

Victory – the most important object of a war

by Petteri Kajanmaa

*Nothing except a battle lost
can be half so melancholy as a battle won.*

Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo 1815

Resumé

Krigskonsten är läran om att vinna krig. I krig är det alltså fråga om att segra. Det här är inte något nytt. Det hävdas att redan Sun Zi ska ha skrivit att ”seger är krigets viktigaste mål”. Vad grundar sig en seger egentligen på? Alla som studerat historia har stött på känslöväckande eller tillfälliga militära segrar oberoende av hur storslagna eller avgörande de varit vid den aktuella tidpunkten. Det faktum att krig handlar om att segra innebär inte att krig enbart gäller segern. Man kan vinna ett krig, men det betyder inte nödvändigtvis att kriget skulle ha varit segerrikt – ord har betydelse. Är en seger alltid likadan? Baserar sig en seger på att förbandsformationer lider nederlag, markområden intas, statsledningsorgan, ekonomi eller infrastruktur förstörs, eller att en stat ockuperas och återuppbyggs – eller allt eller inget av dessa? Syftet med artikeln är att teoretiskt och militärstrategiskt granska segerbegreppet i krig samt att belysa hur Nato förstår segern. Målet är att dra slutsatser så att vi ska kunna skärpa vårt militärstrategiska tänkande och vår verksamhet som alliansmedlem. Det viktigaste budskapet är måhända att en seger endast är väsentlig om man vet varför man ska segra. I framtida krig går inte den nödvändigtvis ut med segern som har de effektivaste vapensystemen, mera data eller snabbare AI. Den part uppnår seger vars beslutsfattare, soldater och samhälle bäst förmår att anpassa sig till krigets kaotiska och ständigt föränderliga verklighet, det vill säga till krigets yttre väsende i varje enskild stund.

THE ART OF war is the study and application of principles designed to achieve victory in war. Therefore, war is fundamentally about winning. This concept is neither surprising nor a novel invention. It is often attributed to the famous strategist Sun Tzu, who purportedly stated that ”in war your great object is victory.” But what exactly does victory rest upon? Anyone who has studied history has encountered military victories that evoke conflicting emotions, are perceived as ironic,

or are temporary in nature, regardless of how impressive or decisive they may have seemed at the time they occurred.

The fact that war is fundamentally about winning does not imply that it is solely concerned with victory. A war may be won, but this does not necessarily mean it has been victorious – the significance of language is crucial in this context. Is victory always uniform across different scenarios? Does it hinge upon the defeat of military formations,

the acquisition of territory, the destruction of state leadership, economy, or infrastructure, or the occupation and reconstruction of a state, or does it involve any combination of these factors, or perhaps none at all? Victory is often defined more as a desired outcome at various levels rather than as a precise, detailed event.

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Recent history has witnessed military victories that have altered the political landscape of their respective regions or brought about prolonged periods of peace. However, the outcomes of other wars have served merely as the seeds for subsequent conflicts. Among the notable victories are those at the Battles of Marathon, Hastings, and Waterloo. Following both World Wars, the Six-Day War, and the Gulf Wars, the victors were indisputable. Yet, not all wars have yielded clear, identifiable outcomes, nor have they led to lasting peace. Included among such examples are concepts like Pyrrhic victory and frozen conflicts, in which the results of war have not aligned with the initial objectives set for the conflict.

The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of victory in war from both a theoretical and military strategic perspective, while also shedding light on how NATO understands the notion of winning. The objective is to draw conclusions that can sharpen our military strategic thinking and actions as a member of the alliance. The article begins by exploring the verbal meaning of victory, drawing upon the author's native language, Finnish, for reference. It then develops a theoretical understanding of victory in war. In the third chapter, various perspectives

on winning and success in certain wars are presented. NATO's theory of victory is elaborated in the fourth chapter. The Finnish military historical understanding of victory is presented in the fifth chapter, followed by the main conclusions.

Politics, war, and their respective strategies are inherently human endeavors aimed at achieving specific objectives. This makes it difficult to distill complex concepts into succinct, catchy terms, regardless of what military doctrines or the constant flow of news may lead us to believe. In simple terms, politics is fundamentally about the exercise of power. Politics involves the use, distribution, and redistribution of power, both within communities and between them. Politics sets goals and objectives, and at times, the use of military force, or war, is deemed necessary to achieve these ends.

In order to address the concept of victory in war, it is essential to understand what war itself entails and how it is defined. According to most interpretations, war is a politically organized use of violence. It is not merely the interaction of military forces between two states through military means. From a Clausewitzian perspective, war is the use of violence as a tool of politics, aimed at coercing the opponent into submission to one's will. Violence can manifest in various forms, and the desired impact on the opponent can be limitless. Consequently, nearly any violent act initiated by a political actor with political objectives can be classified as war.

