

Defining Military Strategy

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Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr.'s pragmatic definition of military strategy is as current today as it was when his article led the May 1989 issue of Military Review. Lykke's model remains the basis for military strategy instruction at the US Army War College. Interestingly, our records show that Military Review rejected this same article in March 1981. According to Lykke, the editors felt an article on strategy would be inappropriate for students at the Army's senior tactical school.

WHAT IS MILITARY STRATEGY? In ancient Greece, it was the “art of the general.” In its glossary of military terms, the US Army War College lists eight definitions of military strategy. This highlights the first of many problems in the study of this important but complex subject. There is no universal definition or even the approximation of a consensus. Today the term “strategy” is used altogether too loosely. Some call a line drawn on a map a strategy. Others believe a laundry list of national objectives represents a strategy. The problem is not just semantics; it is one of effectively and competently using one of the most essential tools of the military profession. In trying to decide between alternative strategies, we are often faced with a comparison of apples and oranges, because the choices do not address the same factors. Only with a mutual understanding of what comprises military strategy can we hope to improve our strategic dialogue. There needs to be general agreement on a conceptual approach to military strategy: a definition, a description of the basic elements that make up military strategy and an analysis of how they are related. For the purpose of this discussion, we will use the definition approved by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff: “The art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force.”²¹

During a visit to the US Army War College in 1981, General Maxwell D. Taylor characterized strategy as consisting of objectives, ways and means. We can

express this concept as an equation: Strategy equals *ends* (objectives toward which one strives) plus *ways* (courses of action) plus *means* (instruments by which some end can be achieved). This general concept can be used as a basis for the formulation of any type strategy—military, political, economic and so forth, depending upon the element of national power employed.

We should not confuse military strategy with national (grand) strategy, which may be defined as: “The art and science of developing and using the political, economic and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives.”²²

Military strategy is [only] one part of this all-encompassing national strategy. The military component of our national strategy is sometimes referred to as national military strategy—military strategy at its higher level and differentiated from operational strategies used as the basis for military planning and operations. Military strategy must support national strategy and comply with national policy, which is defined as “a broad course of action or statements of guidance adopted by the government at the national level in pursuit of national objectives.”²³ In turn, national policy is influenced by the capabilities and limitations of military strategy.

With our general concept of strategy as a guide—strategy equals *ends* plus *ways* plus *means*—we can develop an approach to military strategy. *Ends* can be expressed as military objectives. *Ways* are concerned with the various methods of applying military force. In essence, this

becomes an examination of courses of action designed to achieve the military objective. These courses of action are termed “military strategic concepts.” *Means* refers to the military resources (manpower, materiel, money, forces, logistics and so forth) required to accomplish the mission. This leads us to the conclusion that *military strategy* equals *military objectives* plus *military strategic concepts* plus *military resources*. This conceptual approach is applicable to all three

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levels of war: strategic, operational and tactical. It also reveals the fundamental similarities among national military strategy, operational art and tactics. Strategists, planners, corps commanders and squad leaders are *all* concerned with *ways* to employ *means* to achieve *ends*.

Some readers may question this idea, thinking that while military resources are necessary to support a strategy, they are not a component of that strategy. They would limit military strategy to a consideration of military objectives and military strategic concepts. However, in discussing the importance of superiority of numbers, Carl von Clausewitz stated that the decision on the size of military forces “is indeed a vital part of strategy.”²⁴ And Bernard Brodie points out that “Strategy in peacetime is expressed largely in choices among weapons systems...”²⁵ By considering military resources as a basic element of military strategy, we may also alleviate the problem of disregarding the importance of military objectives and strategic concepts while concentrating mainly on force structure issues.

There are two levels of military strategy: operational and force development. Strategies based on existing military capabilities are operational strategies—those that are used as a foundation for the formulation of specific plans for action in the short-range time period. This level of strategy has also been referred to as higher, or grand, tactics and operational art. Longer-range strategies may be based on estimates of future threats, objectives and

requirements and are therefore not as constrained by current force posture. These longer-range strategies are more often global in nature and may require improvements in military capabilities. Military strategies can be regional as well as global, concerning themselves with specific threat scenarios.

