

Inversion of U.S. Strategy

Marginal Notes for *On Strategy: A Primer*

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-1-200-212

Abstract

The author looks at the collection of essays entitled *On Strategy: A Primer* (2020) as an insight into U.S. policies and strategy. These two basic levels are invariably present in any armed conflict; however, the purpose of this article goes beyond the boundaries of a standard review. At first glance, the problem of effectively blending foreign policy and strategy may seem groundless, far-fetched, and completely out of touch with reality. The author argues that this impression is misleading. The inaccurate distribution of responsibilities between policy and strategy and the tendency to constantly confuse their functions potentially poses serious risks even to such a superpower as the United States. An unbiased glance cast from a distance gives a better view of the prerequisites for mutual alienation of the political and strategic horizons of U.S. military efforts.

Keywords: U.S., politics, strategy, military theory, tactics, conflict, operational level of war.

In 2020, about a year before the “escape from Kabul” drama began to unfold, the academic collection of essays entitled *On Strategy: A Primer* hit the shelves in the United States. Chief editor of this book Nathan Finney well represents the modern cohort of U.S. staff officers boasting a remarkable combination of professional military training and fundamental university education.¹ The preface was written by prominent British military historian, Professor of International Relations Colin S. Gray (1943-2020), in whose lifetime this publishing project, unfortunately, turned out to be the last one.

The book actualizes the long-standing American dispute about the optimal way to couple strategy and policy, which flared up with renewed force on the eve of the inglorious endings of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Earlier, some traces of the dispute could be traced on the pages of analytical papers meant primarily for practical use, for example, in the reports of the RAND Corporation, which in the U.S. system of strategic consulting primarily serves the interests of the Air Force (Robinson et al., 2014). A distinguishing feature of *On Strategy: A Primer* is that it was conceived as a textbook, for which reason it can be rated at a higher conceptual level. The authors not only look for answers to crucial questions on the current agenda but propose systematized and codified conclusions.

The “strategy” label is always attractive, so few can escape the temptation to stick it on all sorts of things, so that ultimately they often get caught in the web of ideological and political opportunism. At the same time, whenever an idea is borrowed incorrectly and begins to be applied in a field distant from the original one, it loses a large share of its original thrust. Therefore, in his introduction, Gray remarked quite sarcastically that on the pages of this collection of essays the authors would not be discussing the “strategy of growing potatoes.”

Although the troubles the American superpower had to go through leaving Kabul will obviously not lead to a national disaster, the resounding failure of the obsession with reorganizing the Islamic

¹ Under the U.S. Army’s Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program, operating at the Fort Leavenworth Command and Staff College, N. Finney studied at Duke University, where he received a PhD in History.

world naturally enhances in the American expert community what eminent Dutch thinker Franklin Ankersmit defined as “the foresight of the vanquished” (Ankersmit, 2005).

THE LESSONS OF 2001-2014. MISTAKES CORRECTED

As noted above, some inconsistencies at the intersection of U.S. policy and strategy, as well as the lack of their interdepartmental coordination, were already noted in the RAND Corporation’s report in 2014. In the mid-2010s, the turbulent situations in Iraq and Afghanistan generated a whirlwind of problems that required instant solutions. The pressure of wartime circumstances left no room for in-depth reflection. However, even in the string of military conflicts at the beginning of the 21st century, RAND Corporation specialists managed to discover some very disturbing trends. The worst sore spots they noted were:

1. Underestimation of the importance of the strategic level of conflict dynamics.
2. Mistakes at the stage of formulating strategic objectives.
3. Desynchronization of policy and strategy.
4. Over-estimation of military technologies’ capabilities.
5. The United States’ inability to convert military victories on the battlefield into the subsequent stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan.
6. Insufficient emphasis on non-military approaches to settlement.
7. Inadequate mechanisms of interdepartmental interaction and poor coordination of the allies’ efforts.