Modern warfare is broad, complex, and chaotic. It involves a race to adapt to unknown demands that could not have been predicted in advance. Achieving political objectives—namely, victory—against a clever adversary in a complex operational environment is increasingly difficult. Peace is often understood as a rather ambiguous condition, generally defined in relation to

war, as a state in which there is no conflict. It is crucial, however, to approach war with an eye toward how the desired peace should ultimately materialize.

An examination of the source material makes it clear that the majority of works address how victory is achieved through the application of military and other forms of power. However, what victory actually means or what it leads to has been studied far less extensively. A primary source for this article is William C. Martel's excellent theoretical examination of victory and war (*Victory in War*, 2007 and updated edition 2011). Martel asserts that there is no contemporary theory of victory. He presents historical views on victory and its evolution, framing these perspectives through the lens of various wars. He also highlights the challenges associated with conceptualizing victory and the theoretical difficulties in its study.

Another significant source is Matthias Strohn's British work on winning wars (*Winning Wars: The Enduring Nature and Changing Character of Victory from Antiquity to the 21st Century*, 2020). Strohn addresses the question of what winning, as a human endeavor, actually means and how it can be achieved in war. This work also employs historical events as a means to explain the pursuit of victory. Richard Hobbs' Cold War-era work (*The Myth of Victory: What Is Victory in War?*, 1979) explores the relationship between society and the objectives of war. In defining victory, he challenges the balance between the resources expended and the goals achieved. The perspective is, in keeping with the era, focused on total war and even nuclear conflict.

In his article (*Theory of Victory*, 2008) J B Bartholomees perhaps most clearly articulates what a great power, and particularly the United States, perceives the theory of victory to be. These perspectives were also evident

in the author's own experiences as Finland's national military representative in NATO's operational headquarters at SHAPE from 2022 to 2025. During this period, NATO not only changed its operational approach but also developed its own theory of victory.

The connection between strategy and military strategy in relation to winning wars is evident. Strategy has been interpreted through the extensive works of Colin S. Gray, as well as by linking it to the author's earlier textbook on the fundamentals of strategy. Carl von Clausewitz remains the undisputed role model for modern theories of warfare. His seminal work on war (*Vom Kriege*) cannot be overlooked in this context. Clausewitz's broader theory of victory centers on the alignment of political objectives with military performance. In this regard, war is subordinated to politics, yet political declaration is seen more as an aspirational state than a concrete reality.

The meaning of the Finnish word for Victory – "Voitto"

In general language, the concept of victory or winning typically refers to triumphing in a competition, game, or similar contest, or it may denote economic success. Conversely, when discussing defeat or losing, the focus is generally on financial loss or the forfeiture of something. Winning (victory) is a product of culture, history, language, and politics, which raises the question of whether its definition or meaning varies across different cultures.¹

An interesting question arises: does the origin and meaning of the word influence how it is used in one's own language and how it is perceived? According to the *Etymological Dictionary of the Finnish Language*, the terms *voittaa* (to win) and *voitto* (victory) are derived from the Baltic-Finnic verb *voida*. This verb refers to the result in battle that

leads to the opponent's defeat, as well as to significant achievements or successes.² Both *voittaa* and *voitto* such as *voittaja* (winner) and *voittamaton* (invincible) appear in religious and legislative texts from the 16th and 17th century. The term *voitollinen* (victorious) appears in the first Finnish translation of the Bible from 1642. Therefore, one might argue that the understanding of victory is shaped by Finnish language, and as such, its interpretation is also linguistically national.

However, defining something or an achievement as a victory is ultimately a matter of perspective. While *voitto* (victory) and *voittaa* (to win) may seem like straightforward words in everyday language, their meanings are quite elusive and open to interpretation. One might ask whether winning necessarily implies that someone must also lose. Defeat is defined as being subjected to loss, failure, destruction, ruin, or perdition. In Finnish language *tappio* (loss) is synonymous with *häviö* (defeat).³ Finnish dictionaries and etymological studies rarely address the military terminology used by soldiers. It is noteworthy that in the book *Suomalainen sotilasslangi* (Finnish military slang, 1963), there is not a single entry related to winning or losing.

The English word for victory is unambiguous. The word *win* also refers to winning, but it carries a more colloquial meaning in general language, such as achieving first place or winning a competition. *Victory* often denotes a more definitive and substantial triumph, and according to dictionaries,⁴ it means:

- final and complete superiority in a war,
- a successful military engagement,
- a success attained in a contest or struggle or over an opponent, obstacle, or problem,
- the act of triumphing or state of having triumphed.

