

1 *Confronting Trade-offs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness*

DAN REITER

Since antiquity, perhaps the most commonly studied question of international politics has been, Who wins wars? Very regrettably, violent conflict in the international system has endured into the twenty-first century, notwithstanding the “End of History” hope that the close of the Cold War might usher in a new era of permanent peace. Many wars between states have been waged since 1990, and even more conflicts within states have erupted and raged. Millions have died in violent, political conflict since then, and there is no end in sight to this curse on humanity.

This grim legacy means that twenty-first-century scholars and policy makers still must think about how both to avoid conflict and to use force effectively in the event of conflict. Even peace-loving leaders need to think about using force effectively, to deter and if necessary fend off violent attacks and in pursuit of humanitarian missions. Leaders must think both about how to engage effectively in long-standing forms of conflict, such as conventional and insurgent wars, and about how to engage in new forms of conflict, such as cyberwarfare and drone strikes.

This book endeavors to help scholars and policy makers better understand the pursuit of military effectiveness, past, present, and future, making two central contributions. First, it pushes the study of military effectiveness in new directions, exploring elements of military effectiveness that are just emerging in the twenty-first century and applying new ideas to the study of enduring questions of military effectiveness. Though this is a scholarly area that has received substantial attention, especially in recent years, the contributions in this book demonstrate that there is yet much to be learned.

Second, the book presents and develops an essential and often underappreciated proposition: *the pursuit of military effectiveness often incurs important trade-offs*. Most phenomena or policies thought to affect military effectiveness do not have simple, limited consequences,

either for a belligerent's likelihood of success in combat or for other values the belligerent might hold dear. The contributions in this volume each discuss a particular element of military effectiveness within the context of exploring how the pursuit of that aspect of effectiveness risks incurring trade-offs. The trade-offs discussed in these chapters fall into three categories: political support, security threats, and war fighting. Failure to recognize these trade-offs encourages a reductionist, incomplete view of military effectiveness that falls short of a complete understanding of war and undermines quality decision making.

This chapter serves to frame the rest of the book. It first discusses the concept of military effectiveness, presenting a new definition. It then lays out the three categories of trade-offs. Last, it presents a road map of the chapters in the rest of the volume.

Thinking about Military Effectiveness

Scholars, political leaders, and generals back to antiquity have considered what factors might help militaries win wars, including ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides as well as Chinese thinkers such as Sun Tzu. Machiavelli paid great attention to mastery of the art of war as part of the art of statecraft. Enlightenment thinkers and political leaders such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Thomas Paine applied their broader political ideas to narrower military effectiveness questions, for instance, examining factors that determine how effectively a society can muster resources for war and motivate its soldiers to fight and die in battle.¹

Observers past and present have focused not only on how belligerents win wars but also on how belligerents and their militaries accomplish the smaller, instrumental tasks that accumulate to eventual victory in war. Focusing on the individual tasks within war rather than just observing who wins and loses wars enables avoiding the assumption that war winners performed all war-related tasks well and war losers performed all war-related tasks poorly. History is, of course, littered with examples of militaries that performed many war-related tasks well but still lost the war, such as Germany in World War II, or performed

¹ Reiter and Stam (2002, esp. Chapter 3); Gilbert (1986).

many war-related tasks poorly but managed to win the war, such as the Soviet Union in the Winter War.

There is space here to survey very briefly only recent political science scholarship on military effectiveness, a limited selection of the vast amount of social scientific and historical work on military effectiveness. In general, modern political scientists have examined a range of phenomena associated with the successful accomplishment of tasks that contribute to victory in war. A mainstream line of thinking has emphasized the importance of military–industrial power for winning wars and in turn explored whether factors such as domestic politics or having a central bank affect the ability of belligerents to acquire the economic resources needed to field powerful militaries.² Other work has examined the sophistication and the size of belligerents' armed forces, examining factors that make a military more or less likely to adopt (effectively) a particular strategic or technological innovation, and in turn other studies have examined whether higher levels of military technology affect conflict outcomes.³ Other studies have argued that it is not only the forces being deployed in combat but also the plans for the deployment of forces in combat that strongly affect effectiveness. Military strategy, doctrine, and force employment are all seen as determinants of operational success in conflicts such as conventional wars, aerial bombing campaigns, and nonconventional conflicts such as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns (and scholars have also looked at factors, such as domestic politics and combat outcomes, that shape how states choose their strategies, doctrines, and force employment strategies).⁴ Several works have taken Napoleon Bonaparte's dictum that “the moral is to the physical as three to one”

