the strategist must understand its nature and identify potential solutions. We start with the nature of the problem and the particular political ends of each of the participants in the conflict. This helps us to identify the specific political objectives to be accomplished. These objectives lead to development of a national strategy to achieve them. From there, we proceed to military strategy.

While it is difficult to specify in advance the content of a military strategy, it is easier to describe the questions that military strategy must answer. First, we must understand the political objectives and establish those military objectives that enable us to accomplish the political objectives. Second, we must determine how best to achieve these military objectives. Finally, we must translate the solution into a specific strategic concept: Will our strategy result in the requirement for multiple theaters or multiple campaigns? What are the intermediate goals and objectives within these theaters and campaigns that will achieve our political objectives? The military strategic concept incorporates the answers to these questions and provides the direction needed by military commanders to implement the strategy.

### **The Strategic Assessment**

When confronted with a strategic problem, strategists must first make an assessment of the situation confronting them. This assessment equates to the observation-orientation steps of the observation-orientation-decide-act loop.<sup>2</sup> While the factors

involved and the time constraints at the strategic level are different from those at the tactical or operational levels, the principle is the same: without a basic understanding of the situation, decisionmaking and action are likely to be seriously flawed.

The assessment begins with observing and orienting to the strategic landscape. Strategists look at the factors discussed in chapter 1: the physical environment, national character, the interplay between the states, and balance of power considerations. Once they have an appreciation for the landscape, they must focus on and determine the nature of the conflict.

Assessing the nature of the conflict requires consideration of questions like these: What value do both sides attach to the political objectives of the war? What costs are both sides willing to pay? What is the result of the “value compared to cost” equation? What material, economic, and human sacrifices will the participants endure? For how long? Under what circumstances? Will the societies expect regular, measurable progress? Will they patiently endure setbacks and frustration?

Such questions are fundamentally related to the ends of the conflict and the means employed to achieve those ends. The answers to these questions are required to determine the nature of the political objectives—the ends—of the conflict and the value to both sides of those political objectives. The value of the objective, in turn, is a major indicator of the resources—the

means—that both sides will likely commit and the sacrifices they will make to achieve it. An understanding of both ends and means is required in order to develop an effective military strategy.

### **Political Objectives**

Political objectives are the starting point for the development of a strategy. The first step in making strategy is deciding which political objectives a strategy will aim to achieve. In order to design the military action that will produce the desired result, the military strategist needs to know what that desired result is, that is, what the political objective is. From the political objectives, the military strategist can develop a set of military objectives that achieve the political objectives.

In theory, the setting of political objectives seems like a relatively straightforward proposition, and sometimes it is. The World War II stated political objective of unconditional surrender by the Axis powers was simple. In practice, however, setting political objectives involves the solving of not one but several complicated and interrelated problems. Multiple problems require the simultaneous pursuit of multiple and imperfectly meshed—sometimes even conflicting—strategies. The constant pressures and long-term demands of our economic and social strategies tend naturally to conflict with the demands of preparedness for the occasional military emergency. The demands of warfighting, of coalition management, of maintaining domestic unity, and of sustaining the political fortunes of the

current leadership often pull us irresistibly in different directions. It is always crucial to remember that military strategy making is but one element of the much broader dynamic of political interaction that goes into the making of national strategy.

At a minimum, the determination of political objectives must establish two things in order to form the basis for the development of a sound military strategy. First, it must establish definitions for both survival and victory for all participants in the conflict. As discussed in chapter 2, without an understanding of how each participant views its survival and victory, it will be impossible to identify the military strategy that can attain either goal. Second, the political leadership must establish whether it is pursuing a limited or unlimited political objective. The identification of the nature of the political objective is essential to ensuring the right match between political and military objectives.

### **Military Objectives and the Means to Achieve Them**

With an understanding of the political objectives, we then turn to selection of our military objectives. Military objectives should achieve or help achieve the political goal of the war. At the same time, the use of military power should not produce unintended or undesirable political results. Fighting the enemy should always be a means to an end, not become an end in itself.

