

The Strategy Bridge: Linking the Tactical and Operational Battles to the National Interests

by LTC Eng Cheng Heng

Abstract:

In this essay, the author contends that in order to effectively achieve its political goals, a state has to strategically bridge its political goals with its military decision planning. He discusses some of these 'strategy bridges' employed throughout history and examines case studies of how various wartime figureheads have aligned their states' overall political goals with its military decision, with varying levels of success. Through these case studies, he notes that military tactical and operational level victories do not necessarily equate to a nation's political victory.

Keywords: Strategy; Decision making; Perception; Tactical; Operational

INTRODUCTION

*"War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means."*¹ Clausewitz's enduring dictum on the use of the military instrument in the service of political goals encapsulates the essence of this essay as it aims to investigate strategy. It is a generally accepted truth that strategy is the bridge linking the political goals (of a state) to the military instrument of statecraft such that its ability to wage war can be brought into the appropriate service of these goals that serve to further and/or sustain national interests.² It is also true that the military instrument of statecraft is but one of the larger arsenal of tools that a state has at its disposal to pursue its national interests and accompanying political goals.³

The frequency or the priority with which the military instrument is selected as the tool of choice is dependent on a variety of factors. However, there is no denying that even if it is not wielded, the strength

of the military and its availability in the arsenal have a large influence on the effectiveness of the other instruments of statecraft.⁴ It is this 'centrality' of the military instrument in relation to political goals that the subject of strategy is important. Correctly conceived strategy enables the efficient use of the military towards these political ends, be it for the purposes of waging war or coercion, while incorrectly conceived strategy makes the outcome of any war or coercion meaningless even if the military wins tactical or operational victories. This articulation of the strategy bridge brings to mind Colin Gray's view that "The strategist does not strive to win a war tactically. His mission is not to pile up a succession of tactical or even operational level victories. Rather, it is his function to so direct his disparate assets such that their total net effect contributes positively to the securing of whatever it is that policy demands."⁵

This essay concurs with Gray's proposition of the strategist's role. However, it will qualify that while the accumulation of tactical or operational victories

by the strategist might not be critical to the political outcome, the achievement of certain permutations and the quantity of tactical or operational victories are elements of a successful strategy—otherwise there would not be much point in employing the military instrument if there were no intentions of enjoying any shred of success. The caveat is that the impact these victories have must be aligned with the greater political goal(s) that exist at the grand strategic level. Hence, it is also the strategist's role to monitor the progress of the tactical/operational elements of strategy and their alignment towards the achievement of political goals and adjust the strategy accordingly to sustain the alignment amidst the constant shifts between the tactical/operational and grand strategic levels of strategy. This is the crux of Gray's point about strategy involving the constant interaction between ideas, through experience and scholarship that shape behaviour in the real world.⁶

FRAMEWORK

The essay will begin by establishing the construct of the strategy bridge using Edward Luttwak's *Levels of Strategy*, Gray's *Dimensions of Strategy* and Harry Summer's *Concept of Trinitarian War*, derived from Clausewitz's Trinity before using this construct to illustrate that the strategist's role also includes the need to monitor the construct of the strategy bridge and adjust for the dynamic nature of the bridge's components. This would ensure the alignment between the tactical or operational and the grand strategic parts of the bridge.⁷

Several case studies will be referred to across different time periods in which the nature of war has changed significantly: Alexander the Great and his conquest of Persia, Napoleon in the Napoleonic Wars, Germany and Japan in World War Two (WWII) and the

United States (US) in WWII, Vietnam War and the First and Second Gulf Wars with Iraq. The milestones of the eras that these cases span are the French Revolution, World War Two and the current time period. I will elaborate on the significance of the periods between these milestones subsequently.

The strategy bridge is thus constructed with multiple dimensions existing in a hierarchical order of separate levels that revolve around the relationship between the nation (the people), the military (the executors of the use of force) and the government (the political institutions of state). The ultimate aim of the bridge is to link the use of force or threat of it—including making the necessary preparations for war—to the achievement of political goals as defined by the government in order to serve the nation's interests.

THE CONSTRUCT OF THE STRATEGY BRIDGE

Luttwak lays out strategy as comprising of five separate levels in a hierarchical order within the grand strategic level (where the military outcomes are viewed in combination with other aspects of statecraft) being the pinnacle.⁸ The four levels subordinate to this, which deal exclusively with the military instrument are, in descending order: the theatre level, operational level, tactical level and technical level. This is not to say however, that the levels interact via a top-down approach, but rather, in a two-way process with the consequences at each level affecting the entire chain in some way, in what Luttwak terms the vertical dimension (across the levels) and the horizontal dimension (within

each level).⁹ The tactical level concerns actions on the battlefield and the deployment of forces. The operational level links the tactical battles with the theatre strategy and through it, to the larger aims at the grand strategic level.