The origin of the word *victory* traces back to the Latin word *victoria* and the Old French word *victorie*.⁵ Both of these derive from the root *vincere*, which originally meant "to conquer" or "to subjugate." Therefore, in Latin, *victory* primarily refers to conquest, winning, and triumph, signifying a glorious success. Wars have been fought for various reasons, but the majority of them fall under the concept of so-called imperial wars, in which one party seeks to expand its realm or empire.⁶

Has this notion also been transferred to the English-language understanding of victory? At least a significant portion of wars have been fought as imperial wars, in which the territory of the opposing party (state) was conquered, and the war ended with the defeat or even destruction of the opposing military faction. This is more common when examining older wars, but even among the 63 interstate wars fought globally between 1946 and 2005, approximately one-fifth ended in a clear military victory.⁷

The evaluation of victory and discussions surrounding it primarily focus on the military actions required to achieve victory on the battlefield. In contrast, less attention is given to assessing the overall outcome of the war. The consistent imprecision in discussions of war arises from the fact that wars do not end in either victory or defeat, but rather in a complex array of arrangements that cannot be reduced to a single, simplistic depiction of the situation.⁸ Victory is a limited concept. It is a noun, not a verb. As such, it is a thing, not an action.⁹

A theory of victory

There is no clear theory or precise definition of victory with which policymakers, military leaders, or the general public could agree on what victory actually means. However,

mankind has waged successful wars for the past six thousand years without a precise definition of victory.¹⁰ Works and studies written about victory, as well as the conceptualizations of victory, often focus on how to win, paying little attention to what victory is and why it is achieved.¹¹ Defining the concept of victory is challenging because it remains uncertain whether a military victory creates a new balance of power, a new state order, or merely returns to the pre-war status quo. As a result, the chosen solutions tend to be short-term, casting doubt on when victory is a truly viable concept.¹²

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Theorists routinely use the term "victory" when referring to all those resolutions that occur at some level of warfare and which meet the general definition of winning. According to the logic of strategy, victory is the outcome of an action in which a state uses the mechanisms of war or armed aggression to achieve its political objectives. Victory in war is fundamentally an assessment, not a fact or a state of being. It is a viewpoint or a mixture of opinions that serves a political purpose. In reality, the victory of one party does not necessarily imply the defeat of the other party.¹³

Colin S. Gray employs the concept of the "theory of victory" alongside that of the "theory of war." This concept is used to explore how a specific state or alliance can be militarily defeated at acceptable costs. The theory of war, particularly in the context of grand strategy, explains how,

within certain constraints, a specific war can be won against a particular enemy at a given moment in history.¹⁴ War can be won in many ways, and victory is a form of exchange. The traditional way of thinking is that the one with the most weapons wins. A more creative approach to victory involves denying the enemy the conditions necessary for their defeat, or simply put, survival.¹⁵

As stated previously, war is a political event in which military actions are carried out. Since these actions occur simultaneously, the decision to initiate a conflict or join a war leads to both political and military developments. Political decisions shape and alter military actions, while military events influence the political will. Thus, the ultimate purpose of military strategy in war is to achieve a political victory.¹⁶

As no foolproof formula for victory has yet been devised, it is not possible to create a strategy that, when implemented, would inevitably lead to success. Military strategy cannot guarantee victory; however, an inappropriate strategy increases the likelihood of failure.¹⁷ A strategy or its theory cannot provide a magical path or universal key to victory, but an understanding of strategic action can help achieve the desired end state. A victorious strategist does not necessarily have to be exceptional, as the implementation of strategy is, in a sense, a duel, where one must defeat the opponent's strategy, i.e., gain control over the enemy's decision-making.¹⁸ This, however, does not only mean winning the war, but it is also acceptable to consider not losing as an acceptable outcome.

Due to the nature of war, it is evident that objectives change during its course. The parties adapt to the conditions and demands of the war and adjust their assumptions about the development of the situation. The expectations regarding the outcome of the war and potential victory evolve over time

and may continue to change as new factors emerge.¹⁹ The achievement of victory, or the realization of political and military objectives, is often compared to the expectations held before the war, frequently without updating these expectations during the conflict. On the other hand, many wars have already seen the phenomenon of “mission creep”,²⁰ referring to the gradual escalation of goals without considering whether the capabilities available are sufficient to achieve them.

Depending on the perspective, the concept of winning a war can be assessed from three viewpoints: tactical, operational, and strategic. Tactical victory on the battlefield is a relatively straightforward military action and is easily interpretable. Common measures for this include casualty figures, destroyed capabilities, captured territories, or the number of prisoners. A tactical victory, such as winning a specific battle, may have a cumulative effect when combined with other similar victories, pushing the enemy toward broader defeat. This, along with other factors affecting the war, contributes to the final outcome of the conflict.²¹

Operational victory, at its simplest, is as transparent as tactical victory. A military campaign is considered a success or failure based on criteria that are easy to understand and measure. Tactical victory is fully attainable, and even the success of an operational campaign is a realistic goal. However, success at the strategic and political-strategic levels is a far more complex matter. Nevertheless, politically, there is often a desire to speak of victory and winning. While success on the battlefield does not usually translate directly into a final victory for decision-makers, it can serve as a path toward achieving strategic or political objectives.²² Battles and operations, even campaigns, are won or lost, but they do not necessarily alter the ultimate outcome of the war.

