

What is strategy?

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Resumé

Denna artikel är en kopia av slutkapitlet i författarens kommande bok: *Strategic Thinking and Other Delusions*. Den publiceras av ERPIC – European Rim and Partnership Investment Council i Cypern. Temat är den definition av strategi som formulerats av den franske generalen Poirier: Strategi är vetenskapen och konsten att manövrera krafter i syfte att uppnå politiska mål. Artikeln diskuterar de olika termerna i denna definition.

MOST OF THE chapters in my coming book *Strategic Thinking and Other Delusions* treat strategy in one way or another. It is time to round up by a discussion of this subject.

There are many definitions of strategy, in fact, most strategic authors use their own. I use the one given by General Poirier: strategy is the science and art of manoeuvring forces in order to achieve political objectives.

We will now discuss the different parts of this definition.

Strategy

The French philosopher Jean Guitton has written that if metaphysics is the highest form of thinking, then strategy is the highest form of action. In fact, strategy is about action – a science of action or a praxeology according to French philosopher Raymond Aron.

Strategy is linked to politics; it is politics in action in the context of (potential) conflict. A government elaborates a political project based on its political goals and objectives. These are, in turn, based on the general culture, strategic culture, and Weltanschauung of the political party(-ies) in power. Then the government, the One, elaborates a strategy in order to fulfil that political project against

the Other. But then the Other has to elaborate a strategy that counters the strategy of the One. Which in turn leads to that the One has to recalibrate his strategy. Strategy is, thus, formed in a dialectical relationship between the One and the Other.

This dialectic relationship is well mirrored in the definition formulated by General André Beaufre: “The art of the dialectic of forces or more exactly the art of the dialectics of will using force to solve their conflict”. He also used the simile of the fight between two fencers. However, this – and the discussion above about the One and the Other is a gross simplification. There are always more parties than two – more or less involved in a conflict.

In fact, dialectic reasoning is common in strategy. There are dialectical relationships between, for example: war and peace, offensive and defensive, as well as between victory and defeat.

Dialectic¹ is often misunderstood as: thesis – anti-thesis – synthesis. In reality it is a kind of three-dimensional spiral where the succeeding turns increases our understanding of a phenomena.

From this reasoning follows that strategy is formed in a (potential) conflict of wills.

The use of the word strategy for, e.g., handling the climate crisis is, consequently, not adequate. In fact, the word strategy is today used in many, too many, contexts. There are gender strategies, industrial strategies, business strategies, economic strategies etc. Sometimes, these “strategies” are correlated to the idea of strategy that this book is built on, more often not.

And perhaps, this is the reason why strategy is such a fascinating subject. In order to succeed, the strategist has to analyse all human aspects: history, social, technology, economy, and psychology, both regarding himself and the Other. Strategy is, indeed, multidisciplinary.

“War is a chameleon” Clausewitz wrote. Each war is different, which means that the specific character of a conflict needs a thorough analysis. The wars that have been fought on false premises are frequent in history. Vietnam is one example, Iraq 2003 another, and the present war in Ukraine a third. The prize for having mistaken the character of the war one is engaging in is usually high.

Strategic culture is the sum of the nation’s experience regarding war and conflict. Sweden, in peace since 1814, and Great Britain with its frequent wars obviously do not have the same strategic culture. But the idea of strategic culture is controversial.

Strategy is always elaborated in the past but carried out in the future. As a consequence, there is a distance in time – long or short – between a strategy’s conception and its implementation. During that time much may happen.