Gray lists seventeen separate dimensions of strategy with the dimensions grouped into three general categories. People and politics is the first category and it comprises people, society, culture, politics and ethics.¹⁰ The second category is preparation for war. It comprises economics and logistics, organisation, military administration, information and intelligence, strategic theory and doctrine and technology.¹¹ The final category, war proper comprises military operations, command, geography, adversary and lastly, friction, chance and uncertainty.¹²

Summers interpreted Clausewitz to mean that strategy is contingent on maintaining the balance of interaction between the triad of the people, the armed forces and the state.¹³

The strategy bridge is thus constructed with multiple dimensions existing in a hierarchical order of separate levels that revolve around the relationship between the nation (the people), the military (the executors of the use of force) and the government (the political institutions of state). The ultimate aim of the bridge is to link the use of force or threat of it—including making the necessary preparations for war—to the achievement of political goals as defined by the government in order to serve the nation's interests.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATURE OF WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON STRATEGY

A point to note is that the above conceptions of the strategy bridge describe the nature of strategy post-Clausewitz. A key reason for the selection of such a conception is the fact that this is the foundation upon which modern strategy is examined. Although a case study before Clausewitz, i.e. Alexander the Great is cited in the essay, the purpose of its inclusion is meant to highlight the link between the tactical/



Painting depicting the Departure of the Conscripts of 1807 by Louis-Léopold Boilly.

operational level of strategy and the political level. While the battlefields and technology might differ in the periods that the case studies exist, the act of war itself has remained a constant throughout time. Clausewitz's treatise was based largely upon his experiences in the Napoleonic Wars. The Napoleonic Wars were themselves a landmark in strategic theory with the concept of the *Levée en masse* (mass conscription) brought about by the French Revolution, thus introducing a radical paradigm shift that accounted for the people of the state as having a stake in the triad that Summers described. Prior to the French Revolution, "war was still an affair for governments alone, and the people's role was simply that of an instrument... the executive... represented the state in its foreign relations... the peoples' part had been extinguished... War thus became solely the concern of the government to the extent that governments parted company with their peoples and behaved as if they were themselves the state."¹⁵

In the period following the French Revolution, the character of nations that had previously been based on dynastic rule now changed towards national democracies. Now, the interests of the people as a community of the state were what nations used to set political goals and harness the military instrument to pursue.¹⁶ Coupled with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution, the doctrine of mobilising mass armies to seek a decisive battle following Napoleon's example nudged the world towards the concept of what became known as 'Total War', as envisioned by Ludendorff, and culminating with WWII.¹⁷ The apogee of this conflict was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The scale of destruction and damage that the conflict wrought made the price of 'decisive victory' too high to pay and ushered in a new era of limited warfare.¹⁸

The post-WWII era saw people's restrained appetites for war in the aftermath of the massive scale of destruction juxtaposed against the pursuit of their interests as part of a nation by their governments through the continued use of the military instrument, amongst others. The evolution of the media—particularly what became popularly known as 'The CNN Effect'—in bringing the realities and information of the battlefield right in the faces of people introduced a new element to the already complex relationship between Summer's triumvirate and the levels and dimensions of strategy. The Vietnam War, also known as the TV War where the results of the war were first broadcasted to peoples' living rooms, and the First Gulf War, where CNN provided total televised coverage of the conflict, characterised this new information era and impacted how people perceived the state's usage of the military instrument.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Two keys traits characterised Alexander's successful conquests: his ability to secure the position of Macedonia within the League of Corinth, and thereafter, his masterful defeat of the Persian Empire that was far superior to Macedonia in terms of size and scale. While Alexander was famous for his skill as a warrior on the battlefield, he was less well known for his astute use of grand strategy to complement the military victories that enhanced his legend in order to secure his gains and build his own empire.

A fundamental enabler of his success was his ability to harmonise the levels of strategy. One military episode that underlines this was his campaign to neutralise the powerful Persian Navy whom he had identified as an enemy Centre of Gravity for its ability to invade Greece and hence, threaten the League of Corinth and Macedonia's position as the League's hegemon.¹⁹

While Alexander was famous for his skill as a warrior on the battlefield, he was less well known for his astute use of grand strategy to complement the military victories that enhanced his legend in order to secure his gains and build his own empire.

