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Linking Ends and Means

What Would the Greats Say About War in the 21st Century

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MILITARY STRATEGY MAGAZINE

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Editorial

The modern approach to military history is to view the subject as a collection of narratives that help us comprehend the modern world. This means a collection of stories to entertain.

The objective of military history is to inform and educate leaders and decision-makers on how to best deal with today and prepare for the future. What is contained within this edition is aimed at precisely that.

Unless military history, or indeed history, has some type of conceptual framework on which to base analysis and understanding, then it is merely stories, and stories do not tell the truth. They dismiss critical facts and alter context in the same way that song lyrics have abstract meaning. No one ever "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die". It's more complicated than that.

What follows could be considered a set of warnings about professional military education (PME). Very few cultures have a sound grasp of military history as a tool for improvement. The Germans and, more specifically, the Prussians did at some point. So did the British and the Americans. Most European democracies follow suit, but many others do not. Many others have a history skewed by myths and narratives that justify all their ills. North Korea is a good example, but it is only the most extreme of many similar ones.

If you do not have strategy and the ideas and writings of those who influenced the men who made it happen, then you merely have the chronology and commentary for what passes as history.

To paraphrase Colin S. Gray's comment on Air Power – War and Warfare are fundamentally about ideas, not technology. The study of ideas, therefore, is critical to understanding where the technology comes from and, more to the point, how you conduct engagements for the purpose of the war. When the word strategy had a specific and useful meaning, that was critical.

The key bit of insight I would ask readers to engage with, in this special themed issue of *Military Strategy Magazine*, is that all "The Greats" we cover here faced considerable challenges in their own time. Many of them had seen close-range combat. With the possible exception of some Soviet Theorists, none of them were deluded into advocating for "new ways of war" or claiming the history to date had been wrong about some fundamental aspect of the conduct of war and 'why can't we all just get along.' They all understood the fundamental relationship between Policy and Strategy, and that if the tactics and logistics could not make it a reality, then all else was for nought. Not one of them was hamstrung by over-intellectualising the future as "fast-changing" and "increasingly complex", which are just indicators that authors of such terms are probably over-promoted.

William F. Owen
Editor, *Military Strategy Magazine*
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May 2024

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Michael Handel, October 7, and The Theory of Surprise

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About the author

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed here are the author's alone and do not represent the position of any government, government agency, commercial firm, or group.

The place to begin is with a chance encounter with Tom Mahnken in the lobby of San Francisco's Hotel Nikko in August 2001. Tom mentioned that he was working on a festschrift for Michael Handel, his colleague at the U.S. Naval War College, who had recently passed away tragically from an especially aggressive form of cancer. Handel had been kind to me as a graduate student, offering advice, opportunities, and introductions – I immediately asked if I could contribute a chapter on his "Theory of Surprise." Tom said he never heard of the theory, but I reassured him that it was embedded in Handel's many works on intelligence failure and strategic surprise. Contemporary events gave the project a sense of urgency. "The Theory of Surprise"

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focused on the September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda attacks. It was published along with other essays in *Paradoxes of Intelligence*, which honored Handel's contribution to the field of intelligence studies.[i]

Today's reader might be unaware of Handel's link to the intelligence field; he is probably best remembered for his comparative study of strategy, especially the works of "classical strategic thought." He began with a volume on Clausewitz,[ii] followed by a comparison of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz,[iii] and then by increasingly comprehensive editions of his monograph *Masters of War*, which surveyed the ideas of Mau Zedong, Antoine-Henri Jomini, Niccolo Machiavelli, Alfred T. Mahan, Julian Corbett and even Casper Weinberger, among others.[iv] Nevertheless, as a founding editor of the journal *Intelligence and National Security*, Handel was an early leader in the field of intelligence studies, scholarship that was energized by the searing experience of the surprise suffered by Israel at the outset of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. He wrote extensively about the subjects of intelligence analysis, intelligence failure, and strategic surprise, including unique treatments of military intelligence, and technological surprise.[v]

Mahnken was of course correct, there is no theory of surprise in this literature, although Handel ruminated about the nature of such a theory and identified most of its key components. Despite his many achievements, we will never know what Handel might have said about Al Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon or, for that matter, the October 7, 2023, strategic surprise attack launched by Hamas against Israel. Or do we? Handel would have responded positively to this question; note how he favorably referenced the idea that scholars inevitably apply, advance, and adapt the work of others in their own research.

> Even the most creative theories in history were not conceived in a vacuum; one way or another, they owe something to the works of others . . .. Scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, for example, either synthesized and combined the work of others, while adding their own ideas, or were heuristically stimulated by existing ideas to develop their own original concepts. The same is true for those whose creative and analytical thought processes have "transformed" the intricacies of strategy . . . into an innovative theory or body of work.[vi]

So, what insights might Handel provide about the most recent example of a strategic surprise attack – the tragic events surrounding the October 7 Hamas raid on Israel? What insights can Handel's work offer about the intelligence-policy failure surrounding the tragedy?

The Theory of Surprise and October 7

As the vast literature on the intelligence failure surrounding the 1973 October War demonstrates, the Israeli government and scholarly community are more than capable of identifying the errors of omission and commission that contributed to the operational and tactical success enjoyed by Hamas during the October 7 raid that killed about 1200 Israeli civilians and soldiers and enabled the taking of over 250 hostages.[vii] When the full record is available for analysis years or even decades from now, there will undoubtedly be many twists and turns in the story of why the Israeli intelligence community and military and political authorities were caught flat-footed as armed units conducted a mad dash across the Gaza border hellbent on killing and capturing Israeli civilians in an act of terrorism that still seems to defy strategic logic. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe that events surrounding the October 7 raid generally conform to a pattern common in instances of strategic surprise attacks. Handel described aspects of this pattern in his writings on intelligence. The fact that the October 7 raid appears to make little strategic sense, that it seems to have achieved its immediate tactical and operational goals and is culminating in an attritional conflict all fits neatly within the five propositions of the theory of surprise.

Proposition 1: Surprise Suspends War's Dialectic

Although strategists universally look for force multipliers, including tactical and operational surprise, to improve their battlefield prospects, they understand the risks of relying too heavily on the success of some maneuver, stratagem, or innovation to achieve their objectives. Clausewitz judged that ambitious stratagem rarely succeeded and often consumed disproportionate resources compared to the battlefield gains they generated. Sometimes, however, strategists accept this significant risk. They launch operations that are based on achieving a surprise so pervasive that it literally eliminates a responsive opponent from the field. By eliminating active opposition, or any opposition at all, they temporarily transcend the nature of war – because the opponent is absent from the scene of some action, war is no longer a duel, as Clausewitz tells us, but becomes an administrative act, allowing a military unit to approximate the theoretical limits of its destructive potential.[viii] With no opposition, for instance, it was possible for two, five-man teams armed with box-cutters to destroy the World Trade Center in an operation that lasted a few hours. Strategic surprise, which often occurs at the onset of hostilities, allows the attacker to achieve objectives that cannot be realistically achieved in war, that is, in the face of opposition from an alert opponent. Other theorists have noticed how strategic surprise can temporarily suspend war's dialectic. William McRaven's theory of special operations embraces this proposition – his theory is intended to place special operators in a position to achieve their mission without opposition, and to mitigate the friction that inevitably will be encountered even when the opponent is nowhere in sight.[ix]

Surprise that suspends war's dialectic is qualitatively different from the element of surprise that commonly serves as a force multiplier. Strategic surprise is intended to create a situation where objectives can be achieved without encountering active opposition, while the use of surprise as a force multiplier is intended to create advantages in an encounter with an active opponent by hampering or delaying the opponent's response. As a good student of Clausewitz, Handel struggled with this distinction between strategic surprise attack and surprise as a force multiplier: he recognized the impact of a strategic surprise attack in international relations, but always tended to refer to it as a force multiplier and described Clausewitz's observations about the limited value of stratagem as an historical artifact.[x] In any event, by removing, sidestepping, or distracting the opponent from some geospatial setting, the realm of the possible expands rapidly into what can be viewed *ex ante* as the realm of the fantastic.

Proposition 2: The Weaker Party is Attracted to Surprise

The weak do indeed suffer what they must in an enduring conflict with a stronger party, which explains why they are willing to gamble everything on the success of a strategic surprise attack against a vastly more powerful antagonist. Because they lack the capability to achieve their objectives in wartime, the weak are attracted to strategic surprise because it offers them a way to achieve those same objectives. They become mesmerized by what in hindsight still appear to be brilliant tactics, operational innovations, and new technologies to achieve and capitalize on surprise, while giving short shrift to the longer-term strategic consequences of a successful surprise attack.

There is no miscalculation of relative strength involved in a conflict dyad composing a strong and weak actor; surprise attack is not caused by a miscalculation of the opponent's strength. The strong recognize their superior position and view the world from an attritional perspective: no matter what the weaker opponent does, they inevitably will encounter a superior opponent. The weak recognize their inferiority but hope to avoid a confrontation with the superior forces possessed by the opponent, or at least not before they can capitalize on strategic surprise and execute their exquisite operation. The weak focus on the opportunities created by the suspension of war's dialectic, by contrast, the strong focus on war's dialectic and their vastly superior position in a kinetic, attritional engagement with the weaker opponent. The theory of surprise thus links the structural setting of a conflict (strong vs. weak) with the cognitive level of analysis (how different perceptions of opportunity and risk inherent in the same conflict dyad are held by strong and weak actors). Handel was quite clear on this point, the weak, not the strong, are attracted to strategic surprise.[xi]

The Hamas attack was a complex, extensive, well-planned, and well-rehearsed combined-arms operation involving coordinated rocket attacks, seaborne assault, airborne attacks (using powered paragliders and drones), mechanized units (trucks, bulldozers, and motorcycles), and infantry. The attack was intended to reach remarkably ambitious objectives that would have been impossible to achieve in the presence of an alert Israel Defense Force (IDF): to take and hold Israeli territory between Gaza and the West Bank. Although the attack petered out in the Western Negev near the city of Ofakim, about halfway to the objective, Hamas was able to achieve secondary goals of killing a large number of civilians, capturing hostages, and delivering a profound political shock to supporters, competitors, and opponents across the globe.[xii] Hamas units breached the border between Gaza and Israel in upwards of 30 locations.[xiii] About 4,000 raiders participated in the attack, which overwhelmed border defenses. The attack achieved complete surprise across the entire border; nowhere were Israeli forces alerted, while the IDF's initial response was piecemeal. In fact, units positioned to defend the border were at half strength on 7 October because of the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah and the Sabbath.[xiv] Sometimes the limited organic defense of the bases and Kubutzes near Gaza managed to deter or slow the attacks, sometimes they did not. The real payoff came with a combined air and ground assault on the Re'im music festival, which resulted in the worst civilian massacre in Israeli history.

Against an alert defense, Hamas had no prospect of taking, holding, and "cleansing" territory between Gaza and the West Bank. It could not hope to achieve that objective *in wartime*. Strategic surprise, enabled by stratagem, accompanied by a concerted combined-arms assault, put that objective within reach. Hamas leaders were mesmerized by the raid's potential, the unifying force of the plan (it was an all-out attack that brought various factions and units on board), and its audacious nature. If there was a shortcoming in the plan, it probably lay in the realm of transportation and logistics – the West Bank could not be reached in a day-long mad dash.

Proposition 3: Handel's Risk Paradox

The explanation for how Hamas achieved a strategic surprise is found in Handel's risk paradox, which is produced by the perceptual divergence that occurs in a conflict dyad between the strong and the weak. Because a strategic surprise attack is an extremely risky evolution, especially because it allows actors to contemplate initiatives that are far beyond their capability in wartime, the stronger party will often dismiss warnings of what is about to unfold as harebrained or too farfetched to take seriously. This asymmetry in the perception of what is plausible and implausible leads to Handel's risk paradox, which lies at the heart of the theory of surprise: "The greater the risk, the less likely it seems and the less risky it becomes. In fact,

the greater the risk, the smaller it becomes."[xv] In other words, the more audacious the operation, the more unlikely the victim is to stage an effective response to a warning. This occurred – the IDF and Israeli intelligence possessed some compelling signals that Hamas wanted to launch a major attack, but they dismissed those indications as fundamentally irrational and unlikely to materialize. Most telling is that the IDF apparently did not even have a plan to respond to a "large scale" surprise attack, suggesting that such an attack was deemed so far-fetched, that it never merited serious consideration. As Yaakov Amidor, a former national security advisor stated, "the army does not prepare itself for things it thinks are impossible.[xvi]

The risk paradox also explains why denial and deception works well in the lead up to a strategic surprise attack. For example, in the months before the assault, Hamas confined communications about the upcoming raid to couriers or secure landlines, while they spoke openly on compromised systems about a decision not to renew hostilities with Israel.[xvii] It is not difficult for the weaker party to convince a stronger opponent that it will not undertake a reckless and self-destructive attack, which helps to explain why denial and deception enjoys a remarkable record of success.[xviii] There is also reason to believe that Hamas's denial and deception strategy capitalized on a bit of Israeli mirror imaging. As one anonymous reviewer noted, Israeli analysts believed (hoped?) that Hamas had undergone a transformation as it took responsibility for its civilians' well-being and now preferred improved economic relations with Israel over an escalation in fighting.

Proposition 4: The Stronger Actor Focuses on Attrition and War's Dialectic

Although the record is years away from completeness and clarity, there are reports that Israeli intelligence possessed a copy of the October 7 invasion plan, codenamed "Jericho Wall" at least a year before the actual attack.[xix] It is unclear if the plan, which was dismissed by the Israeli military as unrealistic and aspirational, was circulated among Israeli civilian officials.[xx] In July 2023, an Israeli intelligence analyst reported that Hamas training exercises were geared toward implementing at least part of the Jericho Wall plan. Intelligence officers of the units stationed along the Gaza border received this warning.[xxi] Border monitors also issued a steady stream of reports about ongoing Hamas assessments of border fortifications and breaching rehearsals.[xxii] Reports of unusual activity were forwarded to senior military officials but were described as signs of ordinary terrorist activity, which was not an uncommon occurrence.[xxiii] This also prompted the usual response – recalling senior unit commanders back to their headquarters. There also are reports that the Egyptian government warned Israel days before of an impending attack and that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency observed unusual activity near the Gaza Strip on or about 6 October 2023, but there are no details about the contents of these warnings.

