



# The Applicability of Design to Strategic Art

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Strategic art is critical to the defense of the national interests of the United States and the continued prosperity of the nation. It is a concept that is as equally difficult to define as it is to practice. Three significant assumptions underpin the concept of strategic art. First, the strategic art concept is predicated on the assumption that the national interests are clearly understood and that all parties involved in strategy formulation hold a common representation. Similarly, it is assumed that problems related to these national interests are also clearly identified in order that suitable ends may be formulated to facilitate national interest defense. The final assumption is that agents of the federal government have a common, holistic vision and work with unity of effort toward the defense of these national interests by incorporating a whole of government approach that transcends the individual agencies involved. To assist in navigating the complexity of the practice of strategic art is the methodology of design. Design as a methodology is essential to strategic art, as it not only serves as a framework to validate the aforementioned assumptions, but also aids in understanding

and identifying the complex, ill-structured problems that characterize the current era.

Strategic art is defined as the skillful formulation, coordination, and application of ends, ways, and means to promote and defend the national interests. This seems to be a relatively straightforward definition with little ambiguity. However, the nature of strategic art and the environment within which it is practiced exponentially raises the difficulty of the concept and requires further explanation. Strategic art begins with understanding the contemporary environment. This understanding is facilitated by a causal analysis of the complex, ill-defined problem that characterizes the contemporary environment and a subsequent visualization of the environment and the United States' place in it. This visualization will then lead to the formulation of desired conditions and supporting objectives to achieve those conditions, the ends. The importance of clearly defined ends and objectives cannot be overstated, as the remainder of the strategic art process is predicated on the desired end state. Subsequent understanding and examination of the current conditions in contrast to the desired conditions leads to a set of actions or activities, the ways,

which will move the current conditions toward the optimal set of conditions. Internal analysis of the elements of national power, the means, and subsequent assignment of the elements of national power to the actions then provides the framework for strategic policy. To this point, the process seems to be relatively scientific. The art portion presents itself in the ability to synchronize the finite number of resources in time and space, in an ever-evolving, dynamic environment, while anticipating changes in the environment and adjusting the objectives and actions to meet those changes, in order to defend all of the national interests globally. Managing this complexity proactively is the essence of strategic art.

Further complicating the concept of strategic art is the fact that its application is based on several assumptions. The first of these is that a clear understanding of the national interests exists, as these interests are the foundation upon which strategic decisions are made. The concept of national interests is concrete and finite in theory, but abstract and ambiguous in application. The difficulty with defining the national interests is that there is no single govern-

ment document that defines them. Strategic policy documents often refer to defending the national interests, but in none of these documents is there a list of these national interests. They do exist, but they exist in the public and private statements of the nation's leaders, in the context of the myriad national policy documents, and in the actions of the various agents of the federal government. For example, the Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." There are national interests included in this sentence, but the ambiguity with which they are presented allows a variety of interpretations based on the strategist's point of view. The Vietnam War brought this point to the forefront, where various agencies of the government identified some manner of threat to a national interest in Vietnam, the visualization and description of which was incomplete and led to not only political unrest, but also public unrest and ultimately withdrawal without objective attainment. The process of

identifying national interests is itself a complex issue that is a necessary condition for the practice of strategic art.

Similar to the link between strategic art and the clear identification of national interests, strategic art is also linked inexplicably to a clear understanding of problems related to the national interests. Strategic art assumes that the right problem related to the national interest can be clearly defined. However, the complexity of the contemporary environment translates directly to the identification and understanding of problems related to the national interests. Identification of the right problem requires a complete understanding of the environment and the ability to visualize the same. Causal analysis is also critical to problem identification as it is necessary for identifying centers of gravity, and subsequently, acceptable ways of dealing with problems to reach desired end states. This was evident during Operation Iraqi Freedom when the problem of an insurgency went unidentified, leading to a course of action that did not address the right problem and led to escalation of the war, first by the insurgents and then in the form of the U.S. surge, before the right problem was addressed. Additionally, the inherent differences in points of view across the agents of the elements of national power further exacerbate the strategist's ability to define the problem and clearly define objectives. This stratification creates a sense of parochialism during the problem identification stage that tends toward the identification of problems that identify with the strategist's personally held belief system. Examples of this type of confirmation bias are that military strategists would tend toward military problems and military solutions while state department strategists would tend toward diplomatic problems and diplomatic solutions.

Additionally, the fact that problem analysis is a continuous process is assumed, although not explicitly stated, and equally as critical to strategic art as initial problem identification. The dynamic nature of the contemporary environment requires constant reframing of the problem to insure that the right problem is being addressed. The complex, ill-defined problems that characterize the contemporary environment significantly increase the difficulty of problem identification.