Alexander demonstrated sound application of the dimensions of strategy by leveraging on the strength of his land forces to approach the Persian Naval Campaign instead of pitting his Navy against the well-trained Persian fleet at sea.²⁰ His forces

won a series of tactical battles to capture Persian ports and naval bases, thus removing the Persian Navy's ability to provide logistic support to sustain their operations. Alexander's tactical and operational success prompted capitulations from the Persian-allied Phoenicians who switched their allegiances to Alexander. The neutralisation of Persian naval power secured Greece from a Persian invasion and strengthened Macedonia's position in the League, thus enabling Alexander an opportunity to consolidate his gains. This episode clearly underlined how Alexander's tactical and operational victories contributed towards his empire building. Although it is arguable that he might have found other tactical means to deny the Persian Navy their logistics support had he lost the



The Kingdom of Macedonia in 336 BC, where Alexander battled the Persian Navy.

battles to capture their ports, such as instigating other states to defeat the Persians or using his own fleet to defeat the Persians at sea, it is doubtful that such alternatives were feasible considering the relative strength of the Persian Navy to the Macedonian fleet or the Persian Army to the other states within its empire.

NAPOLEON'S FRANCE, HITLER'S GERMANY AND HIROHITO'S JAPAN

The common thread that binds the French, German and Japanese together were their armed forces' decisive score of tactical and operational level triumphs in each of the wars their countries fought, and also the eventual strategic defeat that they suffered despite these victories.



The painting "Le Trophee", by Edouard Detaille, depicting a French Dragoon with a captured Prussian flag at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt.

Napoleon's rout of the Prussians at Jena and Auerstadt are perhaps two of the most famous battles that headline his triumphs while the failure of his Russian adventure and the subsequent annihilation of the French army at Waterloo characterised his greatest failures as a strategist. The tactical and operational superiority of Napoleon's army in seeking decisive battle, using the speed of manoeuvre and concentrating forces at the decisive point was the inspiration for Clausewitz's theory of victory in war. The German concept of Blitzkrieg similarly underpinned early German successes in WWII and triggered a rise of operational theories about manoeuvre warfare. However, this foray into Russia dissolved the non-alliance pact between Hitler and Stalin and, coupled with the American entry into the war, began to turn the tides of strategy in favour of the Allies. All the German military's tactical and operational victories from then merely delayed their inevitable defeat. Similarly, the Japanese army demonstrated their tactical and operational superiorities over the British in their conquest of Southeast Asia and also their devastating attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbour. Pearl Harbour proved to be a double-edged sword as it brought the mighty American war machine into the arena. Although the Japanese, like the Germans, managed to continue enjoying tactical and operational successes in the Pacific, it would eventually be unable to stop the tide turning, culminating in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leading to the Japanese surrender.

In each instance, the French, German and Japanese went beyond what Clausewitz calls the culminating point of victory. Each stretched themselves beyond their tactical and operational capabilities, resulting in failure at the grand strategic level when their

opponents banded together to defeat them. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo should not be looked at in isolation, rather, it was his ill-advised campaign to invade Russia, coupled with the attrition of the French Army in Russia and further exacerbated by his losses in the Spanish counter-insurgency that laid the foundations for his defeat at Waterloo. At Waterloo, when the combined Prussian and British forces outmatched Napoleon's army, he was unable to accept a limited defeat and preserve his army thereafter and, that led to a crippling of the French state's military instrument in its entirety.²¹ Similarly in WWII, the rapid and decisive tactical and operational level victories that the Germans and Japanese had accumulated were unable to subdue the British or Americans and achieve the political objective to prevent them from entering into the war to interfere with the Axis' campaign of conquest. This eventually changed the nature of the war into one of attrition where, considering the huge materiel disadvantage the Germans and Japanese suffered, their defeat was only a matter of time in coming.²²

THE US IN WWII, VIETNAM AND IRAQ

The United States (US) armed forces since WWII is generally considered to be the most powerful military force of the modern world with its only close competitor being the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It helped the Allies to turn the tide in both World Wars and blitzed the opposition off the battlefield in the Vietnam and the two Gulf Wars. Unlike the French, German or Japanese in the previous case study, they certainly were not confronted by a superior force, yet Vietnam was considered a failure, and until recently, so was the Second Gulf War although the jury is still out on the outcome. Only WWII and the First Gulf War

could be considered to be anywhere near an overall success.