In the French language, it is possible to make a difference between two kinds of strategists: the *stratégiste* that discusses strategy as a subject matter and the *stratège* who has to elaborate and carry out strategy. Today, it is rare that the same person fulfils both roles; most *stratégistes* are civilian academics

working in universities and thinktanks while *stratèges* are military commanders and their staffs or academics working for the government. There are of course those who have served in both roles: Field Marshal Raimondo Montecuccoli, General Carl von Clausewitz, General André Beaufre, and General James Mattis are some examples. Usually, they have first held command and then formulated their strategic thinking. Admiral Raoul Castex and the diplomat Henry Kissinger are two examples of strategists that have gone back and forth between these two roles. Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch is a rather unusual case: he first – as a professor at the French War College – formulated strategic thoughts and theories and then – as commander during the Great War – had to use strategy in order to achieve the victory of the Entente against Germany.

Science and art

The last paragraph above shows how strategy is both a science and an art, but usually not at the same time.

It is a science because there are strategic theories and a history of strategic theories. These can be discussed and analysed. Foch found that strategy is a science in the same way as there are musicology and art science. A difference is that in art science, it is possible to test various solutions to a problem. If a painting is not good, it can be changed or the artist can try a new idea without too high a cost. This is obviously not possible in strategy as “If strategy is done badly, humans can die in large numbers” (British-American academic Colin Gray). Some lessons can be learned during wargames and exercises but it is not possible to simulate the dynamics of battle where, indeed, humans often die in large numbers.

History is our only empirical evidence. However, it is, evidently, of utmost impor-

tance to differentiate between temporary and constant factors. History is full of generals that have tried to use history too literally and failed – the various attempts to replay the Carthaginian General and statesman Barca Hannibal’s victory at Cannae (216 BC) are a good examples.

Strategy is also an art, in the sense of engineering being an art. The trinity as elaborated by Clausewitz the Commander represents creative spirit in an environment characterized by chance, probability, and danger. Today, the commander has a number of technological gadgets to help him to decide. But the decision is still his. The acronym C4ISTAR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance) promises Dominant Battlespace Awareness (DBA) – the commander has full control of what’s happening. This is a lure, however, as he cannot know what’s going on in the Other’s brain, to take an obvious example. But the hope of achieving DBA may tempt the commander to wait for complete knowledge – the successful commander, on the other hand, acts on incomplete but sufficient information.

In this context, leadership becomes important. History shows a number of excellent leaders. Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyj is the latest example of a stubborn and, hopefully, ultimately successful leader. Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle are two other well-known examples of successful political leaders. There is also a great number of excellent military commanders on various levels. The French General Marcel Bigeard, with experience of leadership in war on all levels from non-commissioned officer to general expressed well what leadership is all about: “You don’t say ‘Forward!’ but ‘Follow Me!’”

And, of course, there is an even greater numbers of commanders that have failed –

and failed utterly. Vladimir Putin is but the latest example.

Traditional military leadership is top-down. As a young officer, de Gaulle wrote that a commander must enjoy a certain prestige. He should be able to command through his competence and not just by his rank. But, he added, it is very difficult to see the man of action without “a big dose of egoism, haughtiness, hardness, ruse...” His opposite was Admiral Horatio Nelson who fostered a sense of confidence between himself and his captains – “his band of Brothers”. He thereby was able to ask them to take initiative: “No Captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy.”

Nelson used what today is called Mission Command or, originally Auftragstaktik. This type of leadership is a prerequisite for manoeuvre warfare. During the ongoing war in Ukraine, we have been able to watch Mission Command – Ukraine – versus Top Down – Russia. It is obvious that the former has been much more successful.

Manoeuvring

The manoeuvre constitutes the active part in the definition of strategy done above. It is the manoeuvre, in accordance with the defined strategy and by using the designated forces, that will achieve the strategic objective.

“Manoeuvring means moving intelligently to create a favourable situation” Castex wrote. “It appears to be the pinnacle of the art” and it “is a creative work par excellence”, he added. But moving is not confined to physical moving, it includes intellectual movement as well both in the context of real as well as in virtual² strategies.

There are three prerequisites for manoeuvre: will, power, and freedom of action. Without will, there is no action.