As follows from paragraph 6, the 2014 report was imbued with ritual clichés, mandatory in such cases. Rebuking the U.S. military-political leadership for insufficient cooperation with civilian actors (Robinson et al., 2014, p. 25) is tantamount to writing about non-military solutions of predominantly military problems. Both are possible only under the pressure of a corresponding ideology and cultural and ethical fashion. Even the most sophisticated social technologies of maintaining relations with the population in the zone of a low-intensity conflict will be unable to compensate for the lack of field troops where they are urgently needed.

In contrast to the RAND Corporation report, the authors of the 2020 collection went much further. Along with an attempt to create an impression of didactic and conceptual integrity, the authors tried to hint at some latent message hiding between the lines. For example, the cover design by Dale Cordes contained a very intricate allegory: three men in military uniform are standing shoulder to shoulder on the top of a cliff, with their backs turned to the reader. Before their eyes, reflected in the sunset sky, lies a WWII map of the D-Day landing in Normandy as of about June 12, 1944. True, good imagination and artistic taste are unlikely to harm a future general staff officer. At the same time, a fake fog screen is out of place here, because the subject matter of strategy requires a clear and precise presentation of the main ideas. Until today's students at the Fort Livenworth Command and General Staff College have different teachers at the very top of the U.S. military hierarchy, we will be unable to learn to what degree they have enjoyed the benefits of the "textbook."

THE U.S. AND THE STRATEGIC TIER OF MILITARY DYNAMICS

The failures of 2001-2020 once again put before the U.S. military quite a few questions consonant with the debates of the Vietnam War era. Why does military-technical and tactical superiority not always evolve into a sustainable strategic advantage and, therefore, does not achieve its foreign policy goal? Why might America's colossal economic, military, scientific and technological not provide a solution that always leads to a victorious outcome? Who is primarily to blame for this: an inert army, traditionally best prepared to fight the last war, or an incompetent policy that sends the armed forces to fight for goals that are obviously unattainable by combat means?

More than twenty authors, mostly Anglo-Americans, contributed to *On Strategy: A Primer*. The book opens with chapters on the history and theory of strategy, followed by a section on the struggle for air and maritime supremacy. Then there are chapters on the "difficulties of translating" strategic imperatives into the language of a practical military doctrine, an analysis of the requirements for a modern general staff officer to meet, and a discussion of the essence of geopolitics. The

collection ends with reflections on the likely forms of future conflicts and an examination of such phenomena as “small wars,” nuclear deterrence, coalition action and civil-military relations.

Any theory, everybody knows, is called upon to help avoid starting the analysis of a specific empirical experience from scratch every time. The focus of strategy is not so much on the war itself, as on the consequences of a military threat. Gray compared the business of defining what strategy is to deciphering such complex and abstract concepts as love or happiness. The authors of *On Strategy: A Primer* were under a strong influence of a British professor known for a series of theoretical papers on this subject. Gray postulated that the history of strategy was a chronicle of the use of force. He argues that strategy is a bridge connecting military power with a political goal (Gray, 2007, pp. 6, 13, 40,70). Accordingly, on the pages of *On Strategy: A Primer*, we are offered a similar definition: “the threat or use of force for political purposes.”

Strategic is not synonymous with military! A simple combination of tactical actions in itself is not a strategy, just as, for example, a folder with plans for certain military operations is not a strategy, either. For example, the technical ability of warplanes to accurately hit the targets is nothing more than the cost of rising to the strategic tier of conflict dynamics. In the meantime, even successful tactical moves may entail negative strategic consequences.

The use of force is ultimately aimed at achieving a political end gain. Strategy actually translates the identified political aim into the language of military operations. Ideally, by interacting with policy, it is designed to harmonize the four basic elements: goals, ways, means, and risks.

In the United States, the relationship between civilian and military leadership, as defined by Eliot A. Cohen, is characterized as “unequal dialogue between civilian policymakers and military professionals” (Cohen, 2003, p. 10), and in this sense it is very far from harmony. Although the key political institutions in the country continue to function as a well-oiled machine, politics is not always able to provide clear goal-setting.

Politics and strategy are not equivalent! A short-sighted policy, even if supported by an absolutely precise definition of goals, ways

and means, will remain flawed. Although any strategy is determined by politics, a good strategy, consonant with political goals, is obliged to supply the civilian leaders with exhaustive information about the costs of their possible mistakes.

