

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SUMMER 1979



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Volume 57 • Number 5

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## THE FORGOTTEN DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGY

**T**he term “strategy” needs continual definition. For most people, Clausewitz’s formulation “the use of engagements for the object of the war,” or, as Liddell Hart paraphrased it, “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy,” is clear enough. Strategy concerns the deployment and use of armed forces to attain a given political objective. Histories of strategy, including Liddell Hart’s own *Strategy of Indirect Approach*, usually consist of case studies, from Alexander the Great to MacArthur, of the way in which this was done. Nevertheless, the experience of the past century has shown this approach to be inadequate to the point of triviality. In the West the concept of “grand strategy” was introduced to cover those industrial, financial, demographic, and societal aspects of war that have become so salient in the twentieth century; in communist states all strategic thought has to be validated by the holistic doctrines of Marxism-Leninism. Without discarding such established concepts, I shall offer here a somewhat different and perhaps slightly simpler framework for analysis, based on a study of the way in which both strategic doctrine and warfare itself have developed over the past 200 years. I shall also say something about the implications of this mode of analysis for the present strategic posture of the West.

### II

Clausewitz’s definition of strategy was deliberately and defiantly simplistic. It swept away virtually everything that had been written about war (which was a very great deal) over the previous 300 years. Earlier writers had concerned themselves almost exclusively with the enormous problems of raising, arming, equipping, moving, and maintaining armed forces in the field—an approach which Clausewitz dismissed as being as relevant to fighting as the skills of the swordmaker were to the art of fencing. None of this,

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he insisted, was significant for the actual conduct of war, and the inability of all previous writers to formulate an adequate theory had been due to their failure to distinguish between the *maintenance* of armed forces and their *use*.

By making this distinction between what I shall term the *logistical* and the *operational* dimensions in warfare, Clausewitz performed a major service to strategic thinking; but the conclusions he drew from that distinction were questionable and the consequences of those conclusions have been unfortunate. In the first place, even in his own day, the commanders he so much admired—Napoleon, Frederick the Great—could never have achieved their operational triumphs if they had not had a profound understanding of the whole range of military activities that Clausewitz excluded from consideration. In the second place, no campaign can be understood, and no valid conclusions drawn from it, unless its logistical problems are studied as thoroughly as the course of operations; and as Dr. Martin van Creveld has recently pointed out in his book *Supplying War*, logistical factors have been ignored by ninety-nine military historians out of a hundred—an omission which has warped their judgments and made their conclusions in many cases wildly misleading.

Clausewitz's dogmatic assertion of priorities—his subordination of the logistical element in war to the operational—may have owed something to a prejudice common to all fighting soldiers in all eras. It certainly owed much to his reaction against the super-cautious "scientific" generals whose operational ineptitude had led Prussia to defeat in 1806. But it cannot be denied that in the Napoleonic era it *was* operational skill rather than sound logistical planning that proved decisive in campaign after campaign. And since Napoleon's campaigns provided the basis for all strategic writings and thinking throughout the nineteenth century, "strategy" became generally equated in the public mind with *operational* strategy.

But the inadequacy of this concept was made very clear, to those who studied it, by the course of the American Civil War. There the masters of operational strategy were to be found, not in the victorious armies of the North, but among the leaders of the South. Lee and Jackson handled their forces with a flexibility and an imaginativeness worthy of a Napoleon or a Frederick; nevertheless they lost. Their defeat was attributed by Liddell Hart, whose analyses seldom extended beyond the operational plane, primarily to operational factors, in particular, to the "indirect

approach" adopted by Sherman. But, fundamentally, the victory of the North was due not to the operational capabilities of its generals, but to its capacity to mobilize its superior industrial strength and manpower into armies which such leaders as Grant were able, thanks largely to road and river transport, to deploy in such strength that the operational skills of their adversaries were rendered almost irrelevant. Ultimately the latter were ground down in a conflict of attrition in which the *logistical* dimension of strategy proved more significant than the operational. What proved to be of the greatest importance was the capacity to bring the largest and best-equipped forces into the operational theater and to maintain them there. It was an experience that has shaped the strategic doctrine of the U.S. armed forces from that day to this.

But this capacity depended upon a third dimension of strategy, and one to which Clausewitz was the first major thinker to draw attention: the *social*, the attitude of the people upon whose commitment and readiness for self-denial this logistical power ultimately depended. Clausewitz had described war as "a remarkable trinity," composed of its political objective, of its operational instruments, and of the popular passions, the social forces it expressed. It was the latter, he pointed out, that made the wars of the French Revolution so different in kind from those of Frederick the Great, and which would probably so distinguish any wars in the future. In this he was right.