Strategic victory can be seen as the outcome of a conflict when one side achieves success. Strategic victory precedes the use of force to defeat another state’s military power or the state itself. Success is attained by destroying the opponent’s society, military power, economy, or governmental structures, as well as its will to continue resisting. Such a victory may compel the state to change its actions, relations, or policies. Grand strategic victory is characterized by the use of all political, economic, military, and technological capabilities in the pursuit of victory. Victory at this level is the result of a political, ideological, and moral struggle, which is existential for the survival of the parties involved.²³

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Achieving the desired outcome or success is the most common way to conclude a conflict. Theoretically, a party to the war fights to secure a position favorable to itself. At a minimum, it aims for a situation where alternative political or military options could be considered, such as suffering fewer losses or reaching a stalemate. Wars typically end when the attacker or the defender prevails, but a war may also smolder unresolved, resulting in a frozen conflict. Often, a negotiated compromise is reached as a way to conclude the conflict.²⁴

According to Clausewitz, the ultimate purpose of war is the preservation of one’s own state and the defeat of the enemy; in his view, the goal is a peace treaty that ends

the conflict and leads to a shared resolution. In practice, victory or success is particularly crucial for those who make decisions regarding war and peace. The enemy's ability to resist is a combination of its capabilities and will. Victory is achieved when resistance disappears, meaning resistance is no longer effective. Resistance can be overcome by impacting either capability or will.²⁵

Accordingly, winning a war means achieving the desired political objectives and, on the other hand, crushing the enemy's capacity for resistance. However, these two factors are not directly proportional, as one is a goal and the other is a state of being. Clausewitz defines victory through three objective factors: greater material losses inflicted on the enemy, the loss of the enemy's morale, and the enemy's open acknowledgment of the first two, which is expressed through a willingness to abandon further resistance.²⁶ The concept of victory in war is ambiguous, as military victories are rarely converted into lasting success.

One way to interpret victory is through the five theories of pursuing victory developed by American scholars. These theories were created in preparation for a potential Taiwan crisis, but some of them are universally applicable. These theoretical approaches are based on dominance, denial, devaluation, brinkmanship, and military cost-imposition.²⁷

Dominance is based on the use of raw power to eliminate the enemy's physical ability to continue fighting. Other theories are coercive approaches designed to compel the enemy to cease fighting, even if it retains its ability to resist. Devaluation convinces the enemy that, even if it achieves its objectives, the benefits will be less than originally hoped for. Brinkmanship forces the enemy to cease fighting by threatening escalation unless the war ends. In military cost-impo-

sition, military force is used to convince the enemy that the costs of continuing the war outweigh the benefits it stands to gain. This could also be termed punishment, but it also has a deterrent effect.²⁸

In practice, these theories of pursuing victory focus on a combination of denial and the "costliness" of military action. It provides a balance to maximize success while managing escalation. Denial restrains the potential projection of military force and demonstrates that threatening military force will not achieve political objectives, nor will future armed conflict advance their attainment. At the same time, the cost of using military force is shown to be so high that it becomes inefficient in achieving objectives, and at worst, it may endanger the protection of one's own interests. Overall, these theoretical ideas resemble NATO's concept of deterrence and defense, which is used to manage potential crises and conflict escalation. This will be discussed later in the article.

Sometimes victory can be achieved without actually attaining a conventional military victory. Such a scenario could arise when an underdog or one in a hopeless military situation survives the conflict. This inevitably brings to mind the outcome of Finland's Winter War. On the other hand, there are instances where military victory may be so difficult to achieve that the objectives of the defeated party are simultaneously realized. Strategic success, therefore, is not the same as victory.

Who defines victory in war — the leadership of the victorious state, its people, the international community, or the media? However, it is certain that when military force is employed as a political tool, there will always be winners and losers. For victory to be sustainable, it must be recognized and accepted by the adversary as well. The following chapter will examine further the

thoughts of military theorists on victory, as well as explore various wars and the nature of victory within them.

On the Winning of Wars

The study of the problem of victory is not new in the fields of international relations, military strategy, or security studies. For thousands of years, theorists, strategists, and other scholars have explored the concept of victory, the theory of war and military strategy, deterrence, and general theories of international relations. The understanding of victory by classical and early modern era theorists was based on the successful conquest of territories and, later in the period, on the necessity of defeating the enemy's military forces. In historical wars, the goal has rarely been total victory, which would involve the complete subjugation of the enemy, the capture or destruction of the entire population, land, property, and government.²⁹

According to classical theorists such as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Plato, victory was primarily a tactical concept used to explain the outcomes of battles. The theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Sébastien de Vauban, Frederick II (the Great), and Adam von Bülow, recognized the connection between victory and the outcome of war, and identified the possibilities of limited and total warfare. For Machiavelli, war was about winning tactical engagements, but for him, it was not about achieving peace as a result of the battle's outcome.³⁰

