

Military Strategy in War and Peace: Some Conclusions

Holger H. Herwig

“Everything in war is very simple,” Prussia’s premier military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, famously stated, “but the simplest thing is difficult.”¹ Strategy falls into that description. Almost no other term in military terminology has been so much and so often abused. Even the most fleeting scanning of major journals and newspapers, the briefest listening to national news casts, reveals a horrendous application of the term: the “strategy” of crossing a desert, the “strategy of storming a hill, the “strategy” of pacifying a village, the “strategy of securing a road, the “strategy” of winning the hearts and minds of indigenous populations—these are but a few of the misapplications of the term with which we are constantly bombarded by both reporters and so-called experts in the field. Not that the military has been much better in applying the term: two well-known modern commanders, Erich Ludendorff in World War I and Bernard Montgomery in World War II, never quite understood it either; the former thought of strategy as the act of merely punching a hole in the enemy’s lines, while the latter cautioned his staff that strategy was strategy only if and when he, Montgomery, said it was.

The participants of an international Strategy Workshop at the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary in July 2010 were given a pre-conference questionnaire asking them to address eight questions on the broader notions (and implications) of strategy in their various historical case studies. These discussion

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), p. 119.

points in many ways reflected the core of the “Strategy and Policy” course originally devised at the U.S. Naval War College by Admiral Stansfield Turner. At the highest level, students are asked to define national policy: the art and science of applying and coordinating all the elements of national power (military, economic, financial, diplomatic, psychological, and technological) to achieve national political objectives in peacetime and war. Thereafter, they are asked to identify the military strategy chosen to achieve that national policy: the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to accomplish national policy objectives by the application of force or by the threat of force in support of military strategy. The third leg of this policy-strategy triad delves into the policy-strategy matrix: Were the military means chosen appropriate to the political objective? Were the costs and risks of war accurately anticipated? Were alternate strategies considered? Was there timely reassessment? To evaluate these difficult questions, students are given sub-headings such as the adequacy of strategy, the social dimensions of strategy, the role of allies, prewar plans and wartime reality, civil-military relations, and, finally, war termination. The hope is that by a series of complex historical case studies, ranging from antiquity to the nuclear age, students will be able to formulate sophisticated appreciations of policy and strategy, and in the process to raise their sights above operations and tactics.

The Calgary workshop in part stemmed from a fear shared by many that what currently passes as military history, especially in Canada, is rigidly rooted in tactics (the art and science of preparing and conducting battles, engagements, strikes and attacks designed to accomplish operational objectives in a given combat sector or zone) and rarely manages to elevate even to the level of operations (the theory and the practice of planning, conducting, and sustaining major operations and campaigns designed to realize strategic objectives in a given theater). Thus, the essays selected for this volume are designed to encourage further debate especially at the policy and strategy levels.

Burkhard Meißner of the Helmut-Schmidt University of the Bundeswehr at Hamburg reminds us that the struggle in the Western World to define military terminology in general, and policy and strategy in particular, dates back to ancient Greece. Especially in Athens, a political and intellectual culture greatly affected the way in which wars were fought. Over time, a loose rotating system of command yielded to a highly specialized, semi-professional command structure. In the emerging system of

strategic decision making, Athenians maintained political control over military operations by way of personal responsibility to the polity, policy making by popular assembly, and public control over military expenses. What Meißner calls a “process of literalization and intellectualization of war” gradually created the first notional distinction between tactics and strategy in European literature. And from the Socratic criticism of Sophistic teaching we derived the later Clausewitzian notion of a functional hierarchy between tactics and strategy. By the fifth century BC, Athenians had raised the basic questions of the Strategy Workshop: What is the nature of military activity? How does military command function? What knowledge does military command require? And by what institutions and structure is that knowledge presented? While not perfect, Athenian political and military leaders had come to grips with the major questions of policy and strategy.

Almost two millennia later, on 15 July 1410, a bewildering plethora of Lithuanian, Livonian, Polish, Prussian, and Russian forces fought a “Great War” in the marshes and forests of Tannenberg-Grünfelde for access to the Baltic sea ports and control of East Europe. Martin Hofbauer of the Military History Research Office (MGFA) at Potsdam reminds us that this “first battle of Tannenberg” (a second followed in 1914) was one of the largest battles in Medieval Europe; that it featured a classic confrontation among regional powers with vast international networks; that it was fought not for religious or ideological but rather political and strategic interests; and that it featured such “modern” concepts as preemptive strikes, deception, diversions, and “bogus withdrawals” in classic Sun Tzu fashion. Policy and strategy were closely intertwined and, along with alliance-building and alliance-denial, decided the issue. Tactics and technological advantage played tertiary roles.

It is a well-known adage that no amount of operational or tactical dexterity can overcome a flawed policy-strategy match. Michael Epkenhans, chief military historian of the MGFA, documents this adage in an examination of German national-military policy before World War I. In a classic case of “getting it wrong,” German policy makers and military planners abandoned Otto von Bismarck’s defensive continental posture after 1871 in favor of an offensive, global expansion—without ever adjusting policy or strategy to match the paradigm shift. Jettisoning a critical alliance with Russia, ignoring European geography, casting aside the primacy of politics in national affairs,

and utterly refusing to take financial capabilities into consideration, Wilhelm II and a small coterie of advisors in what has been described as “polycratic chaos” lurched from one crisis to another, before finally taking the “leap into the dark” in 1914. Policy and strategy coexisted in Imperial Germany as separate entities, devoid of coordination and fine tuning.

