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How to win

The nature of strategy

‘STRATEGY’ IS ONE OF those words that is used so freely and within such a wide variety of contexts that its meaning might seem confused. There was nothing confused about its original Greek form, *strategos*, which simply meant the art of leading an army. Today, however, so-called strategies are claimed for an enormous range of activities. Businesses have strategies to sell their products; sporting teams have strategies to overwhelm their opponents; individuals have strategies for saving money, managing their social lives, sorting their music collections; and so on. Uncertainty can also arise from the somewhat casual way in which military actions and weapons systems are often called strategic, regardless of the circumstances in which they are being applied. Air forces provide a case in point. For years any target which was distant from an attacking aircraft’s homebase almost automatically attracted the label ‘strategic’. Any bomber raid against an enemy’s homeland was strategic, regardless of the target or the mission’s objective, and an aircraft with four engines and capable of carrying a heavy bombload was always a strategic bomber. Conversely, smaller aircraft carrying lighter loads over shorter distances were routinely described as tactical, as were their missions, regardless of their objective. Yet from 1965 to 1972 during the US war in Indochina, ‘tactical’ single-engine F-105 fighter/bombers were used for ‘strategic’ missions in North Vietnam and ‘strategic’ multi-engine B-52 bombers were used for ‘tactical’ strikes in South Vietnam. Similarly, during the opening phases of the 1991 Gulf War, army ‘battlefield’ helicopters were used for long-range

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‘strategic’ strikes. Those examples would suggest that ‘strategic’ should be defined, not by the target, platform, weapon or distance flown, but by the objective of the mission – by the effect being sought. They also illustrate the semantic confusion that has often accompanied the use of the noun strategy and the adjective strategic.

The notion that a military action should be defined by its intended outcome or, indeed, by its post-facto effect, gained widespread acceptance after the 1991 Gulf War, and is discussed in detail in chapter six. Despite that acceptance, the general use of the word ‘strategic’ remains casual. In particular, combat capabilities that are able to operate at long range or which can deploy rapidly, such as special forces, submarines, and heavy bomber and transport aircraft, still tend to attract the description strategic, while their shorter-range, slower counterparts are still described as tactical.

There is far less ambiguity over the use of the noun ‘tactic’, which is applied almost universally by defence forces to describe specific actions that have been developed in response to specific circumstances. In the main, those actions are related to the various ways in which combat forces might manoeuvre and apply firepower. For example, an infantry section will have learnt and practised scores of tactics dealing with offensive and defensive manoeuvre, laying down mutually supporting patterns of fire, setting up or reacting to ambushes, and so on; and fighter pilots and naval formations will have done the same in relation to the most commonly experienced combat contingencies in the air and at sea respectively.

This clear distinction between strategy and tactic is indirectly reflected in the recognition history has given to military commanders. The people whom history has acknowledged as great generals – men such as Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and Lee – have been viewed primarily as strategists: as people capable of developing successful over-arching concepts (strategies) for the conduct of wars and campaigns, without necessarily having to direct those strategies; that is, without having to translate them into tactics on the battlefield (while noting that many great generals have excelled in both strategy and tactics). We might infer from that observation that strategic thinking is a more abstract and intellectually demanding process than

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is the application of tactics, an inference which in turn perhaps partly explains the continuing ambiguity attached to the use of 'strategic'.

It is characteristic of the bureaucratic disposition of the political, diplomatic and military institutions with whose activities this book is frequently concerned that many of them have tried to precisely define levels of strategy, partly as a means of setting the limits of authority within their respective organisations. Thus, the highest level has been titled 'grand strategy' and is nominally the preserve of the most senior arm of government or institutional leadership. A grand strategy should, in theory at least, succinctly describe the key objective towards which all resources – human, diplomatic, economic, scientific, informational, social, industrial, military, perhaps even artistic, and so on – are directed in the national interest.

Within this construct of definitions, grand strategy is underpinned by a number of complementary or subordinate strategies which explicitly address such issues as economics, diplomacy, and military operations, noting that an extensive range of options can exist for each one of these and other potential ways of pursuing objectives. A military strategy, for example, might broadly endorse any one of a number of alternative approaches to protecting national sovereignty, such as deterrence, massive retaliation, terrorism, people's war, and pre-emptive strike. Because competing strategies are by definition interactive, grand and military strategies can be time-limited and, depending on circumstances, they can and do change, as shown by the allies' shifting objectives during World War II.