Very often, a strategy is faced with the need to firmly govern the lower levels of conflict dynamics, in other words, the operational and tactical tiers, when there is a lack of crucial political inputs. In this case, the strategy has to rely on its own interpretation of the underlying political conditions, although this interpretation can often be biased.

In addition, in discussing any strategy, it is essential to bear in mind two of its basic methods, namely, attrition and annihilation. War is continuous interaction by different decision-making tiers. The ratio of tactics, operational planning skills, strategy and politics can most easily be imagined as concentric circles. The connection between foreign policy and strategy remains hierarchical, just as in any war tactics are subordinated to operational considerations. Attrition and annihilation embody the basic algorithms of how the connecting lines between strategy and politics work. By studying them carefully enough one can detect signs of disruptions in the passage of nerve impulses between the most important tiers of military efforts. They were first formulated and critically compared by outstanding German scholar Hans Delbrück at the beginning of the 20th century in his multi-volume *History of the Art of War*. This classification was only a special case of the one proposed by Carl von Clausewitz, who distinguished between wars having decisive and limited goals. However, within the framework of American ideas, the classic dichotomy of “attrition” and “annihilation” breaks down into three components: “attrition,” “exhaustion,” and “annihilation.”

Although strategy and tactics are deceptively similar at first glance, their underlying, inner logic is fundamentally different. The ultimate goals of strategy and tactics are to be looked for in divergent directions. While tactics is in pursuit of a culmination, that is, victory on the battlefield, strategy seeks a favorable continuation of events. On the strategic horizon no achievements are really final. Rather, they turn out to be points of transition to the next phase of the desirable

continuation of events, as a result of which a country expects to take a more advantageous position in relation to its rivals.

Reconciling the antagonistic imperatives of tactics and strategy requires a buffer, such as the art of operational planning, which guides the abstractions of strategy in a specific tactical direction. In the military art of the 19th century, two poles—tactics and strategy—were clearly distinguished. The movement of troops within the boundaries of a theater of war, which lasted weeks and months, belonged with the realm of strategy, while the general battle, the culmination of such marches and maneuvers were played out as a one-act episode, a purely tactical one, lasting only several hours to several days. Intermediate forms were essentially absent. For Napoleon and Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the successful completion of the struggle in a theater of operations was often merely a derivative of success at the initial strategic deployment phase and victory in the general battle.

Later on, with progress in materiel and engineering and the growth of the armies involved in the struggle, this harmonious binary system began to fall apart. The field march and eventual one-act general battle in the end gave way to an era of combat operations, in which multiple and prolonged combat efforts encompassed the entire theater of operations. From that moment on, the sequence of combat episodes became almost continuous. They unfolded in two dimensions at once: along the frontline and in depth. The binary system, which included only tactics and strategy, was replaced by a triangular one, in which tactics ensured victory in battle, strategy was responsible for waging war, and the operational art directed all combat efforts in the theater of operations towards a single goal.

However, already back in the 19th century, military thought intuitively groped about for a link between tactics, responsible for the effective use of troops on the battlefield, and strategy as the art of using the army to win the war. Traces of this search were already seen in attempts to broaden the interpretation of the tasks of tactics and strategy using the history of the Napoleonic Wars as an example. For instance, depending on the context, prominent Swiss theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini attributed to the field of strategy either the

overall coordination of military, diplomatic, political, and economic efforts within the framework of a conflict, or the art of using troops in the theater of operations. In the former case, the term ‘strategy’ was applied to what today would be correct to call politics. And in the latter case, strategy essentially merged with operational elements.

Ultimately, the demarcation of tactics, operational art, and strategy depended on how broadly the tasks of each of the war horizons were interpreted. The advocates of clear normative definitions did not always take into account the plastic nature of these boundaries.

One gets an impression that American experts tend to perceive the fragmentation of the subject matter field of strategy as a necessary evil. A significant part of the U.S. top brass sees an ideal model in a situation where political decisions are made first, and then the army takes certain action to achieve the set goals.