As a useful counterpoint to the imperial German case, Alexander Hill of the Department of History at the University of Calgary reminds us that even when a state gets its military strategy “right,” this still does “not guarantee a successful outcome.” The Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin was “strategically prepared for war in June 1941,” but a combination of poor operational and tactical deployment allowed the Wehrmacht to score huge victories by way not of better strategy, but of “operational and tactical competence.” Only over the course of a full summer of reassessment was the Red Army able to improve at the operational and tactical levels, and in the critical area of resource mobilization, largely by way of reverting to its prewar strategic planning. Examining in detail the actions of the “small decision-making elite headed by Stalin” in May 1941, Hill argues that the “inopportune operational-strategic deployment” on 22 June 1941 was overcome only over time and at great cost on the basis of a long-term strategic policy that had prepared the Soviet Union for war against Germany since the 1930s. In short, strategy momentarily ignored can be as dangerous as strategy permanently ignored. The major difference, at least in the Soviet case, was that a solid strategic-decision making process temporarily abandoned could be resuscitated and redeployed.

Eugenia Kiesling from the History Department at the U.S. Military Academy plays the devil’s advocate insofar as she challenges the accepted wisdom (“strategic paradigm”) that “good strategy always beats good tactics.” Using the French example of 1914 as a case study, she argues, first, that nations often make bad strategic choices because they are the only options available; and second, that “incompetence—famously lampooned by British Prime Minister David Lloyd George standing beside a life-size portrait of Douglas Haig, putting his hand to the top of the cavalry boots, and quipping that the field marshal was brilliant up to there—often is not the reason for bad strategy. Instead, she offers two plausible causes: Leon Festinger’s notion of cognitive dissonance and her own theory of the tyranny of the mundane. The former allowed German Chief

of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke to execute the Schlieffen Plan when he knew in his heart of hearts that its projected forty-day march to Paris was fatally flawed; the latter allowed his French counterpart, Joseph Joffre, to ignore serious warnings that the German main offensive would move west of the Meuse River, and instead to concentrate on the minutia of a dated operations Plan XVII. Cognitive processes, then, rather than sheer incompetence often are at the root of bad strategy.

And “sheer incompetence” brings me to the final paper. Wick Murray, retired academic and current Beltway bandit, first focused my attention in this notion by pointing out to me that Lloyd George in the index of his highly flavorful *War Memoirs* included under the term “military mind” subheadings such as “narrowness of,” “stubbornness of,” “does not seem to understand arithmetic,” “impossibility of trusting,” and “regards thinking as a form of mutiny.”² Thus, I was prepared for a classic Murray piece on the incompetence of U.S. commander in Iraq and Afghanistan. But to my surprise, Murray’s discussion of “grand strategy” was never diatribe nor prescription. Grand strategy to him is a “matter of great states and great states alone.” It is about carefully choosing options, balancing risks, and adjusting aims to means. No amount of operational virtuosity can redeemed a flawed national policy. Errors in operations and tactics can be corrected over the course of a prolonged war; policy and strategy mismatches “live forever.” Reflecting my opening citation from Clausewitz, Murray argues that the execution of grand strategy is exceedingly difficult. “No theoretical construct, no set of abstract principles, no political science model can capture its essence.” It is art more than science. It is a complex “intertwining of political, social and economic realities with military power.” Perhaps, it is like the making of French peasant soup: a mixture of items thrown helter-skelter into the pot over the course of a week without any recipe, and then eaten! In that case, it is time to dismiss the hosts of “analysts” that the government lavishly maintains from the best Political Science departments in the United States, and to replace them with students of Thucydides, Polybius, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and other great thinks of the past who cogitated upon war. Just a thought.

² David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (London, 1936), vol. 2, p. 2088.

These brief comments on a few research papers, which themselves are but précis of much larger research projects, are intended to highlight work being done on the policy and strategy matrix of major Western powers over the past three millennia. They are selected for comment because they show that from Ancient Greece to NATO in the Balkans, the vexing issues of formulating national policy and then fashioning a strategy to realize that policy remain central to any analysis of military affairs. There does exist what Kiesling calls a “strategy paradigm.” It is important that nations, especially decent ones, get the delicate policy-strategy balance right. There is no single formula for this. It is a constant act of assessing and reassessing. It usually involves unhappy compromises. It is always political in nature. In the fourth volume of the British official history of World War II dealing with *Grand Strategy*, Michael Howard gave what just might be as close as we will ever come to an all-embracing, all-satisfying definition of that policy-strategy match:

Grand strategy . . . consisted basically in the mobilization and deployment of national resources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime.³

For the United States, and for its allies and friends, that remains the challenge in the twenty-first century.

³ J. R. M. Butler, ed., *Grand Strategy* (6 vols., London, 1956-76), vol. 4, p. 1.