The response of virtually all the officials and officers who received this reporting shared one thing in common – it dismissed signs of an impending attack as both unrealistic and aspirational, that is, that Hamas lacked the capability to execute such an ambitious attack.[xxiv] In fact, just days before the raid, Israeli intelligence assessed that Hamas possessed the capability to breach no more than a few spots along the barrier running between Gaza and Israel. Even if they were wrong and a more substantial attack unfolded, it would be nothing that the IDF could not handle. In a sense, officials did not dispute the accuracy of the reporting or the existence of the reported planning and training, they assessed that Hamas lacked the capability to undertake such an ambitious evolution, *especially in the face of an alerted IDF*. Hamas might manage to breach the fence in a few places, but they would not get very far. They assessed signals of the impending assault within the context of an alerted and prepared IDF. Within this "attritional" context, the Hamas assault constituted little more than a harebrained stunt.

Analysts, officers, and officials alike adopted an attritional mindset. They assessed reporting with the idea that Hamas would have to fight its way through the IDF first before they could get to killing civilians, and that was not a fight that Hamas would win. They did not view the situation from an asymmetric mindset, the mindset that shapes the perceptions of the weak, and consider what would happen if Hamas could sidestep the IDF and move across the countryside without opposition, or if it reached virtually undefended mass gatherings of civilians. What is key is that they based their judgment of the Hamas plan on their accurate assessment of the military balance, not on an assessment of the ability of Hamas to stage a strategic surprise attack. They failed to assess what might transpire if they completely ceded the opening move to Hamas.

Proposition 5: War Returns as Surprise Fades

Figure 1

Note: image attributions are listed in the endnotes of this article.

As surprise fades, war returns, which takes the form of an attritional contest between a strong and weak opponent with predictable results. When launching their surprise attack, the weak recognize that such an outcome is possible, but they deem it unlikely for reasons that appear implausible in hindsight. In other words, the weak know that the strong might go all in and bring their military power fully to bear, but they assess that various factors will prevent the strong from doing so.[xxv] As an anonymous reviewer noted, Hamas might have gathered from Israel's restraint in the face of earlier provocations that a response to the 7 October attack would take the form of an air strike, not an invasion with its ensuing, military, humanitarian and political costs. The cause of this tendency is probably linked to some form of irrational consistency, that is a failure to accept "value tradeoffs," or the tendency to believe that "all good things go together."[xxvi] There are reports that Hamas leaders accepted the fact that the Israelis would respond by striking Gaza, but it is unlikely that they anticipated the ensuing siege and the war of annihilation that has been underway for months as the IDF works to eliminate Hamas from the Gaza Strip. In a sense, the aftermath of surprise validates the stronger party's *ex ante* assessment of the military balance and the "irrationality" of the weaker party's decision to launch a strategic surprise attack against a stronger opponent.

Conclusion

The events surrounding the 7 October attack hold much in common with other instances of 20th and 21st century strategic surprise and accompanying intelligence failure. While Hamas leadership became mesmerized by the opportunities created by strategic surprise, Israeli analysts and officials became dismissive of indications that Hamas seemed preoccupied with planning for an offensive so audacious, that it strained credulity. The more such an attack succeeded, the greater the ferocity of the Israeli response, and the greater the ultimate damage to Hamas and its interests. Nevertheless, by removing effective opposition from a significant geospatial area, Hamas nearly created a land corridor to the West Bank, while methodically killing or capturing as many of its occupants as it could find. As surprise faded, war has indeed returned, leaving those who have not read this article to wonder how such a seemingly irrational course of events could occur in the first place. The events surrounding October 7 constitute a run-of-the-mill example of intelligence failure and strategic surprise attack,

One caveat to the above observation is in order. There is a relatively unique, and ironic, facet of the intelligence story of 7 October. Israeli intelligence is actually very good, especially when it comes to monitoring its environment. It possessed many accurate signals – from actual plans, to observations of training exercises and breaching preparations, to internal alarms, to warnings from external parties – that might have prompted an effective response, or at least led to a plan to develop an effective response, which of course is an issue that lies beyond the theory of surprise. Indeed, there is an eerie similarity between 7 October and events surrounding the 1973 Yom Kippur War -- here too Israel possessed a startling array of high-quality signals and still was caught unprepared to meet the ensuing onslaught.[xxvii] These cases are ripe for comparison and exploitation by scholars – given the wealth of information available to analysts and officers, both events probably reflect the fundamental causes of intelligence failure.

Finally, given the legacy of destruction and human suffering that follows when a weak actor attacks a stronger opponent, a strategic surprise attack must be considered as one of the most dangerous and irresponsible actions that can be undertaken by states and non-state actors. It constitutes an affront to humanity and an embarrassment to both the military and diplomatic profession. Deliberately attacking and provoking a stronger opponent is strategically bankrupt, despite the visions of a complacent and lethargic victim that accompany brilliant schemes that capitalize on surprise to achieve grandiose objectives. Handel's work reflected this assessment: he treated surprise attack as a danger to the attacker and attacked alike, a pernicious threat that haunts world politics and international security. States are obviously hurt when they fall victim to intelligence failure and the strategic surprise attack that follows in its wake, but everyone potentially suffers when others are victimized, and a major conflagration follows.

In the nearly twenty-five years since Handel's passing, intelligence studies have advanced in its understanding of strategic surprise attack. While intelligence failures are still inevitable,[xxviii] Handel's insights have helped produce a theory of surprise that can explain the conditions that lead to intelligence failure and surprise attack, who is likely to be the target, why surprise succeeds, and what happens when war returns.[xxix] The trick now lies in making operational use of the theory of surprise.

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training exercise, not the basis of an operation that was about to happen.

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Figure 1 - image attributions and credit

"Abbottabad 2011": The image is an apparent screenshot from the movie Zero Dark Thirty. Image found on Quora at https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-good-modern-U-S-military-movies

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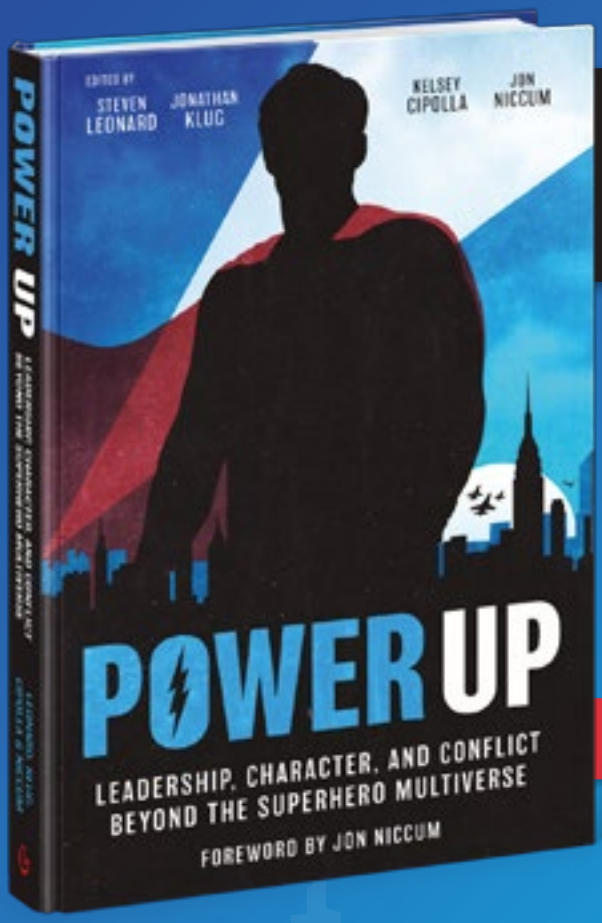

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Introduction

Perhaps the greatest weakness in strategic thinking and the relative literature is planning how to end a war, particularly before launching it. In some respects, this nearly universal historical failure is understandable. The overwhelming pressure of fighting a war often inhibits nations from seriously considering how to end it.[i] Clausewitz noted the importance of this issue, especially when a war is becoming increasingly bloody. The last sentence here is key:

> Theory, therefore, demands that at the outset of a war its character and scope should be determined on the basis of the political probabilities. The closer these political probabilities drive war toward the absolute, the more the belligerent states are involved and drawn in to its vortex, the clearer appear the connections between its separate actions, *and the more imperative the need not to take the first step without considering the last.*[ii]

But what would Clausewitz, and some additional theories, say about this most complicated of tasks: ending a war, particularly the war in Ukraine?

The Problem: Planning A War's End

Sometimes war is thrust upon you with no chance to plan for its termination before it begins—which was Ukraine's case when Russia escalated its war in 2022—or you are simply too weak to see a way out—a description of Ukraine's situation vis-à-vis Russia from 2014-2022. This is especially true for smaller powers forced to defend themselves from larger ones, which also describes the Russia-Ukraine War. In such cases, tough resistance can provide time for the situation to change. Such was Finland's case in the face of the 1939 Soviet invasion. Hard fighting preserved Finland's independence.[iii] The fierceness of Ukraine's resistance since 2022 bought Kyiv time to gather strength internally and abroad, wore down the Russian army, and provided room for a 2023 counteroffensive.

But this doesn't mean one achieves the peace they want. In 1940, the Finns journeyed to Moscow hoping to negotiate, but received no choice but to sign—unchanged—a treaty drafted by the Soviets.[iv] The 2022 Ukrainian counteroffensive liberated much Ukrainian territory but didn't inflict decisive defeat upon Russia's military or deliver Kyiv's aims.

How To End A War

Those facing the perplexing task of ending any war must keep in the forefront of their minds these three critical questions:

1. What is being sought politically?
2. How far must or should one go militarily to achieve this?
3. Who will maintain the peace settlement, and how?[v]

The number of factors in play around each of these ideas is simply overwhelming, this complexity demands systematic analysis. Moreover, these issues are inextricably intertwined. This is not a checklist. The forces related to all three work simultaneously.

1. What Is Being Sought Politically?

We start here because this is what the war is about, and it is an objective basis for analysis. Clausewitz shows that all wars are fought either for regime change (what we call an unlimited aim), or something less (a limited aim). He notes: "The ultimate object is the preservation of one's own state and the defeat of the enemy's; again in brief, the intended peace treaty, which will resolve the conflict and result in a common settlement."[vi]

The Political Aim and The Value of the Object

Clausewitz insists upon understanding the political aim or aims of the combatants and the value each places upon their respective objects, or aims. He wrote: "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of the object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of the effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."[vii]

Putin's words and deeds make his aims clear: the destruction of an independent Ukraine and its assimilation into Russia. Russia's military setbacks haven't diminished Putin's unlimited war aims because he places the highest value on conquering Ukraine, which he views as essential to restoring Russia and preserving his regime.[viii] In 2005, Putin decried the Soviet Union's breakup as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."[ix] In seeking to reverse this, Putin has long focused on discrediting Ukrainian sovereignty and laying claim to its territory. He told US President George W. Bush in 2008: "Ukraine is not a real country" and pressed Russian claims to Ukrainian territory in a 2021 historical essay and again in a speech on the eve of his 2022 full-scale invasion.[x]

Putin's February 2024 comments that the war "is our fate; it is a matter of life and death," reflects his belief in the historical necessity of Russia's possession of Ukraine for it to survive as a great power.[xi] It may also demonstrate his paranoia about losing power. Putin publicly claimed in February 2024 that the West is "bent on destroying Russia."[xii] This view is buttressed by his conviction that Washington backed Chechen rebels, engineered "Color Revolutions" on Russia's periphery, and sponsored a 2014 far-right "coup" deposing his Ukrainian proxy Viktor Yanukovich.[xiii] Likewise, Yevgeny Prigozhin's short-lived march on Moscow in the summer 2023 and the failure of his underlings to speak out in his defense presented Putin with a potent reminder of the fragility of his regime, should Russian forces fail in Ukraine.[xiv]

Ukraine's aims are also clear. Kyiv wants to maintain its independence and territorial integrity. The first requires defending the state against Russian attacks, and the second offensive action to recover lost territory. The first demands steady and consistent military defense. The second will require successful and sustained offensives. Beyond the military challenges, which are discussed below, are the political difficulties Ukraine could face from its supporting partners. If Ukraine succeeds in recovering the territory it held in January 2022 (not 2014), it will encounter immense pressure from the US and Europe to seek peace and accept the pre-2022 *de facto* border with Russia. Zelensky consistently rejects any territorial concessions, but his partners, who supply much of Ukraine's arms and munitions, will disagree.[xv]

Western observers, however, underestimate the depth of Zelensky's resistance to significant territorial concessions.[xvi] Doing so—considering Russia's brutal war and rapid assimilation of occupied territories—would leave millions of Ukrainians at Moscow's mercy.[xvii] Putin's abrogating ceasefire agreements with Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine would give any Ukrainian leader pause about striking this Faustian bargain. [xviii] As Clausewitz observed, time accrues to the defender, suggesting that Kyiv's prospects for recovering lost territories would soon fade if it backed such a deal.[xix] Conversely, an emboldened Putin would find himself in a strong position to attack a rump Ukraine from its former territories after exploiting the ceasefire to refit his forces.

2. How Far Must Or Should One Go Militarily?

When trying to deduce the proper use of military power for ending a war one must—as always—keep the political aim or aims being sought firmly in mind. As Clausewitz tells us, this is the basis for analysis and all else flows from here.[xx] There are, of course, many routes to victory, and Clausewitz draws a useful list of options for using military power to end a war:

a. destruction of the enemy's forces

b. the conquest of his territory

c. a temporary occupation or invasion

d. projects with an immediate political purpose

e. passively awaiting the enemy's attacks.