The U.S. government officially formulates political and strategic objectives in several documents at once. The National Security Council approves the National Security Strategy.² The National Defense Strategy, which is subordinate to the latter, takes shape in the depths of the Department of Defense. And the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in turn, uses the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) as a starting point to draft the provisions of the National Military Strategy.

The abundance of documents headlined “Strategy” is of little help in establishing its long-term goals. It can be assumed that, strictly speaking, only the National Military Strategy (NMS) corresponds to the strategic level of conflict dynamics in U.S. realities, while the NSS and the NDS lie on a different plane. Since they formulate the answer to the question about the national goals as interpreted by the collective mind of the U.S. party-political machine, it will be more correct to classify them as foreign and military policy documents.

According to a fair remark, found on the pages of the collection under review, strategy is sandwiched between the speculative and the observed. To express ideas on paper one often has to sacrifice the

² At the level of the Security Council, the National Security Presidential Memoranda are also prepared in addition to the National Security Strategy.

conceptual purity and comfort of abstraction. At the same time, any military system more easily learns the operational-tactical lessons than the political-strategic ones (Robinson et. al., 2014, p. 30). To be liked by the picky public, an ideal strategic document should have a futuristic tonality and, if possible, to downgrade the issues under consideration to the most simple and understandable categories.

The U.S. doctrine does not make fundamental distinctions between a campaign and a major operation. In the American system, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff does not have command rights over the arms and services and groups of forces in the regional theaters. For this reason, the NMS and other documents of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are advisory. At the lower level of regional theaters of combat operations, the commanders propose their separate individual “strategies” to the higher authorities.

Formally, the National Security Strategy serves the Americans as a tool for translating national policy goals into a national strategy. At the same time, the U.S. tends to distinguish between the national strategy and the theater strategy, which is wedged into this hierarchy in the capacity of a younger brother. In part, this is also because, in the geopolitical sense, America, washed by two oceans, is actually located on an “island.” The geographic remoteness of potential theaters of operations complicates any operations involving power projection. It is difficult to fit them within the boundaries of the operational horizon, because preparations for combined overseas operations require a strategic decision, and not an operational one.

In the continental states of Europe at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the operational horizon emerged in the forefront due to a complex of problems stemming from the mobilization, concentration, and combat deployment of multi-million armies. However, the isolated location of the American superpower reduces the significance of the operational tier. It is more convenient for an insular City on a Hill to split the strategy into a major and minor rendition than to find the ground for a classical triangular system.

On Strategy: A Primer does not propose any specific solutions for harmonizing political goals and military means. The Americans rightly

believe that an important quality of any army is its ability to adapt itself as quickly as possible to the rapidly changing conditions of the conflict environment. However, the correction of mistakes is done mainly in classrooms and rarely goes beyond the bounds of highly specialized academic conferences and seminars. In general, the U.S. approach draws insufficiently contrasting border lines between the four tiers of military dynamics: politics, strategy, operational planning art, and tactics. In the meantime, in the search for truth, it is important to distinguish between the rational and creative kernel, as embodied by modern American military science, and the scholasticism and verbosity of official bureaucratic declarations. It can be surmised that fundamental academic reflections and official bureaucratic rule-making proceed in the United States along non-intersecting straight lines.

The intellectual search impulse dies down the moment it runs into the impregnable shell of the U.S. party-political machine, which retains great inertia and keeps rolling along the spiral of electoral cycles. The U.S. strategy has succumbed to institutional dictatorship, has been artificially split up into several levels, and continues to follow the well-trodden path, which, in fact, has already resulted in its systemic malfunctioning and growing alienation from politics.

THE FIELD OF STRATEGY'S SUBJECT MATTERS FALLS APART

In the modern world, there is essentially no language other than the Western one to describe institutional support for foreign and military policy. In Russia, for example, various strategies are often adopted due to blind mimicking of Anglo-Saxon practices (Melikyan, 2021, pp. 42-46). In the West, doctrinal documents serve primarily the purpose of attracting public attention. Since the domestic “strategies” are created according to Western templates, they borrow their main drawback: the invariable confusion of “policy” and “strategy.” Fragmentation of the field of problems in focus is another distinguishing feature.