² Organski and Kugler (1980); Desch (2008); Beckley (2010); Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003); Schultz and Weingast (2003); Lake (1992); Reiter and Stam (2002, Chapter 5); Cappella Zielinski (2016); Poast (2015); Shea (2014).

³ Evangelista (1988); Rosen (1991); Gartner (1997); Horowitz (2010); Biddle and Zirkle (1996); Goldman and Eliason (2003); Biddle and Long (2004); Resende-Santos (2007); Lyall and Wilson (2009); Biddle (2004); Levi (1997).

⁴ Biddle (2004); Avant (1994); Kier (1997); Arreguín-Toft (2005); Gartner (1997); Mearsheimer (1983); Stam (1996); Pape (1996); Horowitz and Reiter (2001); Krepinevich (1986); Johnston (2012); Johnston and Sarbahi (forthcoming); Peic (2014); Lyall (2009, 2010); Price (2012); Long (2014); Jordan (2009); Reiter and Meek (1999); Snyder (1984); Merom (2003); Brooks (2008); Grauer and Horowitz (2012). For a discussion on several aspects of military effectiveness, see the contributions in Brooks and Stanley (2007).

to suggest the importance of troop morale for affecting military effectiveness, exploring factors affecting soldiers' motivations to fight and die, such as nationalism, regime type, small group bonding, and social cleavages.⁵

Further studies have explored a variety of other sources of military effectiveness, such as military leadership quality, civil–military relations, human capital factors such as education, and wartime coalitions.⁶ Some have also developed more subtle arguments, such as that the ability to win wars is strongly determined by the decision to start wars and that states that are smarter about starting wars, such as democracies, are more likely to win.⁷ Others have proposed that the likelihood of victory is related to the nature of the stakes the states are fighting over.⁸

Though debates continue to rage over the sources of military effectiveness, and the sources of military effectiveness vary across different modes of conflict, one overall pattern is that nonmaterial sources of military effectiveness, such as military strategy, domestic political factors, nationalism, and military leadership, are likely at least as important as military factors, such as the balance of forces or sophistication of weaponry.

This body of work has examined factors that affect the abilities of belligerents to accomplish tasks that contribute to victory. We define military effectiveness in line with this theme, conceiving military effectiveness as *the degree to which militaries can accomplish at acceptable costs the goals assigned to them by political leaders*. We make two observations about this definition. First, within the political ends–military means chain of grand strategy, our definition focuses on military means, leaving aside how leaders conceptualize political ends. Second, though the definition incorporates efficiency, it does not equate effectiveness with efficiency. In this regard, our definition deviates slightly from the efficiency emphasis of the widely used definition of

⁵ Shils and Janowitz (1948); Levi (1997); Peled (1998); Reiter and Stam (2002, Chapter 3); Castillo (2014); Rosen (1996); Reiter (2007); Posen (1993); Lyall (2016). For critique of the small group thesis, see King (2016).

⁶ Rotte and Schmidt (2003); Reiter and Wagstaff (forthcoming); Quinlivan (1999); Brooks (2008); Pilster and Böhmelt (2011, 2012); Choi (2003, 2012); Lake (1992); Biddle and Long (2004); Talmadge (2015).

⁷ Bueno de Mesquita (1981); Reiter and Stam (2002); Weeks (2014). See also Desch (2008); Brown et al. (2011).