The title of the introductory chapter in Summer's analysis of the Vietnam War aptly reflects the overall view of the American scorecard: Tactical Victory, Strategic Defeat.²³ The tactical/operational victories in Vietnam were further underlined by the conventional war criteria of the kill ratio and body count that General Westmoreland, the American commander at the time used, to proclaim that America was winning the war.²⁴ This definition did not correspond with the perception of victory of the era. The American population did not view the finality of a Communist Vietnam with the same strategic lens as a German-dominated Europe or a Japanese-dominated Asia.²⁵ This coloured their perception of what the strategic aims of the war should be and caused a loss of public



The September 11 attack was one of the factors that helped gain public support for the Second Gulf War.

support for the war effort as the North Vietnamese dug in and American casualties climbed, albeit the number of Americans killed to the enemy were much lower. By contrast, the tactical and operational outcomes in WWII and the First Gulf War were aligned with the strategic aims as perceived by the public; a need to drive the occupiers out of Kuwait and thereafter, the victorious return of the American troops home.

During the Second Gulf War, one of the strategic aims of liberating Iraq from the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein (at least the one that was used to gain public support) was certainly helped by the political capital that the September 11th attacks provided.²⁶ The success of the Shock and Awe doctrine resulted in a level of tactical and operational dominance and resulted in the defeat of Saddam Hussein within twenty-one days. American troops were welcomed in the streets of Iraq as liberators. The initial euphoria in meeting the political goal of deposing Saddam Hussein was not to last however, as the sudden power vacuum gave rise to a counter-insurgency campaign against the remnants of the former ruling Ba'ath party, resulting in a war of attrition against insurgents that were content to dig in while American casualties mounted and eroded the public support back home.²⁷ It was not until General David Petraeus introduced 'The Surge' strategy to deal with the counter-insurgency that the US was able to re-define the criteria for strategic victory—by regaining public support and moving the American military effort in a new direction to deal with a counter-insurgency campaign instead of a conventional war.

ANALYSIS

In the case of Alexander the Great, he led in an era where he embodied the state, the armed forces and his people. He was able to exert a high level of

control over all the levels of strategy (except for the technical level). Hence, it was relatively easier for him to find success compared to the nations cited in the later examples.²⁸

In the case of France, Germany and Japan, although the people in Summers' triumvirate had a larger effect on the eventual strategic outcome, the militant nature of the state meant that it was enmeshed with the armed forces. As such, the level of control that the governments or singular figureheads (Napoleon, Hitler or Hirohito) could exert over the levels of strategy, was also significant. Their failure stemmed from an inability to navigate the grand strategic level. Firstly, they did not influence the political outcomes relative to their opponents in their favour. Secondly, they were unable to recognise the unrealistic odds this would impose at the tactical/operational levels and adjust their national interests to accept a compromise or, in the words of Gray, lose the war "if not gracefully at least in such a way that the successful enemy is powerfully motivated to settle for an advantageous, rather than a triumphantly punitive, peace."²⁹

With the US, the democratic character of the country meant that the people, in the form of the voting electorate, exerted a significant effect on the interaction of the triumvirate. The civil-military relations between the civilian political office-holders representing the state and the armed forces added to the complexity of this interaction. This also meant that it was essential for the military to communicate clearly with the political leadership to determine the best strategy considering what it could or should achieve at the tactical/operational levels and for the political leadership at the same time to find the balance between what the military

could achieve and the public opinion of the people to craft the appropriate policy goals or grand strategic objectives. The relatively more complex interaction in the triumvirate and different entities controlling the various levels of strategy muddled the effectiveness of tactical or operational victories toward the desired political outcomes.

The strategist needs to monitor all aspects of the triad's interaction and discern how it affects the political outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the case studies cited across the varying time periods have illustrated how the different levels and dimensions of strategy together with the interactions of Summer's triumvirate affected the eventual political outcome that is the product of the entire strategy machinery. The case studies have demonstrated that tactical and operational outcomes matter (because they contribute to the political/grand strategic aim). It is a matter of whether the correct policy goals to support the appropriate national interest have been formulated from the combined inputs of the triumvirate and whether the tactical and operational criteria for victory are correctly aligned. Depending on the complexity of the triumvirate, this would affect the amount of unity over the controls of the levels of strategy and their various dimensions. The strategist needs to monitor all aspects of the triad's interaction and discern how it affects the political outcomes. He must make adjustments to maintain the alignment of the tactical and operational levels of strategy with the grand strategic level if he senses shifts in the national interests or political goals that could potentially disturb this alignment so that the end