With the end of the age of absolutism, limited wars of pure policy fought by dispassionate professionals became increasingly rare. Growing popular participation in government meant popular involvement in war, and so did the increasing size of the armed forces which nineteenth-century technology was making possible and therefore necessary. Management of, or compliance with, public opinion became an essential element in the conduct of war. Had the population of the North been as indifferent to the outcome of the Civil War as the leaders of the Confederacy had initially hoped, the operational victories of the South in the early years might have decisively tipped the scales. The logistical potential of the North would have been of negligible value without the determination to use it. But given equal resolution on both sides, the capacity of the North to mobilize superior forces ultimately became the decisive factor in the struggle. Again Clausewitz was proved right: *all other factors being equal*, numbers ultimately proved decisive.

In one respect, in particular, other factors were equal. The Civil War was fought with comparable if not identical weapons on both sides, as had been the revolutionary wars in Europe. The possibility of decisive *technological* superiority on one side or the other was so inconceivable that Clausewitz and his contemporaries had discounted it. But within a year of the conclusion of the American Civil War, just such a superiority made itself apparent in the realm of small arms, when the Prussian armies equipped with breech-loading rifles defeated Austrian armies which were not so equipped. Four years later, in 1870, the Prussians revealed an even more crushing superiority over their French adversaries thanks to their steel breech-loading artillery. This superiority was far from decisive: the Franco-Prussian War in particular was won, like the American Civil War, by superior logistical capability based upon a firm popular commitment. But technology, as an independent and significant dimension, could no longer be left out of account.

In naval warfare, the crucial importance of technological parity had been apparent since the dawn of the age of steam, and in colonial warfare the technological element was to prove quite decisive. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the superiority of European weapons turned what had previously been a marginal technological advantage over indigenous forces, often counterbalanced by numerical inferiority, into a crushing military ascendancy, which made it possible for European forces to establish a new imperial dominance throughout the world over cultures incapable of responding in kind. As Hilaire Belloc's Captain Blood succinctly put it: "Whatever happens, we have got/The Maxim gun, and they have not." Military planners have been terrified of being caught without the contemporary equivalent of the Maxim gun from that day to this.

So by the beginning of this century, war was conducted in these four dimensions: the *operational*, the *logistical*, the *social*, and the *technological*. No successful strategy could be formulated that did not take account of them all, but under different circumstances, one or another of these dimensions might dominate. When, in 1914-15, the operational strategy of the Schlieffen Plan, for the one side, and of the Gallipoli campaign, for the other, failed to achieve the decisive results expected of them, then the logistical aspects of the war, and with them the social basis on which they depended, assumed even greater importance as the opposing

armies tried to bleed each other to death. As in the American Civil War, victory was to go, not to the side with the most skillful generals and the most courageous troops, but to that which could mobilize the greatest mass of manpower and firepower and sustain it with the strongest popular support.

The inadequacy of mere numbers without social cohesion behind them was demonstrated by the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917. But the vulnerability even of logistical and social power if the adversary could secure a decisive technological advantage was equally demonstrated by the success of the German submarine campaign in the spring of 1917, when the Allies came within measurable distance of defeat. The German Empire decided to gamble on a technological advantage to counter the logistical superiority which American participation gave to their enemies. But they lost.

## IV

From the experiences of the First World War, different strategic thinkers derived different strategic lessons. In Western Europe, the most adventurous theorists considered that the technological dimension of war would predominate in the future. The protagonists of armored warfare in particular believed that it might restore an operational decisiveness unknown since the days of Napoleon himself—the first two years of the Second World War were to prove them right. Skillfully led and well-trained armed forces operating against opponents who were both militarily and morally incapable of resisting them achieved spectacular results.

But another school of thinkers who placed their faith in technology fared less well; this school included those who believed that the development of air power would enable them to eliminate the operational dimension altogether and to strike directly at the roots of the enemy's *social* strength, at the will and capacity of the opposing society to carry on the war. Instead of wearing down the morale of the enemy civilians through the attrition of surface operations, air power, its protagonists believed, would be able to attack and pulverize it directly.

The events of the war were to disprove this theory. Technology was not yet sufficiently advanced to be able to eliminate the traditional requirements of operational and logistical strategy in this manner. Neither the morale of the British nor that of the German people was to be destroyed by air attack; indeed, such attack was found to demand an operational strategy of a new and

complex kind in order to defeat the opposing air forces and to destroy their logistical support. But operational success in air warfare, aided by new technological developments, did eventually enable the Allied air forces to destroy the entire logistical framework that supported the German and Japanese war effort, and rendered the operational skills, in which the Germans excelled until the very end, as ineffective as those of Jackson and Lee.