⁸ Sullivan (2012).

military effectiveness crafted by Allan Millett and his colleagues: “the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power.”⁹ Though efficiency, the accomplishment of military tasks at lower costs, is an important component of effectiveness, the two terms should not be viewed as equal. For example, some belligerents deliberately adopt strategies and tactics they know to be costly, and therefore perhaps inefficient, because they view such approaches as necessary to achieving their desired goals and are willing to pay higher costs to accomplish these goals. Examples of inefficient but effective approaches include certain Soviet ground warfare tactics in World War II, including the use of blocking units described in Chapter 4, authored by Jason Lyall, in this volume, and human wave tactics employed by China in the Korean War. One might also view American economic provision of weapons and other logistical support during World War II as both inefficient, in the sense that there was a tremendous amount of waste, and effective, in the sense that these efforts were critically important for Allied victory.¹⁰

Trade-offs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness

Some existing scholarship on military effectiveness takes a narrow approach, evaluating the connection between a single causal phenomenon and a single element of military effectiveness, such as whether nationalism affects soldiers’ willingness to fight. Policy makers also sometimes take narrow views of proposals to advance military effectiveness, thinking about specific effects of a particular weapon system or strategy and failing to consider the variety of possible consequences that might ensue. For example, the 1961 American decision to use herbicides, such as Agent Orange, in the insurgency conflict in South Vietnam apparently failed to consider a number of possible drawbacks, such as degradation of agricultural production for non-Viet Cong South Vietnamese civilians and negative health consequences for South Vietnamese civilians and US forces.¹¹

One classic observation about unexamined consequences of fighting wars is the concern that war, even victory in war, may impose a

⁹ Millett et al. (1988, 2). On defining military effectiveness, see also Brooks and Stanley (2007, 9); Talmadge (2015, 5); Rosen (1995, 6).

¹⁰ Atkinson (2007); Overy (1995). ¹¹ Buckingham (1983).

sacrifice of national values, including human and economic costs, that exceeds the stakes of the conflict. A military victory that incurs unacceptably high costs has been called a Pyrrhic victory, so named from the experience of the Greek king Pyrrhus of Epirus. Pyrrhus's army defeated Roman forces at Heraclea and Asculum around 279 BCE at the expense of unacceptably high Epiroean battle fatalities. Plutarch records that after being told of a battlefield victory by one of his commanders, Pyrrhus replied, "If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined."¹² This core insight was famously reframed by Carl von Clausewitz in his nineteenth-century masterpiece *On War*, where he stated famously that war is politics "carried on with other means,"¹³ the means of war serving political ends. And certainly a number of modern conflicts have been critiqued as being waged at costs dwarfing the issues at stake. The most horrifying war of the modern era may have been the 1860s Lopez War, in which Paraguay lost some 50 percent of its prewar population.¹⁴ Britain spent a staggering 2 percent of its annual gross domestic product to wage a military expedition in 1867–1868 in Abyssinia to rescue a mere seven European hostages.¹⁵ Bernard Brodie critiqued European decision making before and during World War I, proposing that European leaders lost sight of the political motivations for fighting.¹⁶ Many have made a similar point about the Vietnam War, sometimes pointing to the 1968 statement of an American major that "it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it" as reflective of the loss of American political perspective during the war. More colorfully, the absurdity of the decades-long India–Pakistan conflict over the Siachen glacier has been captured by the comparison of the conflict with "a struggle of two bald men over a comb."¹⁷

¹² <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pyrrhus.html#21>.

¹³ Clausewitz (1976, 87) ¹⁴ Clodfelter (2008, 346).

¹⁵ Caverley (2014, 156–157). One part of what Millett et al. (1988) describe as "strategic effectiveness," linking military operations within broader foreign policy goals, might be seen as allowing for the inclusion of political costs. But accounting for foreign policy goals in this way is beyond their general definition of military effectiveness, the conversion of resources into fighting power. The question of how well military operations fit within broader foreign policy goals is more generally framed within the purview of grand strategy rather than as part of military effectiveness.

¹⁶ Brodie (1973). ¹⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-26967340.