product of political outcome is not compromised. 🌐

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Clausewitz, C. *On War*, Trans. & Ed. Howard, M. & Paret, P. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1976.
2. Gray, C. *Modern Strategy*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 1999.
3. Gray, C. *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2010.
4. Herberg-Rothe, A. *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2007.
5. Heuser, B. *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press), 2010.
6. Honig, J.W. (2011). Total War: From Clausewitz to Ludendorff. Paper presented at the International Forum on War History at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Tokyo.
7. Liddell Hart, B.H. *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber), 1967.
8. Lonsdale, D.J. *Alexander the Great: Lessons in Strategy*. (London: Routledge), 2007.
9. Luttwak, E.N. *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1987.
10. Murray, W. *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1994.
11. Olsen, J.A. *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2011.
12. Petraeus, D.H. *The American military and the lessons of Vietnam: A study of the military influence and the use of force in the post-Vietnam Era*. Doctoral Dissertation presented to the faculty of Princeton University. (Michigan: University Microfilms International), 1987.
13. Schwab, O. *The Gulf Wars and the United States: Shaping the Twenty-First Century*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International), 2009.
14. Sheehan, M. 'The Evolution of Modern Warfare' in Baylis,

- J., Wirtz, J.J., Gray, C. (Eds) *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (4th Ed). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2013.
15. Smith, R. *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. (New York: Knopf), 2007.
 16. Summers, H.G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. (Novato, California: Presidio Press), 1982.
- ENDNOTES**
1. Clausewitz, C. (1976). *On War*, Trans. & Ed. Howard, M. & Paret, P. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 87.
 2. Gray, C. (1999). *Modern Strategy*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 17

Liddell Hart, B. (1967). *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber), 335.
 3. Heuser, B. (2010). *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press), 24-25

Murray, W. (1994). *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1-23.
 4. Ibid., 25-27.
 5. Gray, C. (2010). *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 174.
 6. Gray. (1999). *Modern Strategy*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press) p. 17

Liddell Hart, B. (1967). *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber), 3-4.
 7. Luttwak, E. (1987). *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 69-71.

Gray. (1999). *Modern Strategy*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press) p. 17

Liddell Hart, B. (1967). *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber), 24.

Herberg-Rothe, A. (2007). *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 6

Summers, H.G. (1982). *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. (Novato, California: Presidio Press), 5.
 8. Luttwak. op. cit. 69-71.
 9. Luttwak. loc.cit.
 10. Gray. (1999). *Modern Strategy*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 17

Liddell Hart, B. (1967). *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber), 26-31.
 11. Ibid. 31-38.
 12. Ibid. 38-44.
 13. Summers. loc.cit.
 14. Smith, R. (2007). *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. (New York: Knopf), 32-33.
 15. Clausewitz, op.cit. 583, 589-591.
 16. Honig, J.W. (2011, September 14). *Total War: From Clausewitz to Ludendorff*. Paper presented at the International Forum on War History at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Tokyo. 34.
 17. Sheehan, M. (2013). 'The Evolution of Modern Warfare' in Baylis, J., Wirtz, J.J., Gray, C. (Eds) *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (4th Ed). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 49-52; Smith. op.cit. 107-108.
 18. Smith. op.cit. 154.
 19. Lonsdale, D.J. (2007). *Alexander the Great: Lessons in Strategy*. (London: Routledge), 65.
 20. Lonsdale. op.cit. 59-60.
 21. Herberg-Rothe. op.cit. 32-36.
 22. Olsen, J.A. (2011). *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 223, 230-232,; Smith. op.cit. 139-141.
 23. Summers. op.cit. 1.
 24. Lonsdale. op.cit. 148.
 25. Petraeus, D.H. (1987). *The American military and*

the lessons of Vietnam: A study of military influence and the use of force in the post-Vietnam Era. Doctoral Dissertation presented to the faculty of Princeton University (*Michigan: University Microfilms International*). 104-105.

26. Schwab, O. (2009). *The Gulf Wars and the United States: Shaping the Twenty-First Century*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International), 102-103.
27. Ibid. 115-117.
28. Lonsdale. op.cit. 148.
29. Gray. (2010). *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 174.



LTC Eng Cheng Heng attended the Australian Defence Force Academy on a Military Training Award and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the University of New South Wales in 2004. He served an Officer Commanding tour in 123 SQN, operating the Seahawk Naval Helicopter and spent the majority of his career on board frigates where he has done several tours, most recently as Executive Officer of RSS *Tenacious*. LTC Eng is currently a Branch Head in the Navy Information Centre, Naval Operations Department.