As with political objectives, the choice of military objectives may seem relatively simple. However, selection of military

objectives is not a trivial matter. First, strategists may select a military objective that is inappropriate to the political objectives or that does not actually achieve the political objective. Second, there may be more than one way to defeat an enemy. As an example, will it be necessary to defeat the enemy army and occupy the enemy country or might a naval blockade accomplish the objective? Third, the pursuit of some military objectives may change the political goal of the war. Successful pursuit of a particular military objective may have unintentional effects on the enemy, allies, neutrals, and one's own society. This is particularly true in cases where a delicate balance of power is in place; achieving a given military objective may alter the balance of power in such a way that the resulting political situation is actually less favorable to the victor. Successful military strategies select a military goal or goals that secure the desired political objectives, not something else.

The designation of limited or unlimited political objectives is a necessary prerequisite to selecting the type of warfighting strategy that will be employed—either a strategy of annihilation or a strategy of erosion. The choice of an erosion or annihilation strategy drives the selection of specific military objectives, the design of our military actions, the effects we hope to achieve, and the weight we give to our military efforts relative to the use of other elements of our national power.

In annihilation strategies, the military objective is to eliminate the military capacity of the enemy to resist. This almost always involves the destruction of major elements of the enemy's military forces. Attacks against other targets—seizing



territory, striking economic capacity, or conducting informational or psychological warfare against the enemy leadership or population—are normally pursued only when they are directly related to degrading or destroying some military capability. Thus, specific military objectives and the means for striking at those military objectives grow out of the assessment of the nature and functioning of the enemy's military capacity.

In contrast, the focus of an erosion strategy is always the mind of the enemy leadership. The aim is to convince the enemy leadership that making concessions offers a better outcome than continuing resistance. The military objectives in an erosion strategy can be similar to those in an annihilation strategy, or they can be considerably different.

The first category of targets in an erosion strategy is the same as in an annihilation strategy: the enemy's armed forces. If the enemy is disarmed or finds the threat to destroy his armed forces credible, he may submit to the conditions presented. On the other hand, certain assets that have limited military importance but are of critical economic or psychological value—a capital city or key seaport—may be seized. Similarly, the enemy's financial assets may be frozen or his trade blockaded. Again, if submission to stated demands is less painful for enemy decisionmakers than continuing to do without the lost asset, they may concede defeat. A third possible target in an erosion strategy is the enemy leadership's domestic political position. Money, arms, and information can be provided to internal opponents of the leadership. The purpose is to make

enemy leaders feel so endangered that they will make peace in order to focus on their domestic enemies.

Choosing military objectives and the appropriate means to pursue those objectives requires the consideration of two closely related concepts: the center of gravity and the critical vulnerability.<sup>3</sup>

A center of gravity is a key source of the enemy's *strength*, providing either his physical or his psychological capacity to effectively resist. The utility of the concept is that it forces us to focus on what factors are most important to our enemy in a particular situation and to narrow our attention to as few key factors as possible.

At the strategic level, the range of possible centers of gravity is broad. The enemy's fighting forces may be a center of gravity. Strength may flow from a particular population center, a region providing manpower, or a capital city. A capital city may draw its importance from some practical application such as functioning as a transportation hub or as a command and control nexus. The capital's importance may be cultural, supplying some psychological strength to the population. In the case of nonstate political entities, the source of the enemy's motivation and cohesion may be a key individual or clique or the public perception of the leadership's ideological purity. Public support is often a strategic center of gravity, particularly in democratic societies.

In contrast to a center of gravity, a critical vulnerability is a key potential source of *weakness*. The concept is important because we normally wish to attack an enemy where we may do so with the least danger to ourselves, rather than exposing ourselves directly to his strength. To be *critical*, a vulnerability must meet two criteria: First, the capture, destruction, or exploitation of this vulnerability must significantly undermine or destroy a center of gravity. Second, the critical vulnerability must be something that we have the means to capture, destroy, or exploit.