Technology had not in fact transformed the nature of strategy. It, of course, remained of vital importance to keep abreast of one's adversary in all major aspects of military technology, but given that this was possible, the lessons of the Second World War seemed little different from those of the First. The social base had to be strong enough to resist the psychological impact of operational setbacks and to support the largest possible logistical buildup by land, sea and air. The forces thus raised had then to be used progressively to eliminate the operational options open to the enemy and ultimately to destroy his capacity to carry on the war.

## v

The same conclusions, set out in somewhat more turgid prose, were reached by the strategic analysts of the Soviet Union—not least those who in the late 1940s and early 1950s were writing under the pen name of J. V. Stalin. But Marxist military thinkers, without differing in essentials from their contemporaries in the West, naturally devoted greater attention to the social dimension of strategy—the structure and cohesiveness of the belligerent societies. For Soviet writers this involved, and still involves, little more than the imposition of a rigid stereotype on the societies they study. Their picture of a world in which oppressed peoples are kept in a state of backward subjection by a small group of exploitative imperialist powers, themselves domestically vulnerable to the revolutionary aspirations of a desperate proletariat, bears little resemblance to the complex reality, whatever its incontestable value as a propagandistic myth. As a result their analysis is often hilariously inaccurate, and their strategic prescriptions either erroneous or banal.

But the West is in no position to criticize. The stereotypes which we have imposed, consciously or unconsciously, on the political structures that surround us, have in the past been no less misleading. The cold war image of a world which would evolve peacefully, if gradually, toward an Anglo-Saxon style of democracy under Western tutelage if only the global Soviet-directed Marxist con-

spiracy could be eradicated was at least as naïve and ill-informed as that of the Russian dogmatists. It was the inadequacy of the sociopolitical analysis of the societies with which we were dealing that lay at the root of the failure of the Western powers to cope more effectively with the revolutionary and insurgency movements that characterized the postwar era, from China in the 1940s to Vietnam in the 1960s. For in these, more perhaps than in any previous conflicts, war really was the continuation of political activity with an admixture of other means; and that political activity was itself the result of a huge social upheaval throughout the former colonial world which had been given an irresistible impetus by the events of the Second World War. Of the four dimensions of strategy, the social was here incomparably the most significant; and it was the perception of this that gave the work of Mao Zedong and his followers its abiding historical importance.

Military thinkers in the West, extrapolating from their experience of warfare between industrial states, naturally tended to seek a solution to what was essentially a conflict on the social plane either by developing operational techniques of "counterinsurgency," or in the technological advantages provided by such developments as helicopters, sensors or "smart" bombs. When these techniques failed to produce victory, military leaders, both French and American, complained, as had the German military leaders in 1918, that the war had been "won" militarily but "lost" politically—as if these dimensions were not totally interdependent.

In fact, these operational techniques and technological tools were now as ancillary to the main sociopolitical conflict as the tools of psychological warfare had been to the central operational and logistical struggle in the two world wars. In those conflicts, fought between remarkably cohesive societies, the issue was decided by logistic attrition. Propaganda and subversion had played a marginal role, and such successes as they achieved were strictly geared to those of the armed forces themselves. Conversely, in the conflicts of decolonization which culminated in Vietnam, operational and technological factors were subordinate to the sociopolitical struggle. If that was not conducted with skill and based on a realistic analysis of the societal situation, no amount of operational expertise, logistical backup or technical know-how could possibly help.

## VI

If the social dimension of strategy has become dominant in one form of conflict since 1945, in another it has, if one is to believe

the strategic analysts, vanished completely. Works about nuclear war and deterrence normally treat their topic as an activity taking place almost entirely in the technological dimension. From their writings not only the sociopolitical but the operational elements have quite disappeared. The technological capabilities of nuclear arsenals are treated as being decisive in themselves, involving a calculation of risk and outcome so complete and discrete that neither the political motivation for the conflict nor the social factors involved in its conduct—nor indeed the military activity of fighting—are taken into account at all. In their models, governments are treated as being as absolute in their capacity to take and implement decisions, and the reaction of their societies are taken as little into account as were those of the subjects of the princes who conducted warfare in Europe in the eighteenth century. Professor Anatole Rapoport, in a rather idiosyncratic introduction to a truncated edition of Clausewitz's *On War*, called these thinkers "Neo-Clausewitzians." It is not easy to see why. Every one of the three elements that Clausewitz defined as being intrinsic to war—political motivation, operational activity and social participation—are completely absent from their calculations. Drained of political, social and operational content, such works resemble rather the studies of the eighteenth-century theorists whom Clausewitz was writing to confute, and whose influence he considered, with good reason, to have been so disastrous for his own times.