"Any one of these," he insists, "may be used to overcome the enemy's will: the choice depends on circumstances." Moreover, the personalities of leaders and their personal relations add infinite further possibilities for achieving the political aim.[xxi]

a. First, the "Destruction of the Enemy's Forces"

Clausewitz's first option is "the destruction of the enemy's forces." Some so-called "limited war" literature argues against this.[xxii] But that is a self-imposed constraint ignoring the realities of warfare, history, and human nature. Recent generations of Western political and military leaders often fail to realize destroying the enemy forces is often the prerequisite for victory and achieving the political aim.

Though Ukraine seeks a limited aim (something less than regime change), and Russia an unlimited aim (regime change), both have tried to achieve victory by destroying the enemy's forces, particularly Russia, which initially gambled on annihilating Ukraine's army, failed miserably, and wrecked its own.[xxiii] The Ukrainians seem to have recently adopted a defensive attrition strategy in the hopes of wearing down Russia's will or military forces, perhaps both. Currently, each lacks the power to fatally injure the enemy's forces. This could change if Russia mobilizes further or Western support for Ukraine lessens or ends, or if Ukraine receives aircraft and ground defenses enabling Kyiv to gain control of the air.

Clausewitz writes that when using military force, it may not be possible to completely overthrow the enemy. In discussing his "culminating point" he warns one can go too far: "Thus the superiority one has or gains in war is only the means and not the end; it must be risked for the sake of the end. But one must know the point to which it can be carried in order not to overshoot the target; otherwise instead of gaining new advantages, one will disgrace oneself." Clausewitz, when discussing "the culminating point of victory," warns: "Even if one tries to destroy the enemy completely, one must accept the fact that every step gained may weaken one's superiority."[xxiv] Moreover, going too far "would not merely be a useless effort which could not add to success. It would in fact be a damaging one, which would lead to a reaction; and experience goes to show that such reactions have completely disproportionate effects."[xxv]

There are few better historical examples of what Clausewitz wrote above than military events in Ukraine in 2022-2023. Russia invaded, underestimating its opponent and its own ability to execute its plans. It lacked the strength to achieve its operational, strategic, and political aims, became overextended militarily (Russia passed the culminating point), had to surrender some gains, and fell victim to a Ukrainian counterattack forcing Russia to cede much of its gains.

Drastically increasing forces can affect the enemy politically by giving opportunities to enemy leaders who want peace or convince the enemy leaders to make peace. Gradually increasing forces or violence doesn't usually produce a shift toward peace. These are more easily absorbed or countered. However, a minor increase in military force might—indirectly—produce change over time via battlefield victory or produce a military stalemate that convinces the enemy to make peace.[xxvi]

And it is here where both Ukraine, Russia, and the Western nations supporting Ukraine have erred. At the war's outbreak, Zelensky declared a general mobilization, banning all Ukrainian men between 18 and 60 from leaving the country. But the draft age remained at 27 until April 3, 2024. Ukraine's parliament passed legislation lowering eligibility to 25 in May 2023, but Zelensky delayed its signing in hopes it wouldn't be needed.[xxvii] Ukraine should have immediately lowered its draft age to 18 and built a larger army. This would have been difficult but possessing more forces for its 2023 offensive would have meant a better chance of dealing the Russian army a decisive blow. Russia failed similarly by initially committing insufficient forces and sporadically mobilizing since. Ukraine's Western supporters failed in sending arms and equipment quickly enough when it became clear Ukraine wouldn't immediately succumb.

b. Second, "the Conquest of His Territory"

Clausewitz advised:

> Even when we cannot hope to defeat the enemy totally, a direct and positive aim still is possible: the occupation of part of his territory. The point of such a conquest is to reduce his national resources. We thus reduce his fighting strength and increase our own. As a result we fight the war partly at his expense. At the peace negotiations, moreover, we will have a concrete asset in hand, which we can either keep or trade for other advantages.[xxviii]

One may not be able to immediately make newly captured territory reduce the costs of waging the war, but it certainly provides a bargaining chip for peace negotiations. Russia has seized substantial amounts of Ukrainian territory, but Putin isn't interested in using any as bargaining chips, though he has tapped it for resources and military manpower. For Putin, controlling territory is the war's point. The Ukrainians feel similarly and are unwilling to allow Russia to keep any seized land. Until one or both sides are willing to bend here, or the army or government of the other collapses, there is little hope for peace.

c. Third, "a Temporary Occupation or Invasion"

The US temporarily occupied Mexico City in 1848 to force an end to the war.[xxix] But currently, barring some strange events, this seems not applicable to the Russia-Ukraine War. Ukraine could conceivably take a piece of Russia, temporarily emboldening Kyiv and embarrassing Putin. Russia could score a dramatic *coup-de-main* against Ukraine, but this would further convince Putin of the correctness of his actions.

d. Fourth, "Projects with an Immediate Political Purpose"

Action against Putin by internal groups *à la* Prigozhin would be the ultimate "project with an immediate political purpose." Putin's death or the fall of his regime could end Russian expansionism. But it also might not. This would depend upon who and what followed. Zelensky could also die or be killed, but in democratic states fighting existential wars, the change of political leader doesn't usually produce an alteration of the political aim as the formulation of aims is not generally determined by a single individual. When US President Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945 and was replaced by Harry Truman, the US aim of "Unconditional Surrender" of the Axis powers remained.

e. Fifth, "Passively Awaiting the Enemy's Attacks"

This means fighting a defensive war to hold one's possessions. At the end of the Russo–Japanese War (1904-1905), both sides awaited one another's attacks. Japan had exhausted its army, and its military leaders considered further advances disastrous. The Russians were pouring in reinforcements and many Russian leaders still wanted to fight. But Russia also suffered from what became the failed 1905 Revolution and needed forces for internal security.[xxx] Tough negotiations for peace followed.

Awaiting the enemy's attacks is an option for both Moscow and Kyiv, but these are routes for a long, bloody, war where neither is likely to achieve its current political aims. Ukraine cannot clear all its territory by only fighting defensively. Russia can't conquer Ukraine without offensive action.

3. Who Will Maintain The Peace Settlement, And How?

Clausewitz cautions: "Lastly, even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date."[xxxi] The 1954 Geneva Accords and the 1961 agreement to neutralize Laos provide examples. The North Vietnamese Communists signed but never intended to abide by the terms.[xxxii] Some agreements ending wars are temporary expedients.

Also, one must consider the differences in ending wars fought for limited and unlimited aims. Some argue it's easier to enforce terms such as disarmament by overthrowing the regime and heavily occupying the defeated, thus creating a more stable post-war environment.[xxxiii] Sir Basil Liddell Hart argued that a negotiated peace to which the combatants have not been forced to conform because their power has been destroyed and in which they freely participate (he sees something like the eighteenth-century model) is easier to maintain, and the signatories more likely to keep the terms because they have agreed to them. If terms are forced upon them, they are more likely to feel no obligation to maintain them.[xxxiv] Both of these observations are correct. Every peacemaking situation is as unique as every war making one. The variables and their weights are distinctive to each event. Successful peacemaking may require as much creativity as successful warfighting.

Making A Peace Work

Deciding when to end the fighting can be difficult, some argue it can end too soon. Theorist Edward Luttwak says "an unpleasant truth often overlooked is that although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace. This can happen when all belligerents become exhausted or when one wins decisively. Either way the key is that fighting must continue until a resolution is reached." He adds that in our present era conflicts among less powerful states are often stopped "before they could burn themselves out and establish the preconditions for lasting settlement."[xxxv] The problem, of course, is what this may mean. It is entirely possible that Western support, Ukrainian will, Russian manpower, and the high value Putin places upon achieving his political aims, will ensure this war continues for years. Neither Russia nor Ukraine have produced serious signs of bending on their aims.

One can face a situation where it is impossible to secure a peace even after winning militarily. In his examination of the problems terminating a future Russia-NATO war in the Baltic States, one investigating a scenario where NATO drives out the Russians, Lukas Milevski shows NATO's inability to convince nuclear-armed Russia to make peace. "Russia would be thwarted," he notes, "but not defeated and there would be no politically acceptable way of using military force to coerce Russia into acquiescing to defeat."[xxxvi] Does this also describe Russia's current war?

There are two factors critical to making a peace work: 1) a formal treaty; and 2) clear and enforceable terms. It would be foolish, though, to assume these are silver bullets and the only things to consider. This is the ideal, but peacemaking is more difficult when a state fights for a limited political aim (Ukraine's case), because here, usually, one hasn't completely disarmed the opponent; nor is the opponent necessarily prostrate and forced to accept whatever peace is dictated, something unlikely in Russia's case.

A Formal Treaty: Problems and Promises

Clausewitz writes: "The ultimate object is the preservation of one's own state and the defeat of the enemy's; again in brief, the intended peace treaty, which will resolve the conflict and result in a common settlement."[xxxvii] But getting here is exceptionally hard. One key to securing a lasting peace is a formal settlement. Done properly, this removes ambiguity. One strength of the Second World War's settlement was the Allied insistence on formal acts of surrender from Italy, Germany, and Japan, agreements arranged by official representatives of both sides.

Ideally, one of the things a peace agreement should do is resolve the problems producing the war. Some consider this the best route to a lasting peace, but such treaties are rare since the end of the Second World War.[xxxviii] Even the victorious parties didn't agree what caused the First World War. To France, it was German aggression; to Britain, the collapse of Europe's balance of power; to the US, it was secret treaties. This multiplied the peacemaking problems. [xxxix] Coalition partners should sort out their differences early.

Machiavelli wrote: "If one wants to find out if a peace settlement is stable or secure, one has among other things to figure out who is dissatisfied with that settlement, and what can grow out of such dissatisfaction."[xl] Historian Michael Howard said, "a war, fought for whatever reason, that does not aim at a solution which takes into account the fears, the interests and, not least, the honour of the defeated peoples is unlikely to decide anything for very long."[xli] Ending wars with several powers usually means concluding several treaties.

An armistice or ceasefire that stops the fighting isn't the same as a settlement concluding the war. Unless the agreement to stop the fighting has a time limit, an armistice can become a *de facto* settlement. Such agreements can make it easy to restart hostilities and almost always lack official political acceptance of their permanence, even if continuing for decades.[xlii] The 1953 Korean War "settlement" is an

armistice not a peace agreement. One must remember this distinction. An armistice isn't preferred but is sometimes what's possible.

Western observers advocating negotiations between Russia and Ukraine generally underestimate the value each places on their respective political aims. This is particularly true regarding assessments of Putin. His deep-seated desire to conquer and assimilate Ukraine, in turn, makes it harder for Kyiv to abandon territories to Russia for the undoubtedly false hope of surviving as a rump state with a revanchist and emboldened Russian neighbor. As the conflict grinds into its third year, this value continues to rise for the leaders on both sides, as do the stakes of defeat.

Enforcing the Terms

One analyst says of treaties: "If either belligerent expected that the other would not honor the agreement, it is improbable that they would accept the agreement in the first place."[xliii] This provides room for hope. However enforcing treaty terms can be more difficult than securing them. One challenge is the defeated not accepting the agreement's articles. When Prussia made peace with Napoleon in 1807, it ignored the military restrictions placed upon it and mounted clandestine efforts to improve its military status in which Clausewitz participated.[xliv] Germany cheated extensively on the 1919 Versailles Treaty.

The time for enforcing disarmament clauses and other terms is limited because states start to wriggle out of them. Moreover, the victors and the members of the international community lose interest, become distracted by more important matters, and hinder enforcement because they begin to regard the victor poorly. The victor's insistence upon enforcement can see it deemed a threat to peace. This strange dichotomy creates an argument for the victor making a quick peace and the defeated pursuing delay, depending upon their situations. There is also the opposite enforcement problem: those signing up for the job refuse to bear the burden. Only four of the twenty-seven signatories of the 1919 Versailles agreements did their part as enforcers during the 1923 Ruhr occupation.[xlv]

Other problems abound. Geography can affect enforcement because of the proximity of the defeated to the victors. After the First World War, distance and the Atlantic Ocean allowed the US to ignore a revisionist and revanchist Germany; France could not.[xlvi] Disputes over postwar territorial control also weaken settlements. One scholar insists "Territory is the only variable that significantly affects the risk of recurrent conflict."[xlvii] This point is particularly applicable to the Ukraine War. Ukraine is vastly more interested in maintaining its territorial integrity than the US and Western Europe. Kyiv shows no signs of bending here.

Numerous ways exist to enforce treaty terms, but most of what statesmen have done to resolve issues of both war and peace have made the world less stable and produced war, not peace.[xlviii] Structures need to be built to protect everyone's rights.[xlix] This is difficult. Monitoring with external groups is common but deciding upon monitors is tough because of suspicions. Occupation or peacekeeping forces are options but come with their own problems. Reconciliation is the ideal.[l] The history and the emotions behind the problem make achieving this difficult. Securing this between Ukraine and Russia is a monumental task.

Victory in the war does not always mean peace, which could be Ukraine's fate when one considers the nature of Putin's regime. Democratic Israel's victories over its generally authoritarian neighbors kept the state alive but didn't bring peace. Some in the democratic West resent its success and survival.[li]

One thing sometimes necessary for maintaining the peace is rebuilding the other state. Historically, this has proven difficult. One author noted that in cases since 1898 where the mission was completed or ended, the US and UN succeeded only 48 percent of the time. Analysts and practitioners neither understand nor agree upon how to produce success. The literature suggests different approaches: liberalization first, or building institutions first, or providing security first. Some argue for finding the right sequence; others believe sequencing a myth because every situation is different.[lii] Since the Second World War, achieving security and stability in a nation has only been possible in states capable of doing it themselves.[liii]

Demilitarized zones can help guarantee peace, especially if big enough to keep forces separated, such as the ones established in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria, and between North and South Korea.[liv] Some believe "mechanisms such as demilitarized zones, monitoring, and arms-control limitations are not merely effective in mitigating security fears arising from commitment problems; because such mechanisms increase the costs of returning to war, they generally increase the contact zone and thereby enhance the robustness of the settlement."[lv]

There can be problems securing the peace if one doesn't make clear to a defeated state's population that its leaders have lost the war. This can have unfortunate consequences, especially if the defeated state is revanchist. After the First World War, the victorious Allies didn't make this clear.[lvi] But one may need to ensure the defeated opponent isn't humiliated; this can cause bitterness and make securing the peace more difficult. After the fall of Napoleon in 1815, Clausewitz was part of the Prussian occupation force in France. He participated in Prussian forced requisitions of goods and material and criticized punitive actions. He believed the British more intelligent in their peacemaking because they behaved with generosity and thought the Prussians bad winners.[lvii]

There is little chance of much of this being relevant to the Ukraine-Russia War while Putin holds power. But as a thought experiment, assume a negotiated settlement preserving Ukraine's independence in some form while Putin still rules. Who would enforce the terms? Western powers would undoubtedly insist upon a UN peacekeeping force on the common border, one Russia would refuse, especially if it included NATO forces. Both Russia and Ukraine would demand the other disarm in some respects. This would be easily monitored in Ukraine and cheated upon incessantly in Russia. Subsequent widespread Russian subversion of Ukrainian elections, media, business, and government would ensue, despite promises to the contrary. Any reparations Russia agreed to would be ignored; only a handful of the kidnapped Ukrainian children and adults would be returned, despite Moscow's promises. One quickly sees the problems. With Putin in charge, any peace between Russia and Ukraine will be nearly impossible to enforce. More importantly, in Moscow's eyes, it will be *very* temporary, a mere breathing spell. And the next time, Russia would be better prepared.