Aron explained ‘power’ as “On the international scene I should define power as

the capacity of a political unit to impose its will on other units.” Furthermore: defensive power is “the capacity of a political unit to keep the will of others from being imposed on it”, while offensive power is “the capacity of a political unit to impose its will upon others.” Aron’s concept is based on Hard Power, which is usually linked to active use of military means. American academic Joseph Nye completes this concept with his idea of Soft Power which aims at persuasion and/or attraction. French academic Frédéric Charillon uses the easily understood term of Influence: when an actor A succeeds in making actor B do something he hadn’t done otherwise – without using force. Influence is increasingly important in today’s strategic context of propaganda and disinformation disseminated on the net.

Freedom of action constitutes the essence of the confrontation of will that is war. When One has lost his freedom of action in the face of the Other, the latter has won.

To manoeuvre requires a degree of freedom of action. However, the commander is never free to do what he will; freedom of action is never complete. There are a number of constraints like international law, economy, requirements from other governmental organisations, and, in particular, friction.

Friction in war could be defined as the difference between plan and reality; that a war never unfolds in the way that the actors planned and hoped for. The outcome of a war is, evidently, a function of the relevant strength of the actors as well as their will-power and morale. However, a war is not mechanical, it is a human encounter and consequently a function of Friction (unforeseen things happen) and Hazard. Intelligence is never complete. The successful commander is able to use Friction and Hazard to his advantage thanks to his Coup D’œil. Friction, Hazard, and incomplete or erroneous in-

telligence make up the term Fog of War. Or put in another way: the fog of war consists of what former US Secretary of Defence Mr Rumsfeld called the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns.

The term Friction was coined by Clausewitz: “Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction, which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen war.” The Russian attack against Ukraine gives a number of good examples of the consequences of friction.

We let Castex sum up this discussion: “It is only necessary to know that the execution of any manoeuvre involves hazards and uncertainties, that it remains exposed to the inevitable accidents of the road, and, when misfortunes and failures occur, when the antagonistic phenomenon occurs, as it often does, to accept the contrary fortune with resignation and philosophy, by immediately setting about reinventing, putting back together something to replace the plan that circumstances have just thrown down.” Without manoeuvre, the commander becomes a helpless victim – a seed for the wind.

Forces

Forces constitute the means, the basis of power, that the One uses to impose his will on the Other through a manoeuvre. Forces in this sense are constituted by all relevant means – existing or potential – depending on the situation.

Usually, there are several ways that could be used to achieve a stated objective. Each way requires a set of means. If there are no such means and if they cannot be created in time, the corresponding way is not adequate. To underline this mutual dependence, it is practical to use the term “ways-and-means”. The ways-and-means constitute the forces (in the term’s physical or mechanical sense).

All forces are combined and put into action through a manoeuvre. The mission of a strategist is, hence, to find the most convenient set of forces and find out how to manoeuvre these forces in order to achieve the political objective in the most efficient way. Obviously, there are cases where there is no set of forces which can achieve the political objective – in that case, it is the duty of the strategist to report this to his political masters.

The choice of a convenient set of ways-and-means is heavily dependent on in which domain the manoeuvre will be carried out. There are five strategic domains: land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Sometimes a sixth domain is added: the electromagnetic domain. The strategic leader will have to manoeuvre in all five (six). The tactical leader bases his manoeuvre on his own domain – land, sea, or air – in the future also space or cyberspace. But he has to manoeuvre as required in all the other domains as well.

Land is the natural habitat of man – the only domain where he can live without aids. Man cannot at all live in cyberspace or the electromagnetic domain which are entirely man-made. Sea, air, space, and cyberspace form the Great Commons. On land the tactical objective is usually terrain while in the Great Commons, control of communications constitutes the primary objective. Today, the Great Commons are often deemed to be of higher importance than land: the one who is master of the Great Commons will be master of the world.

Objective

“War is a mere continuation of policy by other means” is perhaps Clausewitz’ most famous thesis. It is, however, deeply controversial. We will come back to this issue.