Military objectives and military strategic concepts of a military strategy establish requirements for resources and are, in turn, influenced by the availability of resources. If we fail to consider military resources as an element of military strategy, we may be faced with what has come to be called a strategy-capabilities mismatch; in other words, inadequate military capabilities to implement the strategic concepts and to accomplish the objectives of a military strategy. This is the usual case when we are developing a long-range strategy requiring improved military force structure capabilities. However, it may be disastrous if we are concerned with an operational strategy upon which contingency plans and military operations will be based. That is why operational strategies must be based on capabilities.

Let us zero in on the first basic element of any military strategy—a military objective. It can be defined as a specific mission or task to which military efforts and resources are applied. Several examples come to mind: deter aggression, protect lines of communication, defend the homeland, restore lost territory and defeat an opponent. The objectives should be military in nature. While Clausewitz, V.I. Lenin and Mao Tse-tung have all emphasized the integral relationship of war and politics, military forces must be given appropriate missions within their capabilities. B.H. Liddell Hart stresses that: “In discussing the subject of ‘the objective’ in war it is essential to be clear about and to keep clear in our minds, the distinction between the political and military objective. The two are different but not separate. For nations do not wage war for war’s sake, but in pursuance of policy. The military objective is only the means to a political end. Hence the military objective should be governed by the political objective, subject to the basic condition that policy does not demand what is militarily—that is, practically—impossible.”²⁶

In our definition of military strategy, the ultimate objectives are those of national policy. Sometimes policy guidance is difficult to find, unclear or ambiguous. National policy also concerns itself with all the basic elements of national power: political, economic, socio-psychological and military. To make things even more interesting, national policies in these various fields are often overlapping and may even be contradictory. There are seldom “purely military” or “purely political” objectives. National leaders may choose to use the military element of power in pursuit of national policy

objectives that are primarily political or economic in nature. This can cause problems. Sometimes military force is not the appropriate tool. Military commanders may then have difficulty deriving feasible military objectives from the objectives of national policy.

Now let us examine a military strategic concept. It can be defined as “the course of action accepted as the result of the estimate of the strategic situation.”⁷ Military strategic concepts may combine a wide range of options, such as forward defense (forward basing and/or forward deployment), strategic reserves, reinforcements, show of force, pre-positioned stocks, collective security and security assistance. These are a few of the ways military forces can be used either unilaterally or in concert with allies. The determination of strategic concepts is of major importance. However, do not make the mistake of calling a strategic concept a strategy. Strategic concepts must always be considered in relation to military objectives and resources.

Finally, we should study the *means* portion of our military strategy equation—the military resources that determine capabilities. These may include conventional and unconventional general purpose forces, strategic and tactical nuclear forces, defensive and offensive forces, Active and Reserve forces, war materiel and weapon systems, as well as manpower. We should also take into consideration the roles and potential contributions of our allies and friends. The Total Force package must be well-rounded with combat, combat support and combat service support elements adequately equipped and sustained. Depending on the type of strategy we are developing, the forces we consider using may or may not currently exist. In short-range operational strategies, the forces *must* exist. In longer-range force developmental strategies, the strategic concepts determine the type of forces that *should* exist and the way they are to be employed.

Now that we have looked at the basic elements of military strategy, let us try to put them together in some meaningful way. The figure shows one possible model. National security, our most vital interest, is supported on a three-legged stool titled “Military Strategy.” The three legs are labeled “Objectives,” “Concepts” and “Resources.” This simple analogy leads one to the observation that the legs must be balanced or national security may be in jeopardy. If military resources are not compatible with strategic concepts, or commitments are not matched by military capabilities, we may be in trouble. The angle of tilt represents risk, further defined as the possibility of loss, or damage, or of not achieving an objective. It is, of course, the duty of the military to