Conclusion

A quick end to the Russia-Ukraine War is unlikely. The challenges of ending wars, particularly if neither opponent is prostrate, are particularly deep in the current situation. An unpredictable event or series of events could occur, producing a sudden willingness to make peace in one or both combatants, but such is unlikely. We must, as Clausewitz tells us, emphasize the probabilities over the possibilities.[lviii] The probability is war until Putin dies, Ukraine is defeated, or the Russian military breaks as it did in 1917. Ukraine's defeat is possible—but becomes probable if its Western supporters cease or curtail aid and Ukraine continues refusing to fully mobilize its manpower. The defeat of Russia's military is possible (though perhaps not probable) because of poor leadership, weak training, and meat-grinder tactics; its manpower and equipment reserves make this difficult. Ukraine proved with its 2022 counteroffensive a sufficiently weakened Russian army is susceptible to battlefield defeats. But as Ukraine proved in 2024, such an offensive is not easily repeated against a prepared Russia when one doesn't control the air. The situation does not leave one hopeful.

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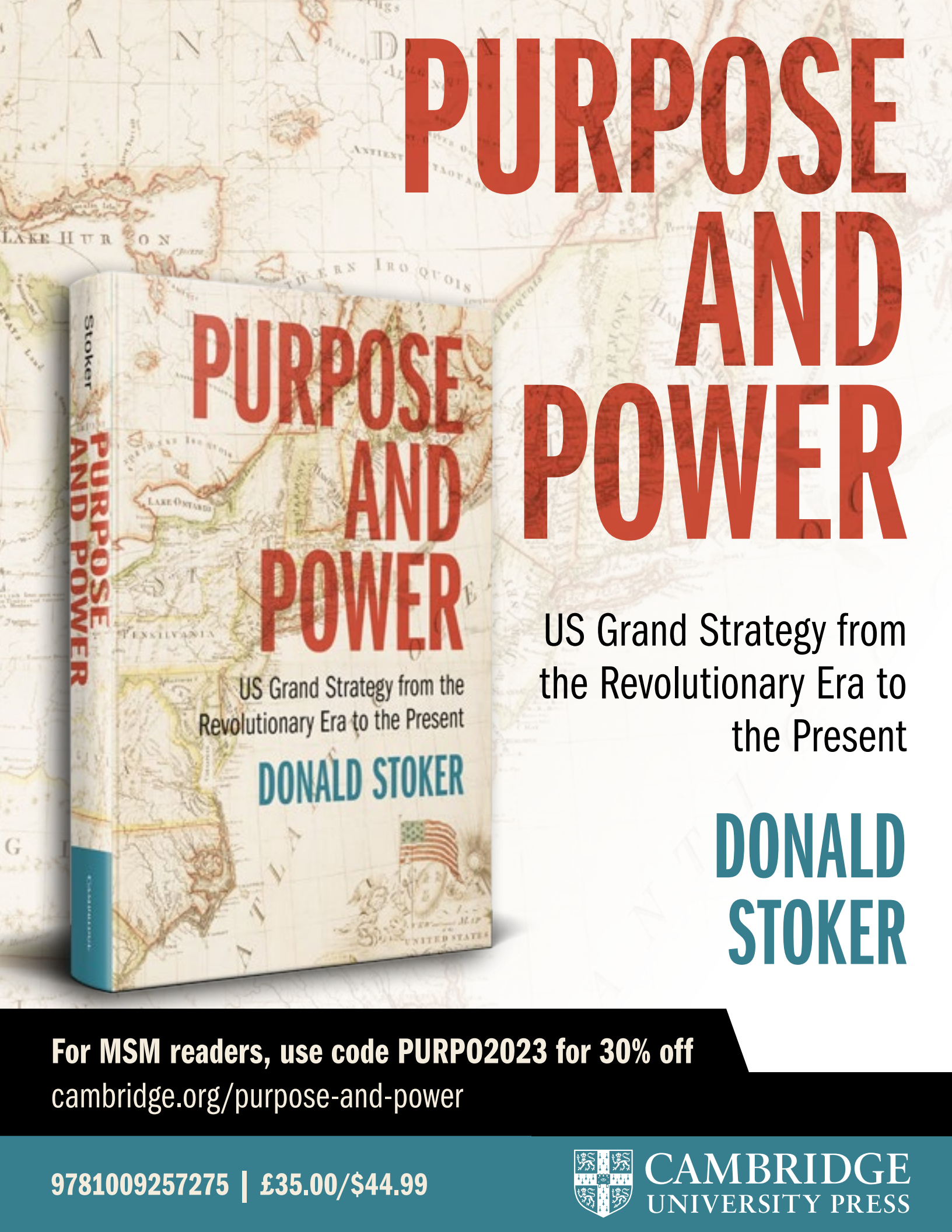

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What would Julian Corbett Say About the Post 2014 Global Crisis?

Andrew Lambert - Department of War Studies, King's College London

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About the author

Andrew Lambert is Laughton Professor of Naval History in the Department of War Studies at Kings College London. His recent books include: *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, (Yale 2021), and *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World*, (Yale 2018), which awarded him the 2018 Gilder Lehrman Book Prize in Military History, and he is also the author of *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia, 1853-1856* (Ashgate 2011).

Sir Julian Stafford Corbett (1854-1922), the most important strategic theorist to emerge in the United Kingdom, created a 'British Way of War' that located the use of force in the wider strategic context of a global maritime empire.[i] Widely travelled and dependant of global investment income Corbett was acutely aware of the political and economic bases of strategy. His legal education, training, and experience as a Barrister (courtroom advocate), provided him with the tools to analyse evidence and

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produce compelling arguments. His literary career honed an incisive, elegant, and expressive prose style that set him apart from most strategists. These skills were deployed in a long-term analysis of English/British strategic experience that provided the basis for contemporary thinking, and the doctrine publications that engaged his audiences in the armed forces and national government. At the same time his progressive Liberal politics marked him out from his uniformed contemporaries.

Corbett's development of Clausewitzian theory to meet the peculiar, maritime demands of the British imperial state is among the most significant intellectual responses to *On War*, and a reaction to the highly militarised total war thinking of his German contemporaries, and those in the British Army who forgot the primacy of sea control in national strategy. Critically Corbett understood that Clausewitz's work was a philosophy of war, not an operational manual, a treatise that had to be developed to meet the needs of different states, and different eras. To this end he replicated Clausewitz's historical research, replacing the Prussian/continental focus of *On War* with those of a global maritime empire, from which he developed his own synthesis of British strategic practice.

Critically Corbett based his theory on English/British experience between 1570 and 1815, which included long periods of relative peace and armed diplomacy, when the national interest was advanced by the strategic movement of fleets. His work was aimed at the mid-career and senior Royal Navy officers, who he taught, and the civilian leadership, who might be called upon to conduct national strategy. Corbett knew many of these men through his political and cultural connections. His 1907 study *England in the Seven Year's War, a Study in Combined Strategy*, examined how a brilliant statesman, Pitt the Elder, worked closely with outstanding naval and military leaders to develop a strategy for a global war. This book informed the development of the British Expeditionary Force, a small professional army that could be deployed to extend the reach of naval power. This work culminated in the semi-official doctrine primer of 1911 *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, another text that encouraged students to read and think, and avoided prescriptive solutions. He argued that Britain had survived the 'total' wars of the French Revolution and Empire by relying on a limited maritime strategy, one which attacked the economic foundations of French power, and avoided costly continental military operations.

Corbett stressed the primary role of economic pressure on British strategy, using money and munitions, not manpower, to support continental allies. By maintaining command of the sea Britain could prevent an invasion of the British Isles and wider empire, protect the vital food and raw material imports, sustain economic life, and project power onto the margins of Europe, destroy hostile naval bases and fleets, open key choke points, notably access to the Baltic, and secure strategic bases like Lisbon. These operations were necessarily asymmetric, relying on intelligence and sea power, not armies. They were more economical in money and manpower than those of continental military powers. Ultimately Britain was able to support European allies from 1812, with money and munitions, and secure the bases of maritime strategy and the Congress of Vienna. The British Government was acutely conscious of the immense National Debt created by 22 years of continuous 'total' war. It had carefully shaped the post-war settlement to stabilise the European System, enabling it to act as an 'Offshore Balancer', and avoid a return to the unlimited wars of 1793-1815. This approach to strategy remained central to British security throughout Corbett's working life.

It is important to consider Corbett's political agenda. He believed the British Empire was evolving into what he termed a 'Sea Commonwealth' of liberal, progressive trading states that agreed to cooperate to protect their vital interests, both territorial and maritime security. Corbett's British model, which emphasised controlling sea and sub-sea communications, replaced the 'decisive' land battle with the sustained exploitation of communication dominance to impose crushing economic warfare. The sea was necessarily the primary focus of national strategy, while the likely opponents were major land powers, with far larger human and military resources. Britain had to rely on asymmetrical strategic responses to aggression on land.

Corbett's 'Sea Commonwealth' concept and progressive views secured him a role in the Phillimore Committee, the British Government's 1917 enquiry into the implications of a League of Nations. Recognising the incompetence of the Chairman Corbett effectively took control of the process, compiling the first draft Charter for such a League. He did this to preserve the right to apply economic warfare at sea, which he believed was essential to the maintenance of British power while the 'Sea Commonwealth' came into being. He also provided the critical briefs that enabled the British Government to prevent absolute Freedom of Seas, which would prevent Britain from using economic blockades against neutral shipping in wartime, from becoming part of the Versailles Settlement.

British Experience:

Between 1815 and 1914 Britain avoided wars against contemporary 'Great Powers', with one significant exception. The Crimean War, 1853-56, saw Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire defeat Russian aggression in Europe and Asia. It is significant that the war was sparked by Russian security anxieties, profound cultural differences, and economic rivalry. Russia demanded effective strategic control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, to prevent hostile (British) naval forces dominating the Black Sea and crippling the movement of Russian land forces. At the same time, Russia's domination of the Baltic region had been challenged by British liberalism, Scandinavian neutrality,

and new steam technologies. However, the fundamental concern for Russia was cultural: the autocratic political system was challenged by the personal freedoms and economic dynamism of western liberalism. Russia was seeking strategic barriers and buffer zones to hold these existential threats at a distance from the 'Old Russian' centre of the Czar's sprawling empire.

While Allied troops landed in the Crimea to capture and destroy the fleet and naval base at Sevastopol, they did not leave the coast. When the destruction of that base and a devastating economic blockade, basically blocking Russia's bulky low cost exports (grain, timber and forest products then, oil, gas, fertiliser and grain today) from reaching foreign markets, leading to a collapse in national credit and a socio-economic crisis, including bread riots and conscription protests, failed to secure peace Britain built a massive coast assault armada and publicly threatened to bombard St. Petersburg, the Imperial capital. The Imperial capital was a critical element in the system of prestige that held the Russian system together. Rather than risk a humiliating loss of the city, and potentially the dissolution of the empire, Russia accepted a limited defeat. The allies imposed peace terms that blocked Russian aggression in the Baltic and neutralised the Black Sea to secure Istanbul against an amphibious strike, by denying Russia the right to maintain a fleet on that sea. This defeat forced Russia to focus on coast defences, military reforms, and economic recovery. Renewed aggression against Turkey and Afghanistan in the 1870s and 1880s prompted Britain to assemble powerful fleets to threaten St. Petersburg. In both cases Russia backed down without a single British soldier being moved. Deterrence was effective because the British Admiralty had been monitoring and assessing Russian naval capabilities since 1700. Sea power was an effective strategy against Russia, and therefore a useful deterrent in a crisis prompted by Russian aggression. Little wonder the Admiralty examined Alfred Thayer Mahan's critical essay of 1900 *The Problem of Asia*, which echoed their assessment.

The Russian invasion of the Crimean in 2014 elevated existing tensions between Russia and the West, led by NATO and the United States to the point of crisis. In assessing how Corbett might have responded to the 2022 invasion of the Ukraine it is important to stress that Corbett had planned to study the Crimean War. Those plans were overtaken by other demands, including writing a confidential strategic analysis of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, which contains his most significant thinking about strategy in a conflict with Russia. In both wars, Russia had been defeated by a combination of limited naval and military defeats, notably the loss of two advanced naval bases, Sevastopol, and Port Arthur, along with most of the Russian Navy, and the collapse of the economy following a naval blockade. It is equally significant that Russia remains an imperial power, the drive to retain or recover 'imperial' possessions is central to the Putin model, along with the trappings of pre-1917 imperial might, palace décor, outsized guardsmen in nineteenth century uniforms, and anxieties about strategic depth. The narratives Russia deployed when attempting to justify the Crimean and Ukrainian invasions follow an established pattern of Russian exceptionalism, which is used to justify aggression.