Beyond the “Pyrrhic victory” claim, scholars and policy makers have sometimes considered the possibility that the pursuit of military effectiveness risks other kinds of trade-offs. However, past discussions of these trade-offs have occurred mostly in isolation from each other, and scholars have not yet taken the next step of recognizing the ubiquity and similarities of these trade-offs. This chapter, and the book more generally, advances our understanding of military effectiveness by taking this next step, proposing that trade-offs are common to the pursuit of military effectiveness and that there are important common elements that tie these trade-offs together into categories. Specifically, this chapter builds a conceptual framework for three main types of trade-offs: *political support*, *security threats*, and *war fighting*. The chapter describes the trade-offs themselves as well as past scholarship and historical episodes that describe these trade-offs. Each of the chapters that follow describes in greater theoretical and empirical detail the presence of one or more of these trade-offs within a single area of military effectiveness.

Political Support

If, as Clausewitz wrote, war is politics by other means, then necessarily wars are fought in political contexts. One context is domestic politics. The pursuit of military effectiveness might undermine public support for war by increasing friendly military casualties, friendly civilian casualties, and/or the financial costs of war. There has been substantial scholarly discussion of the first category, how the escalation of friendly military casualties risks undermining public support for war, and it is the central theme of Chapter 2, on force protection, by Emanuele Castelli and Lorenzo Zambernardi. A substantial body of scholarship has documented that increases in friendly military casualties can reduce public support for war, for the simple reason that as casualties climb, the public becomes less likely to view the war as worthwhile. There are nuances to this relationship, as, for example, if the stakes are high enough, then higher friendly casualties might not reduce support, and an individual’s support for war is more likely to be affected negatively by casualties if the people who died had lived in the individual’s geographic region or are part of the individual’s social network. Some also speculate that other factors, such as elite rhetoric or public perceptions on whether the war is being won, have greater

effects on public support than casualty rates. But overall, the supporting empirical evidence for the casualties–public support proposition is impressive.¹⁸

Increased friendly *civilian* casualties might also undermine public support for war. This question received great interest in the 1920s and 1930s, when theorists speculated that strategic bombing of cities and the accumulation of civilian casualties in the next war would quickly push publics to demand their governments to end the war. Any state whose public was vulnerable to strategic bombing would be unable to fight long wars. Strikingly, however, the historical record indicates that bombing civilians failed to increase public opposition to war and in some case may have had the opposite effect.¹⁹ Occasionally, belligerents take the related tack of seeking to undermine an adversary's public's support for war by using the adversary's civilians as human shields, the idea being that the adversary's public will shy away from war because those captured civilians might be jeopardized. As Saddam Hussein learned in fall 1990, this strategy is ineffective.²⁰

Conflict scholars have drawn another connection between friendly civilian deaths and public support for war with regard to counterinsurgency (COIN). Mainstream COIN theory recognizes that counterinsurgent attacks that kill civilians undermine public support for COIN forces, making victory more difficult. Others also speculate that insurgent attacks on civilians undermine public support for insurgents. Indeed, the escalating brutality of al-Qaeda against Iraqi civilians during the postinvasion Iraqi insurgency in the 2000s may have been one reason why the tide of the war shifted in favor of US COIN forces in late 2007.²¹ American air strikes on South Vietnamese targets during the Vietnam War increased local support for the Viet Cong.²² Some empirical work has found different relationships, for example, one study found that Russian artillery strikes on Chechen villages in the Second Chechen War had the effect of reducing Chechen insurgent violence.²³

¹⁸ Mueller (1973); Gartner et al. (1997); Gartner and Segura (1998); Gartner (2008a, 2008b); Gartner and Segura (2008); Berinsky (2009); Gelpi et al. (2009).

¹⁹ Pape (1996); Horowitz and Reiter (2001).

²⁰ www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_human_shields.

²¹ Ricks (2009a). ²² Kocher et al. (2012). See also Kalyvas (2006).

²³ Lyall (2009).