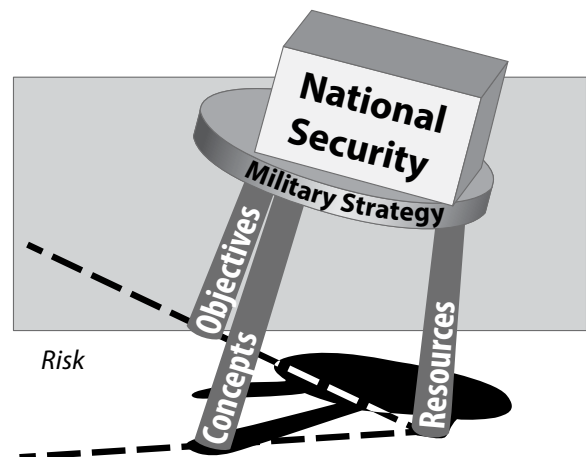
determine if there is risk associated with a strategy, assess the degree of risk and bring it clearly and forcefully to the attention of civilian leaders.

Let us test our model with an example to see if it is useful in explaining military strategy. The Carter Doctrine was a statement of national policy: “Let our position be absolutely clear. An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf Region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United

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States of America. Such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary including military force.”

We must devise a military strategy to carry out this policy. One implied objective is securing access to our Persian Gulf oil supplies. We should first translate this economic/political objective into military objectives, such as maintaining freedom of passage through the Strait of Hormuz and defending key oil fields, refineries and ports. The strategic concept might be by means of a rapid deployment force from our strategic reserves. But, do we have sufficient strategic mobility and power projection capabilities in being today to keep the



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stool level? Which leg needs to be adjusted? Military resources? To program and produce the required airlift and sealift forces may take years. In order to have a feasible short-range operational strategy, it may be wiser to change the strategic concept to that of forward defense and station or deploy more US military force in the region.

Perhaps we have examined the subject of military strategy in sufficient depth to arrive at some initial conclusions regarding its nature. First, it is not the title of a strategy that is important; it is the content that counts. The names are often changed for cosmetic reasons, reflecting little substantive alteration. A study of history shows that military strategies have been identified by a wide variety of labels. The “Massive Retaliation” of the Eisenhower administration, the “Flexible Response” of the Kennedy administration and the more recent “Realistic Deterrence” have all been referred to as strategies. We had the “2 ½-war strategy” of the Johnson administration changing to a “1 ½-war strategy” following the Sino-Soviet split, and the realization that buying a military force in time of peace that could fight 2 ½ wars simultaneously was just too costly. These latter examples of strategic statements describe procurement guidelines for a force structure rather than military strategies. Other names for “strat-

egies” over the years have been: attrition, annihilation, countervalue, counterforce, warfighting, direct and indirect approach, search and destroy, oil spot, assured destruction, containment and countervailing.

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Military strategy may be declaratory or actual. In other words, as stated by our leaders, it may or may not be our real strategy. US military strategy has seldom been clearly expressed and infrequently described in sufficient detail for all to understand. Some say that it is unwise, impossible or even dangerous to openly enunciate a military strategy. This very act may limit our options in a crisis situation or tip off our potential adversaries on what our actions might be.

A nation may need *more than one* military strategy at a time. For instance, if a nation has only a deterrent strategy and deterrence fails, what does the nation do then? Surrender? Submit to piecemeal attacks and incremental losses? Unleash a massive strategic nuclear attack? These are some of the options, if it does not also have a warfighting strategy. Military strategy can change rapidly and frequently, since objectives can change in an instant. However, it takes much longer to alter the military forces so that they may be responsive to new objectives and concepts.

In summary, military strategy consists of the establishment of military objectives, the formulation of military strategic concepts to accomplish the objectives and the use of military resources to implement the concepts. When any of these basic elements is incompatible with the others, our national security may be in danger. **MR**

NOTES

1. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Publication 1, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1 June 1987), 232.
2. *Ibid.*, 244.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret,

- (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 196.
5. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 361.
6. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 351.
7. JCS Pub. 1, 349.

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