The experience of sustained and persistent Russian aggression in key maritime zones, the Baltic and the Black Seas, shaped British responses to Russia deep into the twentieth century. In 1919 Britain deployed naval forces into the Baltic to support the newly independent Baltic States and Finland. The emergence of these new states reduced the Baltic coast under Russian control to little more than 200 miles, deep inside the Gulf of Finland, greatly enhancing the strategic leverage of economic warfare. By 1920 most of the major ports that Russia had used to export produce were held by pro-western nations anxious to remain independent, while the Soviet regime feared an attack on Leningrad, which remained a critical industrial base and symbol of Bolshevik power. Russia's current Baltic coastline is only marginally longer than it was in 1919, and every other kilometre is now controlled by a NATO power.

The post 2014 global crisis, like that of the early 1850s that precipitated the Crimean War (1853-56) followed a combination of sustained Russian threats against neighbouring states, followed by overt aggression to secure territory and strategic advantage. The problem has been complicated by the latent threat of an increasingly belligerent, and economically challenged China, and links with the Middle Eastern crisis driven by the Iranian theocracy, and its' satellites.

At the level of strategic principles, Corbett would condemn the failure of the British Government to settle on a clear overall strategic concept. His maritime strategy was a national concept, embracing all aspects of national power, civil and military. It was not restricted to naval forces. Unlike the United States Britain was never sufficiently powerful to consider dominating all elements of war, it has had to make hard choices, and those choices tended to follow Corbett's model. He believed the entire war-planning effort of the British state should be explicitly focussed around maintaining and exploiting command of the sea to secure floating trade, not least vital food, and raw material imports, along with economic prosperity, and the stability of global trade. The task of the Army within this model was to secure key territory and provide an offensive extension of sea control onto the littoral to weaken or destroy hostile naval assets or hold critical ports and locations that might compromise the use of the sea for trade and or war.

The failure to prioritise the maritime domain in British thinking made some sense during the Cold War, when

the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact were powerful, and threatened the Inner German Border. It does not appear to be correct when Russia has been reduced to a pale shadow of its former strength, and NATO nations have a very large number of troops and hardware between the Ukrainian-Polish border and the English Channel.

So, as a matter of first principles, reinforce the maritime focus of British strategy, and work with allies and partners that offer complementary land and air strengths. Corbett would urge us to re-engage with the long history of Anglo-Russian tension, between 1700 and the present day, rather than obsessing over the strikingly infrequent conflicts. This field remains under-researched. He would have little trouble developing a coherent picture, informed by the work of his contemporaries and friends Alfred T Mahan and Halford Mackinder, whose key geopolitical treatises of 1900 and 1904 had highlighted Russia's strengths and weaknesses as a great power, while his own work on the Russo-Japanese War study provided more detailed insight. Long term analysis remains critical to sound strategic thought.

Within the wider 'western' alliance he would stress Britain's critical role as a leading maritime power with powerful economic and legal levers, to develop and apply sustained pressure on the Russian economy. This approach enabled sea power to generate enhanced strategic leverage with limited or no use of kinetic force. He had been actively engaged in defending the legal basis of economic blockade before the First World War, because it was – and remains - an obvious and largely bloodless curb on the aggression of continental military powers. On this issue he was at one with Mahan, and Admiral Lord Fisher. In 1899 Mahan disobeyed explicit American Government orders to support 'Freedom of the Seas' for private property in wartime at the First Hague Peace Conference, because he believed this would limit American strategy now that the United States had become a major naval power. It would be able to use the same tools as Britain. In 1907 both Mahan and Corbett published powerful essays defending economic warfare ahead of the Second Hague Conference, and these were reprinted in the same volume with the support of Corbett's friend First Sea Lord Admiral 'Jacky' Fisher. Both men understood that economic warfare was the right arm of sea power, and critical to the strategic power of a maritime state. In 1914-18 Corbett was closely involved in the development of British economic warfare policy, which he saw as the key to an effective League of Nations security system, (he had drafted the charter of the League in 1917). As the Director of the British official history project Corbett ensured the state conducted a thorough analysis of the lessons to prepare for a future conflict. Economic warfare, the critical strategic element of sea control, remained central to British war planning in 1939.

The contemporary relevance of this debate is obvious. Russia, China, and Iran are anxious to deny access to their coasts and impose terrestrial forms of control over the open ocean, while the liberal democracies prefer an open ocean order. The emergence of a serious missile threat to global shipping in the Red Sea from Houthi actors, using the same Iranian manufactured drones that Russia has deployed against the Ukraine, highlights the connectivity of these threats. The Red Sea crisis has provided an opportunity for Western powers to coalesce around maritime safety – the list of those countries participating is short, and significant. As a leading maritime power, Britain has a key role in facilitating and enforcing freedom of the seas, as a critical pushback against the totalitarian attempts to close them. The sea is a critical flash point – and success in the Red Sea would have wider ramifications.

As a progressive Liberal Corbett would stress inclusive politics as a primary weapon for liberal states, adjusting strategy to emphasise the distinction between the two sides. That the underlying threat to Russia remains political rather than strategic would be obvious. He would recognise the contested election in Minsk in 2021 as a key moment in the descent into war. Demands for democracy highlighted Russia's core weakness, the lack of political accountability. The attack on Ukraine in 2022 was a reaction to the ideological threat posed by a former Russian province becoming a Western democratic state, and potentially a member of key political and strategic alliances.

The Ukraine conflict provides another legal/strategic opportunity, to weaponize Russia's failure to meet international standards in the conduct of diplomacy and war. Terror bombardments of civilians, the systemic abduction of children, and mass murder cannot be allowed to pass without sanction in the 21st century. The current sanctions regime is weakening the Russian economy, but such measures are cumulative, and rarely decisive on their own. In the past Russian regimes have been brought to accept defeat by the combination of economic, diplomatic and military pressure, reinforced by growing domestic discontent. There is no reason to think that these realities have changed, or that Vladimir Putin's regime is any more capable of meeting the long-term threat than its' Imperial and Soviet precursors. The sanctions regime has been compromised by all the usual measures, smuggling, dark sales and fraud, while Russia is buying diplomatic support among a wide range of non-aligned countries with cheap or free oil, grain and fertiliser. How long the Western coalition can sustain these measures is unclear, but the consequences of failure would include a seismic shift in the nature of the global order, and the value of international law. By contrast defeating Russian aggression would change the tone of other anti-western powers and increase the possibility of effective global cooperation – something Corbett had been

anxious to promote. How the current Russian regime could deal with failure is unknown, but other Russian leaders have accepted limited defeats, notably in 1856, 1905 and 1919, rather than risking the collapse of the state.

Success here would have major implications for other autocracies reliant on the uncontrolled use of force for their continued security. At the same time Corbett's instinct to focus on limited-economic methods would chime with contemporary anxieties about escalation and weapons of mass destruction.

Corbett would argue that Britain needed to focus its' necessarily limited strategic resources on areas of maximum interest, and capability. His 'Maritime' strategic concept would work with the more land focussed efforts of allies, as in the Crimean War, when France and the Ottoman Empire provided far more soldiers but relied on the Royal Navy to deploy and sustain them. British contributions to the current crisis should focus on applying pressure to Russia's maritime flanks, the Arctic and Pacific Oceans, and the landlocked Baltic and Black seas, an option exercised in conflicts in 1854-55, and 1919, but also in periods of heightened tension across the longer period. At present these options are largely in hand, with NATO forces deployed on station, conducting confidence-building exercises, and sustaining presence. These measures have never been a short-term approach, nor do they guarantee Russia will concede defeat. That said the forward deployment of naval forces has long been a potent confidence-building measure to re-assure regional powers, enhance alliance solidity, in this case that of NATO, and protecting critical shipping from shore-based threats. The outlying oblast of Kaliningrad is an obvious pressure point: it is isolated by land, and Russia's relatively limited means of seaborne supply are exposed to local interdiction.

Even in Corbett's day the bulk of this 'pressure' was applied ashore through banking, insurance, and other controls that half the flow of exports. His elder brother, also a barrister, and a Member of Parliament, worked as a City of London financier, he was versed in these issues. So was the Admiralty, which worked closely with Lloyds of London to develop convoy systems and economic warfare policy in the Napoleonic era, in the First World War, and across the century between. Corbett's work demonstrated how, in several cases, pressure from the sea could either force the enemy to concede defeat or attempt to release the pressure by local or strategic offensives. The obvious locations are Russia's maritime flanks. All are exposed to 'western' pressure, and Russia cannot concentrate resources in any one theatre.

The long history of Anglo-Russian stand-offs in and around the Baltic reinforces the wartime lessons of 1807-11, 1854-56, and 1919. The symbolic and economic value of the Baltic was and remains far greater than that of Russia's other seas: St. Petersburg remains the largest port, a cultural and political icon, and the ultimate statement of Russian power. The importance of a state shaped history narrative in Russia's political, economic, and cultural, agendas would make contesting the history narrative used by the Putin regime far more effective than post-modern western policymakers realise. In economic terms Russia has always been vulnerable to export denial. At the same time western sanctions are slowly wearing down Russia's ability to service existing markets, rising costs and cheaper competition will ultimately break the Russian economy, with serious consequences for the population, if a settlement is not reached.

With NATO nations (including Sweden) now holding all but 250 miles of the Baltic coast this enclosed sea is no longer accessible to Russian forces, or trades. The self-destruction of NordStream II suggests the Russian leadership recognise NATO's ability to apply economic pressure from the sea. Current Baltic questions include Kaliningrad. Is it an A2/AD bastion able to deny the central Baltic to NATO forces, or a withering asset cut off from Russia and possessing only limited stocks of now very familiar missiles. The entry of Sweden into NATO completes the isolation of the oblast.

The Bosphorus is the next maritime choke point to be addressed. Currently the Turkish Government is holding the Straits closed to warships, due to the state of war, a choice that clearly favours Russia, and to the economic and strategic disadvantage of the Ukraine and NATO. In 2014 the presence of the American Destroyer USS *McFaul* in the Black Sea had a significant impact on Putin's invasion of Georgia. Turkish attempts to navigate between Russia and the West are fraught with risk. It was always the dream of Russian and Soviet rulers from Peter the Great to Stalin to have such an ally in Istanbul, while an attempt to seize control of the Bosphorus sparked the Crimean War.

Defeating Russia would have a major impact on the wider global crisis. As China's economy struggles, and dissent grows the removal of an obvious authoritarian ally would be a serious blow to the prestige of a regime that had been so supportive of Putin's war. Improved relations with Russia and China would have a wider impact on global order. One key area to examine would be the shipment of munitions from North Korea to Russia although rail links via Vladivostock would be invulnerable they are less efficient than sea-based transport. In December 1855 Britain warned the Prussian Government that if it did not stop violating the economic blockade of Russia by smuggling goods through Prussian Ports those ports would be included in the blockade. Prussia complied, and this decision by a critical friendly neutral was an important element in Russia's decision to accept defeat.

It may be that Iran and its satellites hold the key to the current global crisis. The theocracy is already at war with the western world and its' own people, while sanctions have crippled the economy. Iran's actions and influence across

the Middle East have stretched Western powers and limited their capacity to focus on Russia. The attempt to interdict global shipping through the Houthi rebels may be a sign of desperation: the response needs to go beyond defending ships at sea. The Houthi have been warned that counter strikes are likely. Robust action would force Iran to act, or step back. The replacement of the Iranian regime by a less overtly anti-western government would significantly impact Russia's ability to challenge western sanctions. The Assad regime in Syria, another international pariah that relies on Iran and Russia, is a weak link in the chain of powers that are driving the current crisis. This coalition is anxious to block the spread of liberal politics and open government, and these should be the primary weapon against them. The current stasis in the Ukraine is feeding global insecurity, hampering trade, and distorting resource flows, not least the supply of basic food stuffs and fertilisers to developing countries. The economic, political, and social impacts of this war are significant and persistent. Effective action is essential to maintain the security of the free world.

Corbett understood global war, having served in the British defence system between 1900 and 1922, helping to develop strategic thought, rationalise law, strategy and security policy, and plan major campaigns. His work drove the development of his historical and theoretical expertise, using previous global conflicts to enhance preparation for the future and write the national strategic doctrine. He recognised the vital role of informed and educated political leadership in developing strategy but did not live long enough to contrast the expertise of William Pitt the Elder with the Liberal leadership of 1914, most of whom knew nothing of war, and allowed the Army to embed Britain in a continental total war.

Corbett would suggest that British interests would be best served by adopting a coherent sea-based strategic approach to global politics, working with NATO allies and other engaged nations to bring the current war to an end by a combination of economic pressure, support for the Ukrainian military effort, a wider and more ambitious sanctions regime, and the full range of measures that are covered by existing international legal regimes, including restricting the unlawful assertion of territorial waters. The tools to enable this strategy existed two hundred years ago, they need to be revived - despite the prominence of international actors anxious to preserve their market share. Working from the sea would avoid the need to enter Russian territory, while distinguishing between a Russian state and the wider area of the Russian Empire would highlight the absurdity of Putin's contention. The Ukraine is an independent state, not a rebel province.

Russia and its acolytes will persist with their current campaigns of aggression, disruption, and subversion because they fear the liberal progressive politics that were at the heart of Corbett's thinking a century ago. His strategy was shaped by the need to defend peace and progress, concerns that would shape his approach to the current crisis.

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[i] This essay is based on Lambert, Andrew, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, (Yale University Press, London 2021).