But the question insistently obtrudes itself: in the terrible eventuality of deterrence failing and hostilities breaking out between states armed with nuclear weapons, how will the peoples concerned react, and how will their reactions affect the will and the capacity of their governments to make decisions? And what form will military operations take? What, in short, will be the social and the operational dimensions of a nuclear war?

It is not, I think, simply an obsession with traditional problems that makes a European thinker seek an answer to these questions. If nuclear war breaks out at all, it is quite likely to break out here. And in Europe such a conflict would involve not simply an exchange of nuclear missiles at intercontinental range, but a struggle between armed forces for the control of territory, and rather thickly populated territory. The interest displayed by Soviet writers in the conduct of such a war, which some writers in the West find so sinister, seems to me no more than common sense. If such a war does occur, the operational and logistical problems it will pose will need to have been thoroughly thought through. It

is not good enough to say that the strategy of the West is one of deterrence, or even of crisis management. It is the business of the strategist to think what to do if deterrence fails, and if Soviet strategists are doing their job and those in the West are not, it is not for us to complain about them.

But it is not only the operational and logistical dimensions that have to be taken into account; so also must the societal. Here the attention devoted by Soviet writers to the importance of the stability of the social structure of any state engaged in nuclear war also appears to me to be entirely justifiable, even if their conclusions about contemporary societies, both their own and ours, are ignorant caricatures.

About the operational dimension in nuclear war, Western analysts have until recently been both confused and defeatist. In spite of the activities of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his colleagues nearly 20 years ago, and in spite of the lip service paid to the concept of "flexible response," the military forces in Western Europe are still not regarded as a body of professionals, backed up where necessary by citizen-soldiers, whose task it will be to repel any attack upon their own territories and those of their allies. Rather they are considered as an expendable element in a complex mechanism for enhancing the credibility of nuclear response. Indeed, attempts to increase their operational effectiveness are still sometimes opposed on the grounds that to do so would be to reduce the credibility of nuclear retaliation.

But such credibility depends not simply on a perceived balance, or imbalance, of weapons systems, but on perceptions of the nature of the society whose leaders are threatening such retaliation. Peoples who are not prepared to make the effort necessary for operational defense are even less likely to support a decision to initiate a nuclear exchange from which they will themselves suffer almost inconceivable destruction, even if that decision is taken at the lowest possible level of nuclear escalation. And if such a decision were taken over their heads, they would be unlikely to remain sufficiently resolute and united to continue to function as a cohesive political and military entity in the aftermath. The maintenance of adequate armed forces in peacetime, and the will to deploy and support them operationally in war, is in fact a symbol of that social unity and political resolve which is as essential an element in nuclear deterrence as any invulnerable second-strike capability.

So although the technological dimension of strategy has certainly become of predominant importance in armed conflict be-

tween advanced societies in the second half of the twentieth century—as predominant as the logistical dimension was during the first half—the growing political self-awareness of those societies and, in the West at least, their insistence on political participation have made the social dimension too significant to be ignored. There can be little doubt that societies, such as those of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, which have developed powerful mechanisms of social control, enjoy an apparent initial advantage over those of the West, which operate by a consensus reached by tolerating internal disagreements and conflicts; though how great that advantage would actually prove under pressure remains to be seen.

Whatever one's assessment of their strength, these are factors that cannot be left out of account in any strategic calculations. If we do take account of the social dimension of strategy in the nuclear age, we are likely to conclude that Western leaders might find it much more difficult to initiate nuclear war than would their Soviet counterparts—and, more important, would be perceived by their adversaries as finding it more difficult. If this is the case, and if on their side the conventional strength of the Soviet armed forces makes it unnecessary for their leaders to take such an initiative, the operational effectiveness of the armed forces of the West once more becomes a matter of major strategic importance, both in deterrence and in defense.