During the early stages of the war against Germany, the allies' relative military weakness and the Nazis' stunning battlefield successes left Great Britain and its few supporters with little option other than to try to survive. From September 1939 through to the Battle of Britain a year later, all that Britain's leaders could realistically aspire to achieve was to hang on, which they did. In other words, survival was the grand strategy, even if it was not officially defined as such, and all military actions should have been directed towards that end, as in fact most were. Hitler's invasion of the USSR in June 1941 forced the Soviets to join the allied cause, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor six months later brought the United States into the war. Both strikes proved disastrous for the axis. Japan's attempted knock-out

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blow failed to force the Americans to retreat into isolationism, as the Imperial war cabinet had hoped; and Hitler's dream of establishing a Slavic empire foundered in the brutal winter and dreadful fighting at Stalingrad, Kursk and other epic battles on the Eastern Front.

By the middle of 1943 the military/industrial balance had started to change and it was reasonably clear that the allies would eventually win, even though a great deal of sacrifice and hardship would still be required. Also by this time the full extent of the depravity of the German and Japanese regimes had become apparent, which prompted a fundamental change in the allied grand strategy. Now, the allies declared that nothing less than the unconditional surrender of their enemies would be acceptable. There were other objectives the allies might have settled on, such as: a conditional surrender under which the axis could have retained certain political rights; a negotiated settlement along, say, the territorial boundaries as they existed at the time; and so on. The allies' supreme objective, however, had become the complete destruction of the Nazi and Imperial Japanese political and belief systems, which meant that unconditional victory could be their only logical grand strategy.

There was a direct linkage between that grand strategy and its subordinate military strategy, as should always be the case. Because the allies believed Germany represented a more immediate threat to civilised states than did Japan, they decided they should beat Hitler first, a judgment which greatly influenced priorities for the conduct of campaigns, the choice of theatres of operations, and the allocation of warfighting resources. And there were subsets within the 'beat Hitler first' strategy, such as the decision to mount a major campaign in North Africa late in 1942 because the allies were not strong enough to land in strength in Europe at the time. When the Nazis capitulated in May 1945 the allies' strategic situation changed and so too did their grand strategic objectives, as they turned their full attention against Japan.

THE ART OF WINNING

Trying to place a commonly accepted meaning on words is important for the obvious reason of establishing understanding. On the

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other hand, attempts to construct immutable definitions can place boundaries around commonsense and entrench inflexible thinking, which in turn can inhibit progress. Rather than trying to impose descriptions that might not only be confusing but also self-limiting, it is often more constructive simply to acknowledge that a particular word will be used broadly and to accept a practical, uncomplicated interpretation.

Regardless of whether our interest is retail business, diplomatic negotiations, or war, the fact that we believe we need a strategy implies involvement in competition of some kind. And it is by accepting the notion of ‘competition’ that the most useful interpretation of strategy emerges. In its purest, most straightforward expression, strategy is the art of winning. It is a theory of victory; it is how to win.

The key to using this meaning is to have a clear understanding of what is, and what is not, meant by ‘winning’. Like everything else in life, winning is relative. Consequently, once again, an open-minded interpretation of the concept is likely to be most useful as it will generate options and facilitate flexible thinking.

Almost invariably, if we believe we need a strategy either to shape or to respond to a particular set of events, our objective should be to achieve as much as possible from the available resources at the lowest affordable cost. This is a critical judgment because it implies that an end result perceived by one individual as a loss can be perceived by another as a win. The example of the Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 BCE has already been mentioned. In other words, depending on the point of view, a winning outcome might fall anywhere along a continuum of possibilities ranging from unconditional victory to acceptable defeat. The experience of the US-led alliance in Indochina between 1962 and 1975 further illustrates the point. By almost every military measure that alliance defeated its North Vietnamese and Vietcong enemies, inflicting huge human and material losses. But because of the politics of the situation all the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had to do to win was to not lose (‘victory denial’). Their success in applying that strategy eventually precipitated the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, which in turn was the precursor to the collapse of its puppet South Vietnamese government in 1975.