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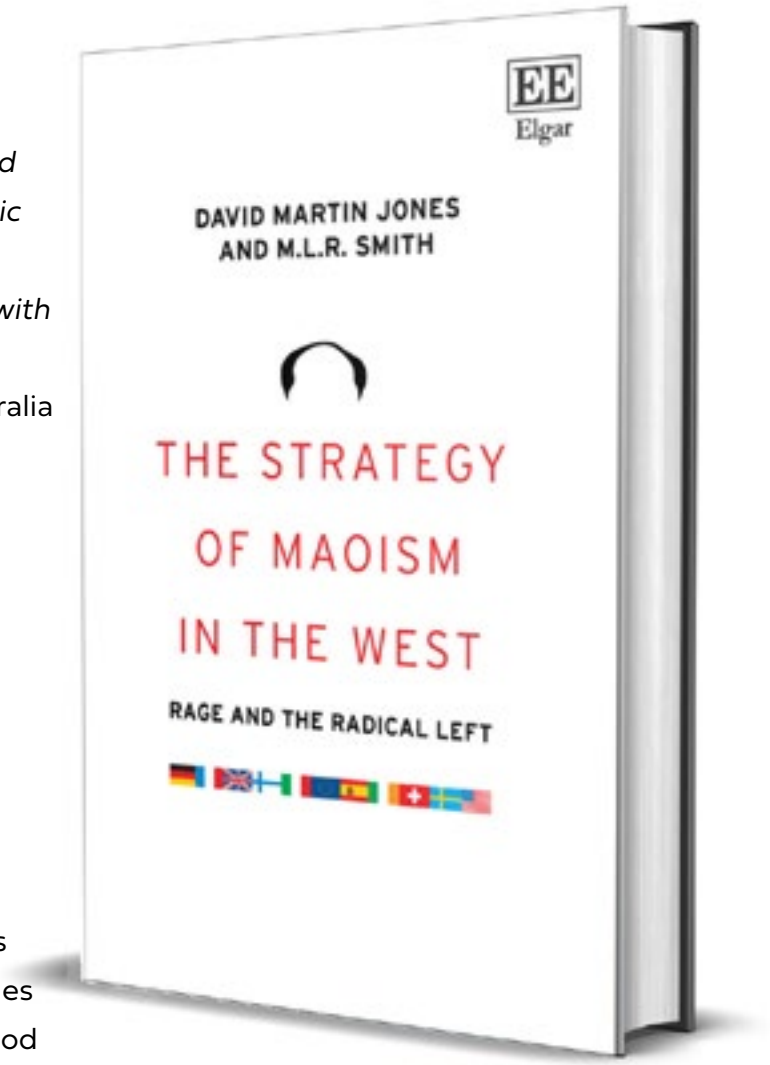

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Soviet Theory Forgotten: Russian Military Strategy in the War in Ukraine

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Dr. Jon Klug is a U.S. Army Colonel and Associate Professor at the U.S. Army War College. He is a veteran of multiple deployments, an experienced staff officer in several American and NATO higher headquarters, and an award-winning instructor at the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy, and the Army War College. Jon holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of New Brunswick, Canada.

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Shocking images of Russian artillery explosions, aircraft strikes, and tanks rolling across the Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022, reintroduced Europe to land war on a scale that had not been seen since the Allied extirpation of

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the Nazi regime. Not only did this Russian offensive usher major international war back to the European continent, but it also upended many twenty-first-century cherished notions, such as American political scientist Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" to British military historian Richard Overy's claim that the Second World War was "The Last Imperial War." The Russian offensive opened at a breakneck pace as a stunned world looked on in confusion. However, problems quickly arose. Despite wishful Russian assumptions to the contrary, the Ukrainian will did not crack; instead, resistance increased dramatically. Future historians will undoubtedly point to the Battle of Antonov Airport, located in Hostomel near the strategically critical Ukrainian capital Kyiv, where the initial Russian offensive culminated. Kyiv held, and the Russian tide receded, resulting in the character of the war transitioning from a lightning coup de main to a long, grinding conflict.

The outcome of the initial failed Russian offensive and the subsequent war in Ukraine is an opportunity to employ the theme of this Special Edition: What would a military theorist say about strategy in the twenty-first century? This article's variation on that theme is to explore what the old Soviet military theorists—the progenitors of concepts like operational art, deep battle, and deep operations in the 1920s and 30s—would say about the Russian twenty-first-century military strategy and performance in Ukraine. Led by the so-called "Soviet Clausewitz" Aleksandr A. Svechin, the "Red Bonaparte" Mikail N. Tukhachevsky, Vladimir K. Triandafillov, and Georgii S. Isserson would take the Russian inheritors of their thought to task on many points.

To demonstrate how the Soviet theorists would critique the Russian war effort in Ukraine, this article uses four sections to explore how the Soviet military theorists might critique today's Russian Army operations in Ukraine. The first section is devoted to the pertinent theory of the four most important Red Army military theorists, providing a framework to evaluate the Russian strategy and operations. The subsequent sections use the military theorists to critique the Russian strategy, preparations, and failed initial offensive; the period of positional warfare, and how the war may end.

Soviet Military Theory: A Framework

The Soviet Red Army produced a mass of literature on military theory, which is far too voluminous to recapitulate in a short article, let alone a section of one. The focus here is to provide the salient points of four of the earliest and, arguably, most important Soviet military theorists to act as a framework for the other sections. Before the twentieth century, armies had collided at a single point, a single battlefield that determined a campaign and often the war. However, Soviet military theorists observed changes in the character of warfare during the First World War—where mass armies fought with continuous fronts with great depth and reserves, causing battlefield casualties at an industrial level—and that continued with the Russian Civil War and the Russo-Polish War. The Red Army's theoretical answer was a holistic concept of military art of which strategy, operational art, and tactics were its constituent fields, of which "deep battle" and "deep operations" would play an essential role as the Soviet theorists refined their knowledge.[i] While somewhat out of chronological order, the best way to explore the four theorists is by detailing their contributions based on their influence: Svechin, Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov, and Isserson.

Although not well-known in the West, Svechin is the most important of the Soviet theorists for several reasons. He was both the first and the most influential of the Soviet theorists—all the work of those who followed him, no matter the importance or novelty of their contributions, is derivative from Svechin. As a result, it is impossible to conceive of Red Army military theory, such as it is, without his work. Two critical previous military theorists influenced Svechin's thinking. Carl von Clausewitz' *On War* shaped Svechin's thinking on strategy and the strength of the defense; hence, those who studied Svechin called him the "Soviet Clausewitz" or "Red Clausewitz."[ii] Finally, Hans Delbrück's ideas on annihilation and attrition shaped Svechin's thoughts on the defense and conceptualization of positional warfare.[iii]

Svechin captured his thoughts in his book *Strategy*, which he began writing in the early 1920s and finalized in 1927.[iv] First, he defined strategy as "the art of combining preparations for war and the grouping of operations for achieving the goal set by the war for armed forces. Strategy decides issues associated with the employment of the armed forces and all the resources of a country for achieving ultimate war aims."[v] As part of his discussion of national strategy, Svechin emphasized the importance of political and economic preparation for war, a defense industrial base capable of resourcing campaigns, and sufficient war stocks built up before the conflict.[vi]

In addition to his thoughts on strategy, and most importantly for military theory, Svechin introduced the concepts of operations and operational art in *Strategy*.[vii] His study of the First World War demonstrated that mass armies of recent wars proved too resilient to damage so that no single effort could translate to strategic success; instead, only long-term tactical attrition could eventually lead to the attacker suspending the offensive or the destruction of the defender's forward forces or, more typically, the defender withdrawing. Regardless, armies in the defense during the First World War usually had forces arrayed in depth, preventing the attacker from achieving significant penetration. This problem led to the notion of operations. Svechin wrote, "We call an operation that act of war in the course of which troop efforts are directed, without any interruption, to a specific region in a theater of military operations to achieve a specific intermediate aim."[viii] For

a military effort to be an operation, it had to be significant enough in time, space, and force to change conditions at the theater level. Thus, operations required a significant grouping of forces to attack multiple geographic objectives throughout the depth of the enemy in one continuous effort. A series of these operations would very likely be necessary to successfully reach the strategic ends, all of which harkens back to his definition of strategy when he mentioned "the grouping of operations." However, something was needed to conceptually tie together tactical efforts, operations, the sequencing of operations, and the overall military strategy into a unified whole. Part of the Soviet solution was replacing the two-part formula of strategy and tactics with the Soviet three-part notion of three fields that equated to tactics, operational art, and strategy,[ix] reflected in today's Western military doctrine as levels of warfare. The corresponding activities for tactics, operational art, and strategy were combat, operations, and war, respectively.

Svechin's conceptual solution was operational art, which he introduced in his book *Strategy*. This notion linked tactics and military strategy, giving meaning to the former and seeking to realize the latter. In Svechin's words, "Tactics make the steps from which operational leaps are assembled; strategy points out the path."[x] He also noted the importance of tactical action coupled with logistics, "The material of operational art is tactics and…being supplied with all materiel necessary."[xi] If operational art does not effectively tie tactics, operations, and strategy—and logistics—the military effort devolves into positional warfare, undermining the overall strategy. Svechin added, "It is easy to get involved in positional warfare, even against one's own will, but it is not so easy to get out of it; no one managed to do it in the World War."[xii] He added that positional warfare may lead to "the temporary renunciation of the pursuit of positive military goals."[xiii] In other words, if an army cannot muster sufficient force in time and space to change a condition at the theater level, it conducts pointless, unconnected tactical engagements or even the massive effort along the Somme in 1916. Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov, and Isserson subsequently built upon Svechin's work.

Nicknamed the "Red Napoleon,"[xiv] Tukhachevsky continued to develop military theory in great detail for the middle of the three fields—operational art. Where Svechin championed defensive efforts as part of a larger strategy, Tukhachevsky instead emphasized the offensive, as the Red Army was to act as a vanguard of communist revolution in other states. He understood "the impossibility, on a modern wide front, of destroying the enemy army by one blow forces the achievement of that end by a series of successive operations."[xv] Furthermore, he argued these operations must be mobile and offensive. Like Svechin, Tukhachevsky also understood the criticality of logistics and preparation and that the Red Army was lagging in this regard, often driving this point home in his writing. For example, in a 1926 study on the prospect of war, he wrote, "At present neither the USSR nor the Red Army is ready for war…national sustenance lags far behind it, placing the outcome of the war under threat."[xvi] Given this grave shortcoming, he favored short wars, as the USSR could not afford a protracted war or, put another way, a war dominated by protracted positional warfare. During a 1926 military conference, Tukhachevsky successfully made the case for an initial period of positional warfare followed by mobile warfare.

Tukhachevsky collaborated closely with Triandafillov and incorporated Triandafillov's previous work into a joint effort.[xvii] Sometimes called the "father of Soviet operational art,"[xviii] Triandafillov did much of the intellectual spade work on the concept of deep battle, which attacked an enemy in tactical and operational depth through combined arms, mass, multiple echelons, and penetration on multiple axes. Historian David Glantz wrote that Triandafillov felt "only successive operations over a month to a depth of 150-200 kilometers could produce strategic victory," and strategic victory meant complete systematic destruction of the opposing force. Also, Triandafillov "introduced the idea of using tanks supported by air forces to effect penetration of the tactical enemy defense and extend the offensive into the operational depth to achieve strategic aims."[xix] Consequently, he argued that doing so required mechanization and industrialization to create vast arrays of tanks, artillery, aviation, and airborne units. Triandafillov also recommended a new formation to conduct operations: shock armies. These large armies comprised four to five rifle corps with lavish organic artillery and enablers; additionally, they required two dedicated railroad lines for logistical support.[xx] More numerous holding armies would fix enemy forces to support shock armies. With these ideas in mind and support from Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov wrote *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies*, published in 1929. More importantly, this work prepared their joint authoring of the Red Army's first doctrine, *Polevoi Ustav* (Field Regulations) 1929 or PU-29.[xxi] Two years later Triandafillov died in an airplane crash.[xxii]

Despite losing the brilliant Triandafillov, Tukhachevsky and the new 34-year-old rising star Isserson continued to expand Soviet military theory.[xxiii] In February 1933, the Red Army incorporated deep battle into its provisional doctrine. The following year, Tukhachevsky, Isserson, and other supporters finally defeated the old guard of officers who advocated for a defensive attritional approach. This victory opened the door to expand deep battle into deep operations, which Isserson did in his 1936 book *The Evolution of Operational Art*. Isserson detailed broad front offensives

with multiple areas of concentration and creating offensive depth using multiple echelons of Red Army forces.[xxiv] He also specified the requirements for the correlation of forces necessary to conduct deep operations successfully.[xxv] Expanding another of Triandafillov's ideas, Isserson discussed shock armies and even larger shock groups. He explored the role of fronts (a Red Army equivalent of Western army groups) and subordinate mobile units—such as mechanized corps and cavalry corps—in exploiting an opening created by the breakthrough development echelon of a shock army.[xxvi] However, the supply issue that prevented fully realizing continuous, consecutive operations remained unsolved. The Soviets' defense industrial base was insufficient to resource the Red Army's operational concept fully. Like Triandafillov's book and PU-29, the Red Army's 1936 Field Regulations, or PU-36, followed Isserson's book.[xxvii] The doctrine in PU-36 solidified deep operations, a more refined and expansive version of deep battle, into Red Army doctrine. But it was not to last.

In 1937, Stalin began a long and bloody purge of the Red Army officer corps, including the execution of Svechin and Tukhachevsky, that liquidated the Red Army's intelligentsia, and Soviet military theory reverted to the old guard's preference for defensive, positional warfare. However, during border incidents with Japan and the early years of the Nazi-Soviet War, individual Red Army officers, such as Marshal Georgy Zhukov, implemented the theory and doctrine that had reached its apogee in 1936. After reeling against the German onslaught in the early years of the war, the Red Army began to turn to the tide and demonstrate the power of the prewar military theory with experienced and logistically supported forces. As the first of three examples, the Red Army used deep operations in November 1942 to penetrate the Germans' defenses in two places, exploit and form a double envelopment around the city, and thereby create an immense pocket centered on Stalingrad. In the summer of 1943, the Red Army started on the defensive during the Battle of Kursk. When the German offensive had culminated, the Red Army commenced a series of successive offensive operations with fresh forces, pushing the front far west into Ukraine. The following summer, the Red Army demonstrated the full power of deep operations with its masterpiece Operation Bagration, destroying nearly sixty German divisions and the German Army Group Center as an organized fighting force.