In the 19th century, theorists such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Henri Jomini, and Carl von Clausewitz linked the concept of victory in war to political objectives, understanding that the outcome of war affected the entire nation. Particularly, Clausewitz defined victory and defeat from a political

perspective. He emphasized the importance of striking at the enemy's center of gravity, as it represented the physical manifestation of the enemy's will, thus transforming military success into a political result. For Napoleon the defeat at Waterloo in 1815 was merely the loss of a single battle. However, it marked the culmination of a series of wars that had plagued Europe for many years.³¹

Napoleon's view of victory — the destruction of the enemy in a decisive battle — dominated European military thinking until the First World War.³² The significance of victory was emphasized for its own sake. Victory was detached from its political context and became a right achieved through power, typically by the strongest state. By the turn of the 20th century, the principle of victory focused on the destruction of the enemy's civilian economy. This concept was introduced in various forms by figures such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder), and Alfred von Schlieffen.³³

Contemporary Russian discussions on the subject of winning modern wars underscore the point that if one does not know why they are fighting, they cannot win. While they acknowledge the importance of technological superiority, they contend that without the will to fight, victory remains distant.

Russian military strategy, dating back to Generalissimo Alexander Suvorov, has traditionally relied on the offense. The rationale behind this approach is that only an offensive can bring about a resolution and victory in war. Modern Russian military doctrine remains an extension of Suvorov's strategic

principles.³⁴ Within contemporary Russian military thought, two schools of thought exist. The traditional school cautions against overestimating the importance of advanced technology in achieving victory, instead emphasizing the value of soft factors such as history, morale, and ideology. In contrast, proponents of technology advocate for the central role of new weapon systems in future warfare and in securing victory.³⁵

In the traditional Soviet doctrine, the political aspect of the concept of victory was not as easily definable as the military-technical aspect, particularly in comparison to the more readily applicable concept of "not losing." In Russia, there has never been an official theory of victory promulgated by the military. The concept of "not losing" required the military capacity to repel aggression. Contemporary Russian discussions on the subject of winning modern wars underscore the point that if one does not know why they are fighting, they cannot win. While they acknowledge the importance of technological superiority, they contend that without the will to fight, victory remains distant.³⁶

The military strategists of the modern era (from the 1920s onward), such as Erich Ludendorff, Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, J.F.C. Fuller, B.H. Liddell Hart, Michael Tukhachevsky, Alfred Mahan, Julian Corbett, Giulio Douhet, William Mitchell, and Bernard Brodie, recognized that the precondition for winning a war was the ability to harness the full resources of society (people, economy, and technology) to support total war. However, the focus of the theorists of this era was not so much on how to measure victory, but rather on how to conduct warfare itself. A novel perspective on the theory of victory emerged with the integration of military and economic objectives, whereby victory was defined by the exhaustion of

both the military and societal resources of the enemy.³⁷

However, Fuller and Liddell Hart strongly linked the concept of victory in war to the subsequent peace that follows it. The mere desire to win and destroy the enemy could not, by itself, justify war. War is not waged for its own sake, but rather for a political objective. According to Liddell Hart, the aim of war is to achieve a better state of peace, even if this peace is defined solely from one's own perspective. Thus, it is important to wage war with an eye toward the shape of the peace one wishes to create.³⁸

Winston Churchill stated in 1930 that a national leader must understand that once the initial military actions are underway, they are no longer above the fray, but instead are controlled by unpredictable and uncontrollable events.³⁹ States often initiate hostilities without considering in advance what they aim to achieve and what kind of peace would be acceptable to them. The most dangerous situation arises when military leaders focus solely on winning battles, while politicians have not given any thought to what will happen afterward. Those who decide to enter a war often assume that military victory will resolve all problems.⁴⁰ In other words, political objectives shape both the conduct of war and its eventual outcome, making it crucial to consider the final step—the outcome of the war—before taking the first step toward war.

All systematic thinking about the definition of victory ceased when the deterrence provided by nuclear weapons emerged. The advent of nuclear warfare raised a new question: what if military victory and survival in war are actually in conflict with one another? The total destruction caused by such a weapon in a matter of hours does not define winners and losers, or as Henry Kissinger put it, "total victory is no longer

possible.” A year after the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Bernard Brodie reflected that the initiator of nuclear war must fear a retaliatory strike, as once it occurs, there will be no winners, and the war will not be worth the cost. This has contributed to a shift away from the desire to win wars toward an increased emphasis on the need to avoid wars altogether.⁴¹

Technology is a significant military element that can provide an advantage over the enemy, but technological superiority alone cannot ensure victory. Winning requires the examination of the political consequences of war. Over the past two centuries, it has been believed that technological dominance guarantees certain victory. To date, no single method, capability, or weapon system (aside from nuclear weapons) has been demonstrated as a “silver bullet” capable of resolving a war.⁴²

The victor is not necessarily the one who invents new technologies, but rather the one who can think about how to apply them extensively and sustainably,⁴³ or the one who can fight even when technologies fail. Every new military breakthrough has prompted a corresponding countermeasure. Each step toward technological superiority also increases the associated risks. Modern armed forces are built upon vulnerable systems. An opponent can win without significant weapon engagement by simply disrupting these systems. However, success is often driven by a strong will to win and the willingness to risk everything.