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People employ strategies for victory at every level of conflict. The definition of strategy as being ‘how to win’ applies just as much to a hand-to-hand fight between two infantrymen as it does to the grand strategy endorsed by a government in pursuit of the ultimate resolution of a clash of national wills. The difference between those two examples is in the effect their outcome is likely to have on the overall conflict. Individual combat is a matter of life or death for those involved, but in modern war it is unlikely to have much effect, if any, on the greater scheme of things. Conversely, according to Biblical legend, when the Israeli shepherd boy David killed the Philistine giant Goliath in single combat, the entire Philistine army yielded the field of battle.

Which leads to the notion of ‘strategic outcome’. A strategic outcome is one that has a profound effect on the event at issue. It is likely to be sudden, and will dramatically alter the state of affairs, the balance of power, who controls what, and so on. A strategic outcome represents the ideal end-state of any action, regardless of its size. In the extreme it may have the potential to achieve the objective in one decisive stroke, as in the case of David’s well-aimed blow. The use by the United States of atomic weapons to end the war with Japan is another obvious if controversial example, but one of an entirely different magnitude. Depending on the circumstances, the application of force may not even be needed: simply deploying military units can generate a strategic effect via deterrence. During the early phases of the UN-sanctioned operation to liberate East Timor in 1999–2000, for example, there were concerns that extremist elements of the Indonesian government and army might escalate their armed opposition to dangerous levels. The deployment of Australian Defence Force F-111 bombers to a base in northern Australia within range of Timor and key Indonesian targets, and of submarines to the Timor Sea, sent a message of intent that reportedly was understood in Jakarta and which, together with complementary non-military coercive measures, made it easier for wise heads to prevail.

The point should be stressed: in the pursuit of a strategic outcome, the concept of operations and the means employed are details. What matters is the effect that a particular action generates. The methods used by the terrorist organisations Hamas and Islamic Jihad in

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their efforts to drive Israeli forces of occupation out of Palestinian-mandated territories provide a useful if grotesque illustration. Lacking the kinds of military capabilities commonly associated with strategic operations, such as highly trained professional defence forces and advanced technology, those groups adopted the systematic use of suicide bombers as their primary warlike activity, with the expectation of achieving their ends by creating terror throughout Israel. It is noteworthy that this method was formalised only after the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad realised that the previously random acts of suicide bombers were in fact creating a strategic effect, partly through terror and partly through their exposure on the global media. That a single person with only several kilograms of explosive taped to their body could, in the prevailing circumstances, both represent a *strategy* and be a *strategic* weapon says a great deal about the nature of those words.

The mere existence of a strategy need not imply that its authors wish to pursue an immediate strategic outcome. On the contrary, as noted above, depending on the circumstances, an honourable defeat may satisfy the objective. Nor are the great majority of military actions, ranging from skirmishes between a handful of riflemen through to theatre-level campaigns involving tens of thousands of people and machines, likely to produce a strategic effect by themselves. But ideally every one of those actions should be relevant to the overall strategic objective.

In order to generate a strategic outcome, it is imperative that strategists identify both their own and their enemy's centre/s of gravity. Defined by the great nineteenth-century Prussian soldier and philosopher Carl von Clausewitz as 'a centre of power and movement . . . on which everything depends', there is no more powerful concept in strategic thinking than centre of gravity.¹ The suggestion that every protagonist will have one or more centres of gravity implies an essential focus for every strategic analysis and action, regardless of the level of conflict. Strategists and protagonists must be continually prepared to attack their enemy's centres and to defend their own.

Precisely what constitutes a centre of gravity is, of course, the crucial question. Is it the army? The leadership? The economy? Civilian morale? Does it vary between nations, cultures, eras? History is

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replete with examples of campaigns that failed because the wrong centres of gravity were attacked and protected, and with those that succeeded because one set of competing strategists got its centre-of-gravity analysis more or less right. The concept is so important that it will constantly recur throughout this book.

ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS

The essence of any strategy, varying from, say, a small advertising campaign to a theatre-level military campaign, is the relationship between ends, ways, and means, in which ‘ends’ is the objective, such as total victory, conditional victory, stalemate, or victory denial; ‘ways’ is the form through which a strategy is pursued, such as a military campaign, diplomacy, or economic sanctions; and ‘means’ is the resources available, for example, people, weapons, international influence and money. If the ends-ways-means relationship is not logical, practical, and clearly established from the outset, then the entire campaign is likely to be at risk, or at the least seriously flawed. It is here that one of the best-known aphorisms in military strategy comes into play, namely, Clausewitz’s conclusion that ‘war is a mere continuation of policy by other means’. Clausewitz’s seminal point is that ultimately war is a political act, and therefore every aspect of its conduct, including the development of strategy, must reflect the political dimension and must be designed to support the political objective. All activities undertaken in the pursuit of a strategy should be measured against that truism.