If the center of gravity is the enemy armed forces, the critical vulnerability may lie in some aspect of its organization or its supporting infrastructure that is both key to the armed forces' functioning and open to attack by means at our disposal. During World War II, the Allies sought to focus on the German armed forces' logistical vulnerabilities by attacking the German petroleum industry, ball bearing supplies, and transportation infrastructure.

As an example of how centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities are used to determine military objectives and the means to achieve them, consider the North's use of General Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Plan" during the Civil War. The plan identified the South's physical and emotional capacity to sustain a defensive war as one of the strategic centers of gravity. Critical vulnerabilities associated with this strategic center of gravity included the South's small industrial capacity, limited number of seaports, underdeveloped transportation

network, and dependence upon foreign sources of supply for foodstuffs, raw materials, and finished goods. The Anaconda Plan targeted this center of gravity by exploiting these vulnerabilities. The plan called for a naval blockade to wall off the Confederacy from trading with Europe, seizure of control of the Mississippi River valley to isolate the South from potential sources of resources and support in Texas and Mexico, and then capture of port facilities and railheads to cut lines of transportation. These actions would gradually reduce the South's military capability to resist as well as undermine popular support for the rebellion. While initially rejected as being too passive, the Anaconda plan revisited and reimplemented, eventually became the general strategy of the North. Scott's experienced analysis of the South's centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities resulted in an effective military strategy which led directly to the defeat of the Confederacy.<sup>4</sup>

An understanding of centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities forms the core for the development of a particular military strategy. Among the centers of gravity, strategists find military objectives appropriate to the political objectives and the warfighting strategy being pursued. Among the critical vulnerabilities, strategists find the most effective and efficient means of achieving those military objectives. Together these concepts help formulate the strategic concept that guides the execution of the military strategy.

### **Strategic Concepts**

An essential step in the making of effective strategy is the development of a strategic concept.<sup>5</sup> Derived from the strategic estimate of the situation and the political and military objectives, this concept describes the course of action to be taken. The strategic concept should provide a clear and compelling basis for all subsequent planning and decisionmaking.

As with the strategy itself, the strategic concept begins with the political objectives. It should identify the military objectives to be accomplished and how to reach them. It should establish the relationship and relative importance of the military means to the other instruments of national power that are being employed. It should address priorities and the allocation of resources. These, in turn should help determine the concentration of effort within a theater or campaign.

Sometimes a war is fought in one theater, sometimes in several. If there is more than one theater, a choice has to be made on how to allocate resources. This cannot be effectively done without some overall idea of how the war will be won. The strategic concept provides this idea. Normally, military objectives are achieved by conducting a number of campaigns or major operations. What should be the objective of a given campaign? Again, it is the strategic concept that answers that question. It gives commanders the guidance to formulate and execute plans for campaigns and major operations.

World War II provides a clear example of the use of the strategic concept. This concept naturally evolved throughout the course of the war. It was modified in response to various political, economic, and military developments and as a result of disagreements among the Allies. It is important to note that the strategic concept was not a single document, but rather a series of decisions made by the leaders of the Alliance. Nevertheless, in this general strategic concept, military leaders could find guidance from their political leadership for the formulation of specific theater strategies and campaign plans.

It was immediately apparent that, given the global scale of the conflict, the strength of the enemy, and the differing political objectives, philosophies, postures, and military capabilities of the Allied nations, a unifying strategy was needed. The strategic concept adopted by the Allies called for the defeat of Germany first, effectively setting the division of labor and establishing priorities between the European and Pacific theaters. As the concept developed, it forced a sequence and priority among the campaigns and operations within theaters and set specific objectives for each of the campaigns. Germany would be engaged through continuous offensive action until a decisive blow could be launched from Britain. Japan would be contained and harassed until sufficient resources were available to go on the offensive in the Pacific. Ultimately, this concept led to the achievement of the military and political objective—in this case, unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan.