When examining the history of modern wars, it seems that victories have often eluded liberal democracies. The West, in a sense, has become accustomed to adapting to defeat. Winning a war is often costly and, in that sense, has been perceived as unnecessary, but losing is considered far worse.⁴⁴

Since the onset of the wars against terrorism, conflicts have no longer been tacti-

cally or operationally winnable. We have witnessed fleeting, short-lived, or inconclusive victories in the First Gulf War, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and certain wars between Israel and its neighboring states. Defeat in these conflicts has sometimes brought unexpected outcomes to the regions, such as economic recovery or political transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracies. However, more often than not, defeat leads to destruction, occupation, displacement, punitive peace terms, and prolonged humiliation and resentment. It has, however, become increasingly important that wars be winnable in order to bring them to an end, thus allowing peace to be restored.⁴⁵

Since 1946, nearly half of all inter-state wars have lasted, on average, more than a decade; just over a quarter ended within a month, and the remaining quarter concluded within a year. The parties to a war typically commit more strongly to their peace terms the more they have invested in and suffered for them. Two crucial elements for peace to endure are a formal agreement and clear, enforceable conditions. Creating these elements is difficult when a state is engaged in war for limited political objectives, as disarming the adversary or forcing them to accept any peace terms is not feasible. This is the case in the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia.⁴⁶

In October 2024, after a year and a half of fighting, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presented his plan for victory to the public. Its aim was to strengthen Ukraine’s position to such an extent that the war with Russia could be brought to an end. In 2025 under the leadership of the United States and European leaders, the next attempt to end the war was initiated. Based on the confusing and fragmented information leaked to the public, it appears that this negotiation attempt

will not reach a level where peace would be feasible. Neither side has yet reached a point where the conditions for continuing the war have expired. It seems that the alternative may be a forced peace, where neither side truly prevails. The key question is, then, which side will have a future peace more favorable (or less unfavorable) to them. In reality, it appears that the conclusion of the war will be determined by the avoidance of broader losses. For Europe, it matters whether Russia can be seen as having won the war.

NATO's Theory of Victory

According to NATO's Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-01), the alliance is engaged in continuous strategic competition. In the future, operational domains will be challenging, and securing them by achieving military victory in the traditional sense will be extremely difficult.⁴⁷ NATO must continuously develop both its ability to operate in these domains and its capacity to militarily challenge potential adversaries. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Alexis G. Grynkewich, directed his key focus areas to Allied Command Operations (ACO). These three areas are personnel management, sharpening combat capabilities, and leveraging innovative technological solutions to enhance its performance.⁴⁸

As previously discussed, various theories of victory emphasize achieving a decisive advantage in warfare. According to NATO, this should be accomplished as early as possible in a conflict.⁴⁹ NATO's strategic concept defines the core tasks of the alliance as deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security.⁵⁰

Strategic objectives, or victory, can be achieved in a multi-domain operations (MDO) campaign through three distinct methods. The preferred method is an effective

deterrence during strategic competition, which prevents escalation and counters adversary influence attempts. If deterrence fails, the second approach is to employ forward presence and maneuverable forces to deny enemy objectives and attain an operational position that provides relative advantage, leading to an acceptable and sustainable political outcome. If neither side is able to achieve its objectives in a short conflict, the third method is to defeat the enemy in a protracted war.⁵¹

According to SACEUR, if deterrence fails, NATO's military power must be overwhelming in order to conduct rapid and decisive operations during a conflict. The prerequisite for the success of these operations—and thus for achieving victory—lies in continuous learning from the modern battlefield and the ability to adapt one's methods, technologies, and mindset in line with the lessons learned.⁵²

At the ACO Headquarters, SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), operational planning is based on SACEUR's *Theory of Victory*.⁵³ The theory of victory outlines how SACEUR assesses the content of his mission while implementing the concept of collective deterrence and defense (*Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area*, DDA). The goal of DDA is to maintain unambiguous control over NATO's military area of responsibility and ensure that the alliance can conduct MDOs. MDOs are carried out across the entire area of responsibility and/or beyond, denying adversaries the strategic challenges they aim to impose on the alliance.

NATO's theory of victory is two-pronged. The first part outlines what NATO must do to prevent adversaries from initiating aggressive military actions against the alliance and its members. If this fails, the theory explains what NATO must do to defeat—or militarily

win—against adversaries. The second part explains how NATO’s military component aims to implement the aforementioned objectives. The core principle is to maintain sufficient deterrence at all times. This seeks to prevent adversaries from using military force as a means of achieving a geographical or domain advantage, or to compel adversaries to alter their risk calculations. However, if adversaries choose military aggression against the alliance, their military power must be decisively defeated in a short war. The key to success lies in denying adversaries the achievement of their strategic objectives.