In the definition given above, the political objective constitutes the purpose of strategy – you develop a strategy in order to achieve

a political objective. The fulfilment of a political goal – especially in war – requires the achievement of a number of objectives supporting each other. That is why there is, usually, an overall strategy – a Grand, General, or Integral Strategy – which aims at coordinating a number of (sub-) strategies in various fields. The achievement of the objective of each of these sub-strategies should lead to the achievement of the political objective.

The West has carried out a number of wars of various kinds during the last 30 years. Generally, we, the West, have succeeded in obtaining the military objective that should underpin the political objective. This, however, seldom – if ever – happens. I do not think that there is one international operation that has succeeded in achieving the political objective except, perhaps, operation United Protector in Libya 2011. But this was rather due to the extremely unambitious goal to uphold the arms embargo and to stop dictator Gadaffi from killing his citizens. The political result was a chaotic state of civil war.

The most infamous example of not achieving the political objectives is perhaps operation Iraqi Freedom. The stated objectives were to destroy the weapons of massive destruction of Iraq, to stop once and for all the support of terrorism by Saddam Hussein, and to liberate the Iraqi people. This should in turn lead to stability and the spread of democracy in the Middle East. The result was:

- No Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were found.
- Terrorism became more threatening than ever because of the creation of Daesh, or the Islamic State, as a result of the war.
- Iraq was in a state of civil war.
- Stability and democracy in the Middle East were more remote than ever.

In fact, to define a military objective which leads to the political objective is difficult and rarely succeeds. It did, regarding Germany, during WWII as the Nazi government had lost all freedom of action in 1945 and because the allies invested in a very robust occupation. But the success is also due to leaders like Adenauer who declared “never more” and made his people follow this line.

The conclusion might be that we do not know how to formulate military strategies that achieve political objectives except in cases of total victory as against Germany – with all the suffering that this would entail.

Finally, let’s go back to Clausewitz “War is a mere continuation of policy by other means.”

The term suggests that war is a strategic choice among others. This is particularly true as he used the word “mere”. That is, from a moral point of view, unacceptable. It is certainly against the prohibition of violence in the UN Charter.

However, Russia’s war against Ukraine is a case in point. Russia first tried a virtual strategy in the autumn of 2021 and beginning of 2022. When that failed, it escalated to a real strategy – a relative massive conventional attack against Ukraine under the virtual threat of nuclear weapons.

For the attacked state, however, war is hardly a continuation in the word’s mathe-

matical meaning but a discontinuation. When attacked the policy of keeping peace has to change into a strategy of active defence.

Finally, the word policy is ambiguous; what is not policy? The British military historian John Keegan cites the wars of the Aztecs, aimed at obtaining prisoners to sacrifice, as an example of wars which were not a continuation of policy. But, given the importance of the Goods in Aztec society, one could argue that their wars, indeed, were a continuation of policy. To conclude, the Formula, as Aron called Clausewitz’ phrase, does not give much clarity.

Finally

War in one form or another has existed as long as mankind has existed. It will not go away. Hence, strategy is a science and an art with a future. In fact, as our societies become more complicated, strategy also will be so. An important factor in this context is climate change. War is evidently not climate friendly – imaging the damage coming from a sunk nuclear aircraft carrier.

The strategic worksite never closes (Poirier).

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Noter

1. For the interested: Hegelian dialectic is composed by three times of development. The first is the embryo, the “itself” (an sich); the start. The second is the moment of existence, the “be-there” (für-sich or dasein) which is contrary to the first. The third and last is the result, “self” (an-und-für-sich) which takes in the contradictions of the first two but also is the start for the next dialectic round but on a higher level.
2. A Virtual operation uses the potential of power and/or armed forces to achieve strategic objectives. Active, lethal, force is not used – or only little. The aim is not the destruction of the objective but to influence his behaviour and perceptions; A Real operation uses violence by armed forces in order to achieve strategic objectives. But a real operation also has a psychological impact on the adversary.