## WHO MAKES STRATEGY?

Strategy making is almost always a distributed process. The various elements of any particular strategy take shape in various places and at various times and are formed by different leaders and groups motivated by varying concerns. Elements of the strategy eventually adopted may surface anywhere in the organization. We need to understand the particular characteristics, concerns, and goals of all significant participants if we are to understand a specific strategic situation.

Without a detailed examination of the particular political entity and its strategy-making process, it is impossible to determine who is providing the answers to a particular question. Nevertheless, at least in terms of the division between military and civilian decisionmakers, it is possible to identify who should be providing these answers.

Earlier, it was argued that certain questions have to be answered in order to make strategy. The question, “*What is the political objective the war seeks to achieve?*” must be answered by the civilian leadership. The question, “*The attainment of what military objective will achieve, or help achieve, the political objective of the war?*” should also be answered primarily by the political leadership. They alone are in the best position to understand the impact that achievement of the military objective will have on the enemy, allies, neutrals, and

domestic opinion. In answering the question, "*How can the military objective be achieved?*" the military leadership comes more to the fore. However, the civilian leadership will want to make sure that the means used to achieve the military objective do not themselves have deleterious effects, effects that may overshadow the political objective of the war. The question, "*If there is more than one theater, how should the war effort be divided among theaters?*" is likely decided primarily by the political leadership, because this question can be answered only with reference to the overall structure of the war. The questions, "*Within a given theater, should the war effort be divided into campaigns?*" and "*What should be the objective of a given campaign?*" would seem to be primarily military in nature. Nevertheless, decisions made here can also affect political objectives or concerns as well as impact on the availability and consumption of scarce human and material resources. No political leader would want to entirely relinquish the decision about what the primary objectives of a campaign should be.

Thus we can see that the making of military strategy is a responsibility shared by both political and military leaders. Military institutions participate in the political process that develops military strategy. The military leadership has a responsibility to advise political leaders on the capabilities, limitations, and best use of the military instrument to achieve the political objectives. Military advice will be meaningless, and political leaders will ignore it unless military professionals understand their real concerns and the political



ramifications—both domestic and international—of military action or inaction.

## JUST WAR

Traditionally, Western societies have demanded two things of their strategic leaders in war. First is success, which contributes to security and societal well-being. Second is a sense of being in the right, a belief that the cause for which the people are called to sacrifice is a just one. Strategists must be able to reconcile what is *necessary* with what is *just*. The “just war” theory provides a set of criteria that can help to reconcile these practical and moral considerations.

Just war theory has two components, labeled in Latin *jus ad bellum* (literally, “rightness in going to war”) and *jus in bello* (“rightness in the conduct of war”). There are seven *jus ad bellum* criteria:<sup>6</sup>

- **Just Cause.** A just cause involves the protection and preservation of value. There are three such causes: defense of self or of others against attack, retaking of something wrongly taken by force, and punishment of concrete wrongs done by an evil power.

- **Right Authority.** The person or body authorizing the war must be a responsible representative of a sovereign political entity.
- **Right Intention.** The intent in waging war must truly be just and not be a selfish aim masked as a just cause.
- **Proportionality of Ends.** The overall good achieved by the resort to war must not be outweighed by the harm it produces.
- **Last Resort.** We must show that there is no logical alternative to violence.
- **Reasonable Hope of Success.** There can be neither moral nor strategic justification for resorting to war when there is no hope of success.
- **The Aim of Peace.** Ends for which a war is fought must include the establishment of stability and peace.

Satisfying just war criteria is often not a simple or clear-cut process. We want to believe in the ethical correctness of our cause. At the same time, we know that our enemies and their sympathizers will use moral arguments against us. Therefore, though the criteria for the rightness in going to war may be met, the translation of political objectives to military objectives and their execution cannot violate *jus in bello*—rightness in the conduct of war. The destruction of a power plant may achieve a tactical or operational objective; however, the impact of its destruction on the civilian populace may violate rightness in

conduct and result in loss of moral dignity, adversely affecting overall strategic objectives.