Translating that ideal into practice has not always been straightforward, especially in the modern era when it has become less common for a single individual to represent both the state and the military. Within liberal democracies, legislation invariably establishes the authority of representative civilian governments over the military, but it remains the case that in some states defence forces have enormous political power. Furthermore, elected representatives with vested interests, such as a large defence community or infrastructure in their home state, might promote parochial defence interests; while there can often be significant differences between the security policies promoted by a nation’s defence department and by its state

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department, with the United States providing the obvious example. An argument might be made that the model which best observed Clausewitz's dictum was the one established in the USSR after the Bolsheviks gained power in 1917, when political commissars who directly represented the Communist Party's policy position were attached to all military units, to oversee decision-making and to ensure conformity with national (as defined by the Party) objectives. While that system was frequently dysfunctional during World War II, when the political and ideological demands of the commissars could conflict with battlefield realities, the ruthless manner in which it was enforced ensured an exceptional degree of policy unity.

The element of the ends-ways-means nexus most responsive to Clausewitz's maxim is the ends. Before embarking on any campaign – that is, before attempting to put any strategy into practice – the desired political ends should be determined. In other words there should be a clear understanding of what, in the prevailing circumstances, is meant by winning. This is the crux of Clausewitz's stricture. The mere achievement of an apparently satisfactory military result may be of little consequence if it does not support the ultimate political objective; or if, more probably, the desired ends have not been clearly identified. Few better examples can be found than US President George H. Bush's experience following Operation Desert Storm during the 1991 Gulf War.

The international coalition led by the United States against Iraq's Saddam Hussein achieved a remarkably quick and conclusive military victory, routing the ostensibly powerful Iraqi armed forces in only forty-three days with relatively few friendly casualties. Bush and his Administration had, however, thought little beyond the military operation. It was one thing to drive the Iraqi invaders out of occupied Kuwait, but the political question remained: what then?

In the event, when the coalition's commanding General, Norman Schwarzkopf, attended a hastily arranged meeting with his Iraqi counterparts to draft an instrument of surrender, he had almost no guidance from Bush regarding the required political ends. What was the envisaged post-war political form of defeated Iraq? How would that affect the balance of power in the Middle East? How would the numerous dissident groups in Iraq respond to Saddam's defeat? What

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did the coalition want to do with Saddam? How would other influential players react to US actions? Working in a political vacuum, Schwarzkopf was understandably uncertain and, as it happened, in the longer term, not surprisingly, unsuccessful. Within weeks of the war's conclusion Saddam Hussein was again dominating Iraq, and within a year was again perceived as a major threat to international security. Indeed, despite his army's humiliation in 1991, by the mid-1990s Saddam could with some justification claim to have won a political victory of sorts over the United States.

An even more unexpected outcome followed the second US-led war in Iraq in 2003. Having decided this time that Saddam Hussein's regime had to be forcibly removed, coalition military forces directed by the Administration of President George W. Bush (George H. Bush's son) took only weeks to crush the political and military apparatus of Saddam's ruling Ba'athist Party. Largely ignorant of Iraqi culture and social mores, this second Bush Administration had expected that military victory would be accompanied by a spontaneous outbreak of democracy and the installation of an Iraqi government favourable to Western interests. Instead, what followed was a campaign of attacks against US forces and urban terrorism, as many Iraqis who might have detested Saddam nevertheless resented even more the presence of Western invaders.

One of the reasons for President George H. Bush's vacillation in 1991 was his concern that if he forced Saddam and his minority Sunni supporters out of office, the balance of power in Iraq would shift to the majority Shi'ites, who might introduce a theocratic governance similar to that in neighbouring Iran, and which was hostile to US interests. Ironically, following his son's military victory but political failure, that is precisely what happened when the free elections that were held in Iraq early in 2005 returned a dominant Shi'ite government that increasingly began to reflect conservative Islamic values. Furthermore, it might also prove to be the case that the second US invasion of Iraq hastened Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, as protection against becoming a similar target of US military intervention in the future. And it is possible that the invasion convinced otherwise moderate Palestinians to vote the extremist Hamas party into power in January 2006.