The rapid military response prevents adversaries from achieving their strategic objectives and forces them to reassess their risk calculations. Actions that lead to a reassessment of risks are known as generating dilemmas. At the strategic level, these dilemmas compel adversaries to increase their capabilities beyond their capacity, deny them control over geographic areas, and undermine their operational advantage in every domain. These dilemmas may arise from a series of operational actions and surprises across the entire area of responsibility.

The fundamental idea behind the NATO’s theory of victory is that military deterrence is established through peacetime activities and maintained throughout the crisis and conflict. By generating dilemmas, adversaries are forced to choose the least favorable course of action from bad options, thereby influencing their decision-making on whether it is worth continuing the conflict. In the traditional sense, success based on deterrence is not the typical way of winning a war. Therefore, it can be argued that NATO accepts a form of victory that, in reality, is the avoidance of war, rather than the winning of battles or the destruction of the enemy. For Finland, this is reassuring, as the fundamental concept of our nation does not align with the notion of

achieving victory through aggressive warfare and the total destruction of the enemy.

Finland’s Success in Wars

Finland has faced the challenges of war and victory in the modern era during the Second World War, the Cold War, and the war in Afghanistan. The outcome that Finland achieved in the Second World War, often referred to as a “defensive victory”, demonstrated that when a great power with diverse objectives and commitments confronts a small nation fighting for its survival, the balance of power cannot be assessed solely on mathematical or conventional grounds.

It later became clear that the original goal of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1939 was not the conquest of all of Finland, but rather the security of Leningrad. Thus, when Finland secured its defensive victory, the Soviet Union simultaneously achieved its political objective. During the Moscow peace negotiations, the term “defensive victory” was not used, as acknowledging such a victory would have implied that the Soviet Union had suffered an “offensive defeat.” The Moscow Peace Treaty was deeply perceived by Finns as an unjust imposed peace.⁵⁴ This sentiment was one of the contributing factors to the outbreak of the subsequent war.

Throughout the entirety of the Second World War, Finland was viewed by the Allies as a former satellite of Nazi Germany and was internationally categorized as a defeated nation. For Finland, the Second World War ended with an armistice, the terms of which were formulated by the three major Allied powers (the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union). In practice, the Soviet Union succeeded in pushing through its demands regarding the content of the agreement, while the others were sufficiently involved in the process to

ensure that it adhered to the principles that had been collectively prepared. Evidence of the treatment of the defeated party included the heavy war reparations imposed as part of the peace terms, as well as the humiliating war guilt trials that Finland was subjected to. Although the agreement did not explicitly mention surrender, it was perceived as such. Despite this, achieving the armistice was seen as a great relief in Finland.⁵⁵

Finland had steadfastly defended its territory, remained independent, and remained under Finnish control, thus avoiding occupation, unlike many other countries.

Finland succeeded in raising the cost of resisting occupation to such a high level that its payment would have caused significant damage to the Soviet Union's other critical interests. The terms of Finland's armistice and later the Paris Peace Treaty were shaped, in part because the Allies had limited ability to agree on specific details. However, Finland emerged from the war in a better position than many Central European countries, regardless of which side they were on. The key difference was that Finland had steadfastly defended its territory, remained independent, and remained under Finnish control, thus avoiding occupation, unlike many other countries.⁵⁶

Although the Cold War was not a conventional war, it represented, for Finland, at least a period of strategic destiny. President Mauno Koivisto has effectively interpreted Finland's decisions during the Cold War by addressing how Finland adapted its foreign and security policies to the tensions between the superpowers, given its challenging geostrategic position. When presenting the

Russian-language edition of his book *The Idea of Russia* in Moscow, he was unexpectedly asked a question about Finland's own "idea" if Russia's idea was one of grandeur. A linguistically adept Koivisto responded with the word *vyžit*, which was translated as "survival." He later clarified that, literally, it means "the continuation of life."⁵⁷

The West is easily identified as the winner of the Cold War, with the Eastern Bloc, particularly the Soviet Union, seen as the loser. Finland, too, immediately prepared to dissolve the Yalta Agreement and annul the military clauses of the Paris Peace Treaty following the end of the Cold War. The question of how Finland survived the Cold War is perhaps best answered by looking at the final outcome. A useful point of comparison might be the fates of other Soviet border states.⁵⁸

According to Koivisto, survival was, indeed, part of Finland's strategy. Contrary to the negative connotations associated with the term Finlandization, which is often seen as a sign of subjugation, Finland navigated the Cold War with strong political leadership, emerging as a successful welfare state despite its extremely weak starting position and the intense subjugation efforts of its large neighbor. Finland was undoubtedly on the side of the victors, though not solely due to its own efforts. In reality, all nations, especially European countries, benefitted from the end of the Cold War.