In the previous section, it was noted that U.S. documents lack a clear distinction between the strategic and the political. It is customary to speculate about a multitude of “strategies” at a time. Military, national security, nuclear, and space strategies more often than not appear on

the same list back-to-back... In the meantime, strategy, firstly, cannot be a synonym of politics, because the connection between the two is hierarchical, and, secondly, one of its segments cannot incorporate, subdue or absorb the other. The subject matter of national security, of course, is wider than the military posture, but proclaiming for this reason a narrow or, on the contrary, broad version of a strategy will be tantamount to multiplying redundant notions without a special need. There can be only one strategy at a time, provided the supreme state power is able to clearly formulate its imperatives.

If one decrypts the cumbersome American definition of strategy, it can be reduced to a fairly simple thesis. Strategy is understood as an art of choosing the optimal point for the application of state power.³ As long as one assumes that the strategy's field of problems is homogenous, it has to be admitted that the speculations about "space," "overland," "underwater," "stratospheric" and all other "strategies" in the plural form, in reality, are groundless. They are nothing but bureaucratic phantoms that exist exclusively on the pages of official bureaucratic documents. Edward Luttwak, one of the leading U.S. historians and military theorists, once made an important observation on this subject: "But if there really were such a thing as naval strategy or air strategy or nuclear strategy in any sense other than a combination of the technical, tactical, and operational levels within the same universal strategy, then each should have its own peculiar logic, or else exist as a separate counterpart to theater strategy, which would then be limited to ground warfare. The first is impossible, the second unnecessary" (Luttwak, 2001, p. 215).

When the Americans single out, for example, "a theater of operations strategy" as a separate concept and use the concept

³ The latest edition of the departmental dictionary proposes the following definition: "A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives" (DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. As of August 2021, p. 203). This definition is a word-for-word borrowing from the corresponding document of 2006 (Joint Publications 3-0. Joint Operations. 17 September 2006. Glossary 29) and, in fact, differs little from the equally cumbersome definition of 2001: "The art and science of developing and instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives" (Joint Publications 1-02. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. 12 April 2001 (as amended through 23 January 2002), p. 417).

of “operational level of war” along with it, this can be attributed, although not unconditionally, to objective “translation problems.” The reason is the categories of “operational,” “operational art” and “operational level of war,” which began to be spread in the U.S. army no earlier than the second half of the 20th century. The doctrine of the operational level of warfare was first introduced into the U.S. military doctrine under the FM 100-5 keystone manual of 1982 (McGrew, 2011, pp. 1, 5, 13, 15). In the context of U.S. ideas, the “strategy of the theater of operations” and the “operational level of war,” somewhat repeating the logic of Jomini, are very similar in meaning. However, the systematic confusion of the political and the strategic cannot be attributed to any objective circumstances. Strategy takes center stage when all other, peaceful and diplomatic means have already been exhausted. Overloading a strategic document with non-military issues means devaluing it in its main, primary and decisive aspect.

In other words, the official names of most of these papers should not be misleading. They are not a concentrated expression of strategic imperatives. Strategy and policy cannot be synonymous. The authors of policy documents are sometimes unaware of this. Confusion of these simple and at the same time complex concepts is highly undesirable, because the correct name is the clue to correct understanding.

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In academic works, U.S. authors painstakingly emphasize the importance of cohesive strategy, but in practice they stratify it to the point where it begins to resemble a layer cake. How does this seemingly strange paradox arise? From my point of view, the U.S. expert community abides by the unwritten rules of competition among super agencies. According to its logic, as long as the Department of Defense has a document under the fancy caption “Strategy,” the Security Council, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other bureaucratic heavyweights cannot afford not to have their own. *On Strategy: A Primer* sheds light on exactly how the U.S. military intellectual elite adapts to these external institutional pressure.

Obviously, there is a serious and potentially dangerous flaw in the U.S. model, which boils down to a fundamental desynchronization between policy and strategy. Although scholars consider the current situation a deviation (which is easy to read between the lines), they see it as an unavoidable evil. The realities of life itself indicate that an expertise that is not ready to propose an attractive enough surrogate of a practical solution will not be in demand. And, regrettably, not only in America.

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