Most strategic scenarios today are based on the least probable of political circumstances—a totally unprovoked military assault by the Soviet Union, with no shadow of political justification, on Western Europe. But Providence is unlikely to provide us with anything so straightforward. Such an attack, if it occurred at all, would be likely to arise out of a political crisis in central Europe over the rights and wrongs of which Western public opinion would be deeply and perhaps justifiably divided. Soviet military objectives would probably extend no farther than the Rhine, if indeed that far. Under such conditions, the political will of the West to initiate nuclear war might have to be discounted entirely, and the defense of West Germany would depend not on our nuclear arsenals but on the operational capabilities of our armed forces, fighting as best they could and for as long as they could without recourse to nuclear weapons of any kind. And it need hardly be said that hostilities breaking out elsewhere in the world are likely, as they did in Vietnam, to arise out of political situations involving an even greater degree of political ambiguity, in which our readiness to initiate nuclear war would appear even less credible.

The belief that technology has somehow eliminated the need for operational effectiveness is, in short, no more likely to be valid in the nuclear age than it was in the Second World War. Rather, as in that war, technology is likely to make its greatest contribution to strategy by improving operational weapons systems and the logistical framework that makes their deployment possible. The transformation in weapons technology which is occurring under our eyes with the development of precision-guided munitions suggests that this is exactly what is now happening. The new weapons systems hold out the possibility that operational skills will once more be enabled, as they were in 1940–41, to achieve decisive results, either positive in the attack or negative in the defense. But whether these initial operational decisions are then accepted as definitive by the societies concerned, will depend, as they did in 1940–41 and in all previous wars, on the two other elements in Clausewitz's trinity: the importance of the political objective, and the readiness of the belligerent communities to endure the sacrifices involved in prolonging the war.

These sacrifices might or might not include the experience, on whatever scale, of nuclear war, but they would certainly involve living with the day-to-day, even the hour-to-hour, possibility that the war might "go nuclear" at any moment. It is not easy to visualize a greater test of social cohesion than having to endure such a strain for a period of months, if not years, especially if no serious measures had been taken for the protection of the civil population.

Such measures were projected in the United States two decades ago, and they were abandoned for a mixture of motives. There was, on the one hand, the appreciation that not even the most far-reaching of preparations could prevent damage being inflicted on a scale unacceptable to the peoples of the West. On the other was the reluctance of those peoples to accept, in peacetime, the kind of social disruption and the diversion of resources which such measures would involve. The abandonment of these programs was then rationalized by the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. And any attempt by strategic thinkers to consider what protective measures might have to be taken if the war which everyone hoped to avoid actually came about was frowned on as a weakening of deterrence. But here again, there seem to have been no such inhibitions in the Soviet Union; and their civil defense program, which some Western thinkers find so threatening, like that of the Chinese, seems to me no more than common sense. It is hard not to envy governments which have the capacity to carry through such measures, however marginally they might

enhance the survivability of their societies in the event of nuclear war.

The Western position, on the other hand, appears both paradoxical and, quite literally, indefensible, so long as our operational strategy quite explicitly envisages the initiation of a nuclear exchange. The use of theater nuclear weapons within Western Europe, on any scale, will involve agonizing self-inflicted wounds for which our societies are ill-prepared; while their extension to Eastern European territory will invite retaliation against such legitimate military targets as the ports of Hamburg, Antwerp or Portsmouth for which we have made no preparations at all. The planned emplacement of nuclear weapons in Western Europe capable of matching in range, throw-weight and accuracy those which the Russians have targeted onto that area may be necessary to deter the Soviet Union from initiating such an exchange. But it will not solve the problem so long as the Russians are in a position to secure an operational victory without recourse to nuclear weapons at all. Deterrence works both ways.

#### VII

It cannot be denied that the strategic calculus I have outlined in the above pages has disquieting implications for the defense of the West. We appear to be depending on the technological dimension of strategy to the detriment of its operational requirements, while we ignore its societal implications altogether—something which our potential adversaries, very wisely, show no indication of doing. But the prospect of nuclear war is so appalling that we no less than our adversaries are likely, if war comes, to rely on “conventional” operational skills and the logistical capacity to support them for as long as possible, no less than we have in the past.

Hostilities in Europe would almost certainly begin with the engagement of armed forces seeking to obtain or to frustrate an operational decision. But as in the past—as in 1862, or in 1914, or in 1940–41—social factors will determine whether the outcome of these initial operations is accepted as decisive, or whether the resolution of the belligerent societies must be further tested by logistical attrition, or whether governments will feel sufficiently confident in the stability and cohesion of their own peoples, and the instability of their adversaries, to initiate a nuclear exchange. All of this gives us overwhelming reasons for praying that the great nuclear powers can continue successfully to avoid war. It gives us none for deluding ourselves as to the strategic problems such a war would present to those who would have to conduct it.