In sum, the just war criteria provide objective measures from which to judge our motives. The effective strategist must be prepared to demonstrate to all sides why the defended cause meets the criteria of just war theory and why the enemy's cause does not. If a legitimate and effective argument on this basis cannot be assembled, then it is likely that both the cause and the strategy are fatally flawed.

## **STRATEGY-MAKING PITFALLS**

Given the complexity of making strategy, it is understandable that some seek ways to simplify the process. There are several traps into which would-be strategists commonly fall: searching for strategic panaceas; emphasizing process over product in strategy making; seeking the single, decisive act, the fait accompli; attempting to simplify the nature of the problem by using labels such as limited or unlimited wars; falling into a paralysis of inaction; or rushing to a conclusion recklessly.

### **Strategic Panaceas**

Strategists have long sought strategic panaceas: strategic prescriptions that will guarantee victory in any situation. The strategic panacea denies any need for understanding the unique

characteristics of each strategic situation, offering instead a ready-made and universal solution.

Examples abound. In the 1890s, the American naval writer Alfred Thayer Mahan convinced many world leaders of the validity of his theories centered on capital ships and concentrated battle fleets.<sup>7</sup> These theories prompted Germany to challenge Great Britain for naval dominance, contributing to the tension between the two countries prior to the outbreak of World War I. Similarly, the theories of German Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen fixated on strategies of annihilation and battles of envelopment. These prescriptive theories dominated Germany's strategic thinking in both World Wars. The deterrence strategies embraced by American Cold War theorists were equally influential. American forces accordingly designed for high-intensity warfare in Europe proved inappropriate to counter Communist-inspired wars of national liberation.

### **Emphasizing Process Over Product**

The second major trap is the attempt to reduce the strategy-making process to a routine. The danger in standardizing strategy-making procedures is that the leadership may believe that the process alone will ensure development of sound strategies. Just as there is no strategic panacea, there is no optimal strategy-making process. Nonetheless, political organizations, bureaucracies, and military staffs normally seek to systematize strategy making. These processes are designed to control the

collection and flow of information, to standardize strategy making, and to ensure the consistent execution of policy.

Such systems are vitally necessary. They impose a degree of order that enables the human mind to cope with the otherwise overwhelming complexity of politics and war. However, they may also generate friction and rigidity. Standardized strategies can be valuable as a point of departure for tailored strategies or as elements of larger tailored strategies. However, when the entire process is run by routine, the results are predictable strategies by default that adversaries can easily anticipate and counter.

### **The Fait Accompli**

One class of strategic-level actions is worth considering as a distinct category. These are strategies in which the political and military goals are identical and can be achieved quickly, simultaneously, and in one blow. Done properly, these actions appear to be isolated events that are not part of larger, continuous military operations. More than raids or harassment, these actions aim to present the enemy with an accomplished fact, or *fait accompli*—political/military achievement that simply cannot be undone. In 1981, the Israelis became extremely concerned about Iraq's nuclear weapons development program. They launched an isolated bombing raid that destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility. The Israelis had no further need to attack Iraqi targets, and Iraq had no military means of recovering the lost facility.

A coup d'état is usually designed as a *fait accompli*. The political and military objectives are the same thing: seizure of the existing government. Noncombatant evacuations are also normally executed as *faits accomplis*. In a noncombatant evacuation, one country lands its troops for the purpose of evacuating its citizens from a dangerous situation, as in a revolution or civil war. Once the evacuation has been accomplished, the cause for conflict between the state conducting the evacuation and those engaging in the hostilities that led to it has been removed.

The *fait accompli* is another potential strategic pitfall. It is immensely attractive to political leaders because it seems neat and clean—even “surgical.” The danger is that many attempted *faits accomplis* end up as merely the opening gambit in what turns out to be a long-term conflict or commitment. This result was normally not intended or desired by those who initiated the confrontation. In 1983, the Argentines assumed that their swift seizure of the nearby Falkland Islands could not be reversed by far-off, postimperial Britain and that therefore Britain would make no effort to do so. They were wrong on both counts.