A third avenue by which the pursuit of military effectiveness might reduce public support for war is if such pursuits are financially costly. War costs money, and citizens may not be willing to sacrifice butter to acquire guns. There is a growing body of literature on the connection between financial expenditures and support for war, and it is the main topic of Chapter 3, authored by Rosella Cappella Zielinski.²⁴

Beyond the intrinsic costs of greater bloodshed and the diversion of economic resources, the trade-off of eroded public support for war has other consequences, including potentially affecting a belligerent's prosecution of its war, forcing a belligerent to exit a war short of (decisive) victory, and undermining the belligerent's leadership's hold on political power. Regarding a belligerent's prosecution of war, eroded public support or the prospect of eroding public support can have several effects on how a war is fought. An excessive focus on minimizing friendly casualties, or force protection, can undermine aggressiveness, slowing the ability of an army to capture territory. In the American Civil War, for example, President Abraham Lincoln tabbed Union general George McClellan as having a case of the "slows," as

McClellan moved his forces with caution, often out of concern for risking higher casualties. Only when McClellan was replaced by more aggressive generals such as William T. Sherman, Ulysses Grant, and Philip Sheridan who were more willing to accept Union casualties, was the Union finally able to break the back of the Confederate Army and save the American republic.²⁵

Force protection concerns can encourage other military strategies, including capital-intensive strategies that emphasize firepower over labor-intensive strategies that risk troops.²⁶ Others have proposed that states sensitive to friendly casualties may adopt military strategies that may reduce friendly casualties at the expense of increasing foreign casualties, including foreign civilian casualties.²⁷ The most extreme example of this last dynamic, perhaps, is the 1945 American decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in hopes of ending the war before a very bloody American amphibious invasion of the Japanese home islands might become necessary.²⁸

The other side of the force protection trade-off is that leaders sometimes recognize that they must accept friendly casualties to accomplish

²⁴ See Flores-Macías and Kreps (2013, forthcoming); Kriner et al. (2015).

²⁵ McPherson (1988). ²⁶ Caverley (2014). ²⁷ Downes (2008).

²⁸ Frank (1999).

important operational goals. The World War II American general George Patton was ruthlessly willing to sacrifice his own troops in pursuit of operational objectives, such as speed of advance. During the 1943 Sicily campaign in World War II, Patton remarked that if his forces could reach Messina a single day earlier if it meant “losing additional men,” then he would be willing to “lose them.”²⁹ Perhaps accordingly, Patton’s troops sometimes cynically interpreted his nickname of “Old Blood and Guts” as “our blood, his guts.”

War-fighting strategies aside, declining public support may constrain a belligerent’s access to human and economic resources. At the limit, publics may riot in protest of conscription, as occurred in the Union during the American Civil War.³⁰ The specter of opposition may push leaders to seek an end to the war rather than fighting with insufficient resources or risking political upheaval. Following the January 1968 Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, the Johnson administration rejected the military-recommended option of escalation of American involvement, in part because doing so would increase American casualties and impose substantial strains on the American economy, both of which would further undermine public opinion. Democracies in particular face these possibilities of escalating human and financial³¹ costs pushing elected leaders to exit wars faster. Indeed, General George C. Marshall once observed, “A democracy cannot fight a seven years’ war.”³²

The pressures presented by this public support trade-off toward, for example, fighting shorter wars or minimizing civilian casualties may have positive or negative effects on military effectiveness, as described in Castelli and Zambenardi’s Chapter 2. For example, a maneuver-based strategy, chosen to keep the war short and low cost, may also make victory more likely.³³ Jonathan Caverley proposed that American military strategy in Vietnam was ineffective in part because the imperative toward force protection encouraged an emphasis on firepower over manpower, an approach ultimately ineffective in fighting insurgencies.³⁴

²⁹ Quoted in Atkinson (2007, 143).

³⁰ On conscription and public support, see Vasquez (2005); Horowitz, Simpson, and Stam (2011); James and Choi (2005). On the Civil War, see McPherson (1988).

³¹ Hallek (1998, 509); Herring (1996, 222–223).

³² Reiter and Stam (2002, Chapter 7). ³³ Reiter and Stam (2002).

³⁴ Caverley (2014).