True synchronization of ends, ways, and means can only be achieved if the various practitioners of the elements of national power have a common, holistic vision and work with unity of effort toward the defense of the national interests by incorporating a whole of government approach that transcends the individual agencies involved. The related assumption is that strategists operate under a system akin to Allison's rational policy model, where all elements of national power are weighed equally, prioritized, and sequenced for action such that those executed are those with the highest payoff. Reality demonstrates that often the actual method is some type of cross between the organizational process model, where certain problems are perceived to belong to a certain agency and therefore are canalized in that direction leading to a restricted course of action along singular elements of national power, and the governmental politics model, which is basically a zero-sum political model where each agency is out for the best it can do from its own perspective. Lack of interagency coordination is a common theme throughout history, resulting in duplication of effort at its best and contradictory efforts at its worst. Security Assistance operations in Eastern Africa represent just this type of problem. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken in the region

to build the capacity of those countries under the auspices of numerous independent offices and budgets in the Department of State and the Department of Defense, each attacking a unilaterally defined problem. Strategic art requires that strategists take a holistic view that incorporates all elements of national power in order to reap the synergistic effects of the combination of elements of national power

The realization of strategic art requires that, in addition to the formulation, coordination, and application of ends, ways, and means, the assumptions upon which it is based are validated. To that end, the concept of design is as critical to strategic art as it is to the operational level of war, as it provides a framework for understanding, visualizing, and describing the contemporary environment in order to identify the right problem and subsequently developing approaches to solve the identified problem. As previously discussed, the contemporary environment presents national leaders, policymakers, and strategists with an ever-evolving set of complex, ill-defined problems. Design is a methodology for understanding these types of problems, which will work to validate the first two assumptions associated with strategic art. Thoroughly understanding the environment, both domestic and international, will inform a better understanding of the national interests and the relationships between those interests and the international community. This understanding will not only benefit the strategists in their understanding, but also the national leaders who define the national interests and the desired conditions associated with those interests. Given more clearly defined interests, strategists will then be able to better identify and frame the problem to address the threat posed to those national interests. This method of framing these complex problems will also enable

strategists to better define centers of gravity and clearly defined objectives to reach the identified end states. Design also incorporates the concept of anticipating changes in the contemporary environment, resulting in the synchronization of ends, ways, and means in a more proactive manner to affect the environment rather than reacting to events as they unfold. The ability of strategists to anticipate change gives them the ability to more accurately forecast the application of ways and means under the auspices of contingency planning as opposed to crisis action planning. The ability to adjust the time and space horizon is significant given the dynamic nature of the contemporary environment.

While design may be extremely advantageous to the practice of strategic art, it is by no means a holistic answer to the practice. Design is a methodology for applying critical thinking in an effort to understand the environment and identify and solve the right problem. It is a method of taking a complex, ill-defined problem and breaking it into manageable pieces that facilitate subsequent problem identification. Design is not a checklist solution to problem solving, nor does it reduce the complexity of the contemporary environment. Success of design still hinges on clearly identifying the conditions that define the end state, thus allowing the strategist to develop well-defined objectives. These well-defined objectives are decisive points in the development of comprehensive strategies and facilitate the operationalizing of the strategic concept into tactical action. Additionally, while design sets forth the framework for anticipating change, it does not insure that the causal relationships associated with the contemporary environment will be understood or visualized in advance. Further, design does not account for the disparity in

points of view and the biases inherent in the various agencies of the elements of national power, nor does it establish a framework for managing political maneuvering. The operational approach aspect of design will still have to cross the lines between the various elements of national power and synchronize them toward the attainment of those well-defined objectives in order for the methodology to achieve a measure of success. Design as a methodology must be implemented holistically as part of a whole of govern-

ment effort in order to synchronize all of the elements of national power in the effort to reach the desired end state.

The designation and synchronization of ends, ways, and means in national strategy formulation, strategic art, is a complicated and complex process. It requires that strategists identify the roots of complex, ill-defined problems, prioritize them, determine how to move them towards optimal conditions, and apportion and allocate a finite amount of resources in their application. Furthermore,

the concept of strategic art is based on critical assumptions that only add to the complexity of the process. Understanding the contemporary environment is critical to not only identifying the problem that needs to be solved, but also identifying the national interests that lend themselves to the creation of the problem. Additionally, applying a holistic approach that crosses bureaucratic lines to achieve synergy in the application of the elements of national power adds more complexity to the process. The elements of design

provide a framework for dealing with this inherent complexity, but by no means provide a clear-cut solution. The strategist who can validate these assumptions through the use of the framework to understand the environment, clearly describe the ends, develop the ways to achieve those ends holistically across the elements of national power, and prioritize the available elements of national power to defend all of the national interests simultaneously will be the true strategic artist. ■

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### Endnotes

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