### Limited and Unlimited Wars

Another common error is the attempt to characterize a war as either “limited” or “unlimited.” Such characterizations can be seriously misleading. While we can generally classify the political and military objectives of any *individual* belligerent in a war as limited or unlimited, seldom can we accurately

characterize the conflict itself as limited or unlimited. To do so may leave us badly confused about the actual dynamics of a conflict.

If we examine the conflicting aims of the belligerents in the Vietnam War, we can see that this was never a limited war from the North Vietnamese perspective nor should South Vietnam have pursued only limited political objectives. North Vietnam's political goal was the elimination of the South Vietnamese government as a political entity and the complete unification of all Vietnam under northern rule. The North Vietnamese leadership saw victory in this struggle as a matter of survival. While the North Vietnamese military strategy against the United States was erosion, against South Vietnam it was annihilation. The South Vietnamese leadership was weak, enjoying little legitimacy with a population that had no hope of conquering the North. Its only goal was to survive. The American strategy against North Vietnam was one of erosion. However, the United States was never able to convince North Vietnam that peace on America's terms was preferable to continuing the war.

All wars can be considered limited in some aspects because they are generally constricted to a specific geographic area, to certain kinds of weapons and tactics, or to numbers of committed combatants. These distinctions are the factors at work in a particular conflict, not its fundamental strategic classification. Another common error is the assumption that limited wars are small wars and unlimited wars are big ones. This confuses the

scale of a war with its military and political objectives. Large-scale wars can be quite limited in political and/or military objectives, while a relatively small conflict may have unlimited political and military objectives. The U.S. action against Panama in 1989 can be considered a very small-scale war, but both its political and military objectives were unlimited. Panama's capacity to resist was annihilated, its regime was deposed, and its leader was put on public trial and imprisoned. It is possible that had the United States pursued more limited objectives, the result might have been a war of attrition much more destructive to both sides.

The strategic pitfall in characterizing wars as limited or unlimited is that such a label may lead to adoption of an incorrect strategy. This is particularly true in the case of limited wars. There are always temptations to limit the military means employed, even when the political objectives demand a strategy of annihilation. Such inclinations stem from the psychological and moral burdens involved in the use of force, the desire to conserve resources, and often a tendency to underestimate the enemy or the overall problem. Strategists must correctly understand the character and the resource demands of a strategy before they choose it.

### **Paralysis and Recklessness**

Competent strategic-level decisionmakers are aware of the high stakes of war and of the complex nature of the strategic environment. Successful decisions may lead to great gains, but failure can lead to fearful losses. Some personalities instinctively



respond to this environment with a hold-the-line, take-no-chances mentality. Others display an irresistible bias for action.

Unless we understand the specific problems, dangers, and potential gains of a situation, the two approaches are equally dangerous. Paralysis is neither more nor less dangerous than blindly striking out in the face of either threat or opportunity. Unfortunately, the very process of attempting to ascertain the particulars can lead to “paralysis by analysis.” Strategy makers almost always have to plan and act in the absence of complete information or without a full comprehension of the situation.

At the same time, strategists must guard against making hasty or ill-conceived decisions. The strategic realm differs from the tactical arena both in the pace at which events occur and the consequences of actions taken. Rarely does the strategic decisionmaker have to act instantaneously. The development of strategy demands a certain discipline to study and understand the dynamics of a situation and think through the implications of potential actions. While it is often possible to recover from a tactical error or a defeat, the consequences of a serious misstep at the strategic level can be catastrophic. Boldness and decisiveness, which are important characteristics of leadership at any level, must at the strategic level be tempered with an appropriate sense of balance and perspective.

The strategist’s responsibility is to balance opportunity against risk and to balance both against uncertainty. Despite the obstacles to focusing on specific strategic problems and to

taking effective action, we must focus, and we must act. Success is clearly possible.