War in Ukraine: Failed Coup De Main

Using Soviet theorists to evaluate the Russian Army in the War in Ukraine requires an overview of the war as we know it today. In the infancy of its third year, the War in Ukraine appears to have been essentially two wars: a failed Russian coup de main and an ongoing brutal war of attrition. Russian expert Michael Kofman further breaks the war down into six phases:

> These are the initial invasion of February 24–March 25, 2022, the battle for the Donbas of March 25–August 31, Ukrainian offensives between September and November 2022, the Russian winter offensives between December 2022 and April 2023, Ukraine's offensive between June and September of 2023, and the follow-on period during which Russia had retaken the strategic initiative from October 2023 through the winter of 2024.[xxviii]

Russian President Vladimir Putin, his government, and his military laid the groundwork for the coup de main long before the actual attack through subversive efforts. In early 2022, the Russians planned to completely subjugate Ukraine in a lighting three-day seizure of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, followed by a six-week denouement to complete the conquest. This vision of rapid Russian victory was based on several assumptions, starting with the belief that Russian subversive efforts had eroded the will of the Ukrainian people to resist to the point they no longer had the will—or, for that matter, the physical means necessary—to resist the Russian military. Naturally, merely crossing the border with a massive show of force would start a cascade of collapse that would quickly end in Russian victory.[xxix] It had the same ring as the words of another dictator who claimed, "We have only to kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

At first blush, Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov, and Isserson would have applauded the offensive nature of the initial Russian attack, but they and Svenchin would have been appalled with the details of the minimal preparation, driven by the assumptions of minimal Ukrainian resistance and six weeks to victory and coupled with the desire for minimal preparation to maintain the best chance for strategic surprise. Many units got no actual warning of the impending operation. There was no real mobilization and little logistical stockpiling of ammunition or spare parts. The maintenance situation was abysmal, exposing embarrassing peacetime corruption and malaise.[xxx] Even though he perhaps understood that Putin and his generals intended this operation to be short, Svechin would have been appalled by how poorly prepared the Russian Army was and how years of neglect led to a lack of professionalism and downright criminality. Similarly, Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov, and Isserason all understood that preparation for war was necessary for the logistical lifeblood to flow through lines of communication sufficient to match the voracious appetite of deep operations.

At the time of the initial invasion, the Russian Army would seem to have been designed for this operation, as it primarily intended to bully smaller neighbors in rapidly decided campaigns. However, Putin's "Special Military Operation" was geographically much more extensive than recent Russian conflicts, with an initial frontage of over one thousand kilometers. As part of its mission to wage quick border conflicts, the Russian Army had reduced

higher echelon headquarters and logistics in favor of electromagnetic, fires, and cyber capabilities. Also, the Russian Army's focus was the brigade (the "unit of action" using U.S. Army vocabulary) and, more specifically, its battalion tactical groups.[xxxi] This brigade-level focus starkly contrasts with what the four theorists would have been familiar with or how the Red Army operated in the Great Patriotic War. Granted, the character of war has changed, but the Russian Army attacked with essentially one echelon and reserves—a far cry from the multi-echeloned approach championed by Triandafillov, Tukhachevsky, and Isserson. But, again, the Russian Army expected to march into Kyiv with very little resistance.

The entire Russian plan revolved around seizing Kyiv, and the most critical task for that effort was taking Hostomel Aiport. The plan reminded me of a Russian "A Bridge Too Far," save the newer version used ground forces to link up with heliborne rather than air-dropped troops. The Ukrainian air defenses downed several Russian helicopters, and the Ukrainian National Guard unit protecting the airfield put up a strong defense; however, sufficient Russian forces landed to take the airport. Unfortunately for the Russian airborne troops, the reinforcements were loaded on fixed-wing transport aircraft but were diverted, perhaps due to the damaged and blocked runway, Ukrainian artillery, the loss of several helicopters from the first wave, or a combination thereof. Meanwhile, stiff Ukrainian resistance prevented the overland force from linking up with the air assault. A collection of Ukrainian forces, including veterans and civilian volunteers, counterattacked that night and defeated the isolated Russian airborne. However, the Ukrainians holding the critical airfield learned of the imminent arrival of the Russian overland force, so they rendered the runway unusable and withdrew. When the Russians took the airfield, it was too badly damaged to use to move reinforcements by air.[xxxii]

Svechin would have been apoplectic over the lackadaisical planning and execution. He would undoubtedly not have approved of any high-risk/high-reward strategy; instead, he would have advised adopting much lower-risk approaches. Another point of contention would have been that the Russians had not prepared the industrial base and logistical support should the coup de main not succeed. Svechin's treatment of strategy during wartime is largely independent of the effects of politics, which significantly affected the initial invasion of Ukraine. However, the War in Ukraine has been associated so closely with Putin that its decisions have become "tacticized" due to the ideological character of the war. Tukhachevksy would have liked the bold and offensive nature of the actual plan. When Triandafillov and Isserson voiced concerns about not having sequels with adequate preparation or logistical support, Tukhachevsky would have nodded sagely.

War in Ukraine: Ongoing Positional Warfare

With the failure of the Hostomel mission, the Russian plan and, indeed, the entire offensive began to unravel. The Russians were slow to react to the realities of the situation. Despite having chosen a high-risk/high-reward coup de main approach, it appeared they had no sequels (plans for when operations go unexpectedly well or unexpectedly bad). Granted, at that point and with the level of preparation involved, little could have been done to salvage a good outcome, as the initial strategy for the "Special Military Operation" was based on several erroneous assumptions—the strength of Ukrainian will, the overall level of military resistance, and the West's level of support—that made the operation unsalvageable when they did not hold. At that point, the failure of the operation is overdetermined. By April 1, the Russians began pulling back from around the capital city and within a week had withdrawn from the Kyiv Oblast.[xxxiii]

After their initial coup de main failed and the invalidation of several critical assumptions, the Russians faced a new strategic situation. Now what? And what would the four Soviet theorists have advised? The character of war during Svechin's era prevented a single decisive battle, and he would have seen the Russian situation in March 2022 as one where the character of war prevented a single decisive battle. At that point, he would have recommended a strategic defensive posture to build up capabilities for a protracted conflict while employing positional warfare as the operational foundation of Russian military strategy. Tukhachevsky, Triandafillov, and Isserson would have agreed, but they would have wanted to stay on the strategic defensive only as long as was necessary to build enough strength to execute deep operations. Svechin would have recommended exercising more strategic patience. However, all four would have agreed to keep pressure on the Ukrainians and that the goal was to restore maneuver to the battlefield.

The Russians, and Ukrainians for that matter, opted to wage positional warfare after listening to Tukhachevsky more and Svechin less. When one side built enough combat power, they would conduct multiple tactical offensive operations, "trying to 'lean' on the front of the enemy," as an *Institute for the Study of War* article put it.[xxxiv] In other words, both sides wanted to pin down their opponent and gain territory where possible all while keeping an eye on restoring maneuver for a larger-scale, operational-level offensive. It was not to be. Instead, a dynamic formed where one side would temporarily have built enough combat power to go on a larger positional warfare offensive. That offensive would culminate, and the other side would soon start a similar counteroffensive. This dynamic played out with the Russian battle for the Donbas of March 25–August 31, the Ukrainian offensives between September and November 2022, the Russian winter offensives between December 2022 and April 2023, Ukraine's offensive between June and September of 2023, and then the period during which Russia had retaken the strategic initiative from

October 2023 through the winter of 2024.[xxxv] As Svechin said, "It is easy to get involved in positional warfare, even against one's will, but it is not so easy to get out of it."[xxxvi]

Conclusion: Where Does The Ukraine War End?

The Russians reportedly were within 27 kilometers of Kyiv. Perhaps they could see the Motherland Monument—updated with a Ukrainian coat of arms after the failed Russian attack—like the myth that the most advanced elements of the German Army could see the spires of the Kremlin from 29 kilometers away. Regardless of the validity of this speculation, the historical parallel reveals the hard truth that the Russian attack on Kyiv may ironically be their own Barbarossa—an offensive tantalizingly close to victory, yet the tide turned, perhaps never to return. While this is a pleasant long-term thought for the Ukrainians, the Russian bear is a resilient foe that is patiently hibernating, waiting for the West's will to support Ukraine to wane and the Ukrainian will to crack under the strain of grinding positional warfare. Overall, the Soviet Union employed the military theory of Svechin, Triandafillov, Tukhachevsky, and Isserson far better in the Second World War than Russia did in Ukraine roughly eighty years later; however, Putin and his generals may have adopted a long-term strategy in line with Svechin's writing.

Predictions are always dangerous, but several scenarios seem likely. The first is that Western political debates slow the delivery and reduce the magnitude of aid, especially military equipment, sapping the energy and undermining the will of the Ukrainian people. Russia would wait to see the results of upcoming political elections while continuing to conduct positional warfare to attrit Ukrainian forces, who have a much smaller pool of manpower to draw upon. The Ukrainians would strive to hold as far forward as possible, holding as much territory and protecting as much of its populace as possible. In this scenario, sadly, if the Ukrainian military were to fail, it would likely fail catastrophically. Any Ukrainian resistance movement would be challenged by poor geography for insurgency and the Russian intimate knowledge of Ukrainian culture and language. However, Ukrainian separatists held out after the Second World War until the mid-1950s.

The second scenario is less dire for Ukraine but is still gloomy. If the West can support Ukraine with a consistent flow of aid, the Ukrainian military could keep the current line of contact. However, Ukraine has far less manpower to mobilize than its foe, Russia. In this scenario, the tail of the conflict will be long. Given the Russian occupation of much Ukrainian territory, it is difficult to see Putin giving up Crimea or lacking some kind of guarantee that Ukraine will not become a member of NATO. On the other hand, it is equally challenging to envision the Ukrainians being willing to negotiate away any of their pre-2022 territories, likely now including Crimea, without further loss of territory. This situation seems to point to positional warfare occurring for the foreseeable future. Barring a "black swan" event, more blood and treasure must be shed and spent before negotiations start.

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Vauban, The War on Terror, and the Aesthetic Strategic Imperative

David Betz - Department of War Studies, King's College London

Camp Bastion. Photo: Cpl Daniel Wiepen/MOD, OGL v1.0OGL v1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

About the author

David Betz is Professor of War in the Modern World in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. His most recent book is *The Guarded Age: Fortification in the 21st Century* (Polity, 2024).

In late 2020, *Popular Mechanics* magazine carried a short story about the building of two new forts near the towns of Meneka and Labbezanga by French forces involved in the now defunct Operation Barkhane in Mali.[i] Normally, the addition to the world of a couple more military forward operating bases someplace hot, dusty, and far away would not capture the attention of the mainstream press. In this case, however, the 17th Parachute Engineers Regiment had constructed them in a star shape reminiscent of the polygonal bastion fortresses of the 17th century. 'Mediaeval star forts are alive

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and well', the article declared.

A pedant would differ with that assertion. For a start, bastion forts are quintessentially of the early modern period not the mediaeval; their very existence is due to the inability of lofty mediaeval castles to stand against mobile gunpowder artillery.[ii] For another, bastion forts were not simply geometrically complex, their defining quality was the immensely thick glacis (for illustration see Figure 3) which enabled them to endure pummelling by the most powerful weapons available—and the equally immense cost which that entailed. By contrast, what we see at Meneka and Labbezanga is a curtain wall comprised of a single layer of HESCO gabions, plus a ditch—a cheap construction, secure against the lightning raids of enemies armed with weapons no heavier than can be mounted on a pickup truck.[iii]

The star shape is essentially a fashion statement of not much tactical consequence. Anyway, perhaps it was a fit of whimsy, or maybe it was a deliberate nod to their illustrious forebear, the French military engineer Marshal Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, at any rate, the forts at Meneka and Labbezanga were more eye-catching than usual, at least from above. Imagine, though, that we might ask Vauban directly what he made of these forts and the War on Terror more generally.

Would he pour scorn on them? I think not.

He would, I shall argue, find them technically ingenious and be quite astonished by the speed, economy, and scale with which fortifications can and are being constructed by many state and non-state actors today. At the same time, he would be dubious of the strategic logic with which they are often employed. Specifically, he would argue that they fail to perform what I call an aesthetic strategic imperative.

Aesthetics is the concern with or appreciation of beauty. To be imperative is to be crucial, vital, or necessary. Beauty seems incidental to our current strategic culture because it is fundamentally utilitarian in outlook. If it's ugly and it works then it's not ugly, or at any rate it's good enough, is a fair encapsulation of the prevailing attitude. To believe otherwise is alien to the broader culture of the Western world, which in art and design has been increasingly anti-beauty for over a century.[iv]

Neither was true, though, in Vauban's time—the epoque of the Baroque, a cultural period defined by grandeur and complex ornamentation governed by simple underlying symmetries in architecture, as well as music, painting and other arts—which is why I have a strong hunch that he would have a great deal that is interesting to say about our current strategic efforts in respect of fortification, his particular area of military fame.[v]

To speak in the voice of another, particularly one long since dead is intrinsically presumptuous. To do it at all requires great caution on the part of the author, and some willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. The argument which follows proceeds from as best as possible an understanding of the man, his works, and the strategic context of the time in which he lived. Ultimately, though, it is my humble interpretation of things which is on display here and I would not wish to pretend otherwise.

Before continuing, it is perhaps useful to provide a brief biographical sketch. Vauban was a French Marshal during the long reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715). He is known largely for having constructed a great ring of marvellous fortresses to defend and demarcate French national frontiers at a time when it was the preeminent European military power. Such was the scale and quality of his contribution to military engineering that European artillery forts of the 16th and 17th centuries, which strictly speaking are Italian in origin, hence the term 'trace italienne', are as often as not referred to as being in Vauban-style.

For all that he is associated with the design and construction of fixed defences, he in fact rarely commanded one in battle; he was, rather, an undisputed master of siege warfare, nearly always in the offence operationally, i.e., he was as much a fortification-breaker as fortification-maker. In battle he was highly courageous and wounded severely eight times in his career, but he was cautious with the lives of his soldiers and most of his tactical innovations served the end of reducing casualties in perhaps the most miasmically concentrated and complicated sort of combat. No pacifist, he was, though, sceptical of the utility of force. 'The father of war is greed, its mother is ambition, and its relatives are all passions that lead us to evil', he once wrote.[vi]

These aspects of his personality and military leadership style are admirably current and worthy of continued emulation.