After the Second World War and the Cold War, the next and only true war in which Finnish soldiers participated was the international military operations in Afghanistan—ISAF and Resolute Support from 2001 to 2021. The war began as a counterterrorism operation following the attacks on the United States in 2001 and later transformed into an international crisis management operation, initially led by the United Kingdom and later by NATO.

The operation lasted 20 years, and Finland was one of the participating nations, engaging in military operations from 2005 onward. Over the course of these two decades, it became evident that the strategic lack of clear objectives led to what is known as the “sunk cost fallacy.” This refers to the difficulty of acknowledging the failure of an investment. Rather than admitting defeat, increasing resources are often allocated to salvage the project. The international community failed to accept that it had been in Afghanistan for too long. Afghanistan became an example of what an increasing number of Americans referred to as an “endless war.”⁵⁹

President Joe Biden’s administration stated that the United States had achieved its objectives in Afghanistan. He justified this by stating that the U.S. had never been in Afghanistan with a nation-building mission but rather to eliminate international terrorism and its support from within Afghanistan. However, the temporary military victories in Afghanistan did not address the root causes that allowed terrorism to persist in the region.⁶⁰ In reality, NATO, the United States, and the international community, including Finland, had suffered a strategic defeat. The entire war in Afghanistan, along with the associated political and military strategic challenges, reinforces Clausewitz’s view that war and its events alter political objectives. Part of this was also due to “mission creep,” where increasingly ambitious goals were set, and military performance was no longer sufficient to meet them.⁶¹

Conclusions

Depending on the strategic culture in which and the language through which we describe the concept of victory in war, its meaning may vary. While the Finnish word *voitto* and the English term *victory* are understood to have

the same military meaning, their differing etymological histories might influence the way we conceptualize success in war. The word itself, its meaning, and the conclusions drawn from it can have an impact on the nature of our military-strategic culture.

The concept of victory is still used because it remains significant. Military operations aim for victory, which serves to justify the costs of war and the suffering it causes. Additionally, victory is often viewed as a zero-sum game, where achieving it is necessary to avoid defeat and its associated consequences.⁶² The opposite to victory, of course, is defeat. It is frequently noted that failing to respond to a deliberate threat would itself be considered a form of defeat—particularly in the case of a great power like the United States. If the U.S. were to fail to respond effectively to a threat posed by Russia, for example, it would lose credibility in the eyes of its allies in both Europe and Asia.

“Wars are still fought for honor, the control of trade routes, territorial conquest, the implementation of ideological beliefs, the pursuit of independence, religion, or simply to preserve self-determination.

The prerequisite for winning a war is the breaking of the adversary’s will—the will to fight and the will to defend itself. Destroying the enemy’s capabilities without breaking its will to resist leads to a situation where hostility can persist. The defeat of the will to fight ends the war, regardless of any remaining military capability.

Victory in war is a term that can be both defined and delineated, and it is an achievement that can be realized through action.

However, winning a war is much more demanding and long-lasting. Acceptable victories are often the result of subtle diplomatic efforts. The significance of deterrence in war, particularly in nuclear conflict, has become paramount. For this reason, deterrence, the threat of war prevention, and the achievement of political objectives should be recognized as victories, even at the lowest tactical levels.

Humankind fights because we have needs, because we wish to protect something important to us, or because we believe we can change the world in which we live. We fight because we can. Wars are still fought for honor, the control of trade routes, territorial conquest, the implementation of ideological beliefs, the pursuit of independence, religion, or simply to preserve self-determination. Engaging in war requires a commitment to victory and an understanding of what victory looks like. Without the aforementioned factors, war loses its purpose. Winning in war, or at least avoiding defeat, seems as important as ever.⁶³

What, then, does achieving victory mean? In many wars, situations have arisen where, after victory, the parties involved were not truly victorious. Based on historical precedent, it can be argued that the concept of victory is realized if the political objectives of the war are achieved. However, wars have

also been won by breaking the enemy's will, making the costs of the war unbearable, or inflicting losses too great to sustain. Victory in war does not always equate to peace.

Perhaps the most significant message is that victory is only meaningful if there is a clear understanding of what it is being won for. A deeply ingrained belief is that victory is achieved when the enemy's ability to wage war is crushed to the point where a political solution ensures that no further active resistance will arise. However, crushing the enemy may not necessarily be the best way to achieve political objectives, especially when considering post-war scenarios.

Historical wars, such as the Russo-Japanese War, the Vietnam War, and the wars in Afghanistan, demonstrate that the victor was not always the side with more soldiers, firepower, or a more powerful economy. The future of warfare may not be determined by superior weapon systems, more data, or faster artificial intelligence. Victory will belong to the side whose decision-makers, soldiers, and society are best able to adapt to the chaotic and ever-changing reality of war—that is, to the character of war at any given moment.

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