Beyond battle and fortification design, however, he was also a talented economist, an author on matters ranging from agriculture to religion, and an astute commentator on political affairs. Throughout his adult life, he was a loyal, industrious, and humble servant of the 'Sun King' Louis XIV; but he started his military career as a rebellious Frondeur in 1651. When he died in 1707 in the middle of the War of Spanish Succession he was again in political disgrace, watched and suspected of disloyalty by the Royal Police, for having written of all things a critical volume on French tax policy.[vii]

His acute perception of the relationship between economics and war, and of civil-military relations generally, in the current context feels to me very relevant to strategic thinkers today. Vauban is hardly a forgotten figure; in fact, he is probably the only great military engineer of history which most people, even many uniformed products of professional military education, would be able to name in a pinch. My point is twofold: fortification is not a redundant

military science relevant mainly to history enthusiasts but is, rather, a very current aspect of military operations; and Vauban's relevance to military problems of the day extends beyond tactics and techniques to broader matters of strategy.[viii]

What is a fortification? At first, the answer to this question would seem simple, but a moment of reflection ought to provoke some hesitancy. It is fruitless to define them by form because of their sheer variety. Large or small, organic, or regularly angled, perched on the highest ground or buried underground, lofty or squat, linear or in depth, singular or part of a larger fortified complex—examples of all and more might easily be given. Walls can be very complex and varied. [ix]

Function provides a more useful distinction. A fortification is a built object that compels an opponent to do something they would otherwise not: slow down, go around, expend greater force, or if effectively deterred not attack at all. A simplification which I find useful is to consider a fortification as a kind of *strategic message*, of which two are very important.

The first is aimed internally at the people who live regularly around a given fortified strategic complex and it says, 'you are ruled from here', in other words it is a tool of pacification, a protected installation from which governance emanates. The second is aimed externally at other sovereigns and it says, 'past here you do not rule', in other words it is a tool of conquest, an armoured belt signifying a territorial claim by one sovereign against the real or perceived wishes of another.

As examples of the former, think of once fortified Russian towns such as Vladivostok and Vladikavkaz, meaning respectively 'Rule-over-the-East' and 'Rule-over-the-Caucasus'. The clue is in the name, as they say. A great example of the latter may be seen in the characters emblazoned on roof tiles found on the northern frontier of China's Great Wall which declare 'all aliens must submit'.[x] It would be hard to state sovereign supremacy of a place any more directly.

Another useful distinction is that between field and other fortifications. The former is generally a decidedly slap-dash affair, constructed expediently (usually by combat troops) from the best available materials in what form and place that tactical exigency and weapons characteristics dictate; the latter are typically more deliberate constructions, built by specialists with some degree of consideration of factors beyond the immediate needs of combat—be that the comfort of the occupants or broader symbolism.

The quintessential example of the field fortification is the Roman marching fort—again, the clue is in the name—constructed by legionnaires as they moved about and sometimes beyond the Empire so prolifically that even today traces of them are to be found from North Africa to the north of Scotland.[xi] More modern examples would include the vast entrenchments of the First World War and, for that matter, the fortifications that dominate the conduct of the ongoing Russo-Ukraine War.

Obviously, there is overlap between the categories which I have laid out, which might reasonably be seen as representing gradations on a scale rather than as being fundamentally distinct. Clearly, the need for pacification is usually driven by a preceding conquest. Likewise, field fortifications may acquire a degree of permanency and undergo redesign and embellishment over time. Most castles in England, for instance, started out as simple *mottes* (mounds of earth) surrounded by a wood-palisaded bailey. Built by the conquering Normans as bases for pacifying the Anglo-Saxons they had conquered, those which have survived acquired their stone cladding and other embellishments many years later—sometimes very much later.[xii]

The matter here, though, is not historical; it is, rather, that the distinctions equip us with a conceptual frame—grounded in the history of war and warfare—that can illuminate the present. Undoubtedly, rather than pacification or conquest, those statesmen and commanders today who are practicing such strategies would probably describe them in other terms such as 'stabilisation' or 'sovereign border demarcation', though that changes nothing of substance.

Put a pin anywhere on a map anywhere in the region of the world once described by the Pentagon as the 'Non-Integrating Gap' and you will be very near one of thousands of pacification forts the same as those at Meneka and Labbezanga.[xiii] Until recently, NATO operated some truly gigantic ones in Afghanistan—Camp Bastion, Kandahar Airbase, Bagram, amongst others—now mostly abandoned and being swallowed back by the desert. The shape of them—star, square, circle, or more likely completely irregular—is incidental. Moreover, they are not all strictly military. After the United States Army, the single largest buyer of HESCO bastion—a modern gabion, i.e. a basic fortification building block—is the United Nations, which uses them to add security to refugee camps and humanitarian compounds in conflict areas.[xiv]

Pause for a moment now to compare Vauban's Citadel of Lille in Figure 1 with the Meneka fort in Figure 2. Both are pentagonal and have *redans*—arrow shaped embankments at their points—and there is a rudimentary outwork which might charitably be described as a *ravelin* in front of the gate of the latter. After that, the similarities are effectively none.

That would not have offended Vauban at all because he was no dogmatist when it came to design. He built forts in

whatever shape the tactical conditions necessitated, not simply as an exercise in geometric elaboration, with the best materials available within the budget allotted to him. In mountainous terrain where artillery was not a threat, he even built them in a high-walled mediaeval style that remained effective under those conditions.[xv]

For that matter, French colonial engineers constructed hundreds of wooden 'Vauban-style' forts all over the world which were truly more akin to Roman marching forts, lacking in practically every way the engineering elements required for the high intensity warfare of the time in Europe itself. They too were perfectly well-adapted to local conditions because the native tribes whom they were intended to subdue had no artillery and were, therefore, not capable of warfare at such high intensity.[xvi]

In short, Vauban as a practical soldier would not have deplored the expediency of Meneka's construction because they worked—tactically. He would also probably greatly appreciate the simple genius of things like the stackable, flat-packable HESCO bastion system. There are many other fortification products to be found in the catalogues of the global 'perimeter security' business, which including electronic surveillance systems, was valued at $59 billion in 2021.[xvii] These also would fascinate him. Vauban could take his pick of lucrative directorships in any one of a dozen military engineering firms within minutes of exiting our hypothetical time machine.

What, then, is the problem? The crux of the matter, reader, if now I may presume to speak directly in the words of our veteran commander and fortification expert:

'Ils ressemblent à de la merde.'

The problem is not incidental—it is highly strategically consequential. To explain why requires unpacking a logical syllogism, two elements of which we have already encountered. First, a fortification may be seen functionally as a component of a strategic messaging system; and second, in a pacification campaign that message concerns governance above all—the combat potential of the fort is but one of several considerations, and probably secondary in importance to some of them. The third is that governance requires some degree of grandeur.

The word grandeur has a rather anachronistic feel to it now because it seems to jar with contemporary sensibilities about equality. It can come across as haughtiness, or arrogant superiority, displays of which are off-putting. In essence, though, grandeur is a signal of social significance or authority that all governments—even the most egalitarian—must display to some degree. It is a concrete embodiment of *legitimacy* and that is why courthouses, government ministries, embassies, even universities and hospitals sometimes, pay attention to design, often drawing on architectural elements going back to classical times.[xviii]

Now picture in your mind's eye a place like Camp Bastion in Helmand, Afghanistan, as an example. About the size of the city of Reading, Camp Bastion was 'home' to up to 30,000 people by 2012. One of its most important facilities was a large field hospital, one of whose doctors described the character of the place as follows:

> In a faraway land where the rains are dry and the trees blue and the air bittersweet, and where ants are like dogs and birdsong is not, there life goes for a song – everyone dies young. Safeguarding its sandy southern perimeter was, until recently, a coalition of The Free sandbagged in a ghetto the size of a small city. Camp Bastion was the hub in an operation designed to secure for others the freedoms they would have wished for themselves had they been less primitive.[xix]

The tone is grimly sardonic throughout but the use of the term 'sandbagged ghetto' to describe what was overtly strategically intended to be a mammoth stability-generating machine is what is pertinent here. Quite obviously it lacked grandeur—more to the point it distinctively lacked the power to convey that sense of legitimacy, the building of which everyone who went to Afghanistan was told repeatedly was the central aim of the campaign.

How might the proverbial average man on the street have interpreted the 'body language' of the West in the War on Terror as evinced in the structures which it has built in every single place on the planet that the conflict has touched down? They are undoubtedly powerful military instruments, generally sufficient defence if not perfectly impregnable against the threats against them. The primary message, however:

'Please don't hurt me.'

A bit of contemplation of the starkly utilitarian ditch, razor-wire topped HESCO barriers, occasional watchtower, and the dismal tent city inside, would reveal another significant message. If there is nothing that you care to embellish on your fortress, if its default condition is half-ruined & half-built, and there is nothing inside it which could not easily be left behind or stuffed in the back of a heavy transport plane, then what it says is,

'There is nothing I care about here.'

In strategic communications much tends to be made of the 'see-do gap', which refers to the difference between rhetoric and action and the aphorism that actions speak louder than words.[xx] I do not wish here to discuss the matter of strategic narrative in the War on Terror in detail; suffice to say, though, I think the two messages above are precisely the opposite of those which our words were intended to convey.

It would be a very stupid Afghan who failed to notice the

difference and an even stupider one to heed words more loudly than deeds. As it happens, there proved to be too few stupid Afghans to rescue the West from the strategic debacle that ultimately transpired. Likewise, it would seem Malians could see that they were in effect being talked down to by people to whom they could stand up if they wished.

The Meneka and Labbezanga forts, as examples of their type, were in many ways ingenious and strictly tactically strong enough. Strategically, however, they were a complete failure—as indeed the War on Terror, or however we are to call the continuing campaigns to defeat violent Islamic fundamentalism wherever it takes root, has been a failure. I am not saying that the War on Terror has been lost because we build bad forts. The reasons are too many and complex to be reduced in such a way. I believe, rather, that we build forts that are bad in strategic messaging terms because ours is a starkly utilitarian culture, a problem multiplied in a military context which is starkly utilitarian to start with.

Our forts are ugly and visually obviously disposable because they are built by a culture that has little time for aesthetic embellishment generally and which is highly prone to disposability which means that they lack strategic utility. The War on Terror has been described so many times as a 'war of ideas' that it does not seem a controversial suggestion.[xxi] A war of ideas is a sort of beauty contest in which it is asked, in essence, here is one interconnected system of beliefs and things and here is another: which is better?

A culture which lacks regard for beauty, which indeed is sceptical of the existence of such a thing as an absolute, will struggle to win any beauty contests.

I anticipate some objections to the argument I have presented here. For one, Vauban's whole military career was confined practically to the territory of one state which he crisscrossed many, many times and all his battles were fought against other state agents. France, moreover, at that time was at the height of political despotism. What might he say, therefore, about a globe-spanning conflict between the supposed free West and what the historian Michael Howard described as a state of mind of 'generalised resentment' in the Islamic world?[xxii]

In anticipation of such critiques, I would conclude with a two-part response. First, like all the West's generals today, Vauban was a loser. Remarkable, yes, he won all his battles. However, though he himself was in disgrace at the time of his death, and France itself was still at a cultural and strategic high eighty years away from the Revolution, the wars of the Sun King had been ill-conceived, and France was worse off at the end of his career than at its beginning. 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose', it is said. On his deathbed, Louis XIV advised his heir not to imitate his example, 'try to keep the peace with your neighbours'.[xxiii]

Second, I would urge readers to look at the many surviving Renaissance fortifications not simply as not just military objects but also as works of art. True, they were conceived and built as fighting machines, first and foremost; they were not meant to last *per se*, their durability against the advance of time is an incidental result of being designed to be able to endure artillery battering. It is clear, though, that they were also designed with at least half an eye to posterity—as a political statement written in stone and brickwork.

There is a lesson there that is most obvious when looking at the gates of 16th and 17th century fortified places which are nearly always embellished, often quite extravagantly like an arc of triumph, and not infrequently at the cost of some loss of defensive function. A more subtle, but to my mind also telling example, may be found in the *echaugettes* that jut out on corbels from the salient of bastions and outer works of Vauban's forts. Their function: a humble sentry box. Their form: usually unique to a given fort, with an elegant silhouette blending into a gracious *cordon* and *tablette* which in the opinion of most experts existed *purely for decoration*.

For illustration see the drawing in Figure 4 of an *echaugette* from the Vauban fort at Port-Louis in Bretagne. They could have been made uglily, but they were made beautifully—presumably at extra expense. Why?

Vauban did not have endless resources; indeed, quite the opposite was the case. As Commissioner General of Fortifications his job was to defend the country against many powerful threats, which it must be said were largely caused by Louis XIV's religious intolerance and aggressive policies that caused resentments and grudges all over Europe. The forts he built were undeniably militarily remarkable. The Citadel of Lille in Figure 2 was declared by a Spanish fortification expert, Don Francisco D'Arguto, to be impregnable 'so long as French women bear children.'[xxiv] They were also convincing expressions of cultural power with great aesthetic merit.

No good commander wastes resources. Vauban was a good commander. I surmise, therefore, that he judged the added cost of making his fortresses beautiful to be worthwhile strategically.

There is a short old book by a notable professor of Italian and expert on the Renaissance the title of which takes the form of a very good question, 'Renaissance fortification: art or engineering?'[xxv] It is fair to say that the author was trying to make a point about conservation not about strategy and definitely not about contemporary war. I think there is a strategic point, however, which is that the answer is both. Vauban's fortresses were both art and engineering. The art was part of their strategic power. The lack of art in our fortresses today is one of the reasons that they lack strategic power. There is an aesthetic imperative in strategy that relates to its being a form of communication.

If, reader, you accept that the outcome of the wars of our 'information age' are somehow especially influenced by communications power, then the fact that strategic studies is so suspicious of the indeterminacies of culture and basically is uninterested in aesthetics is a problem. Looking at the strategic problems of our time through the eyes of one of the most remarkable officers of the Baroque period brings that to light.

Figure 1 Meneka fort, Mali

Figure 2 Citadel of Lille designed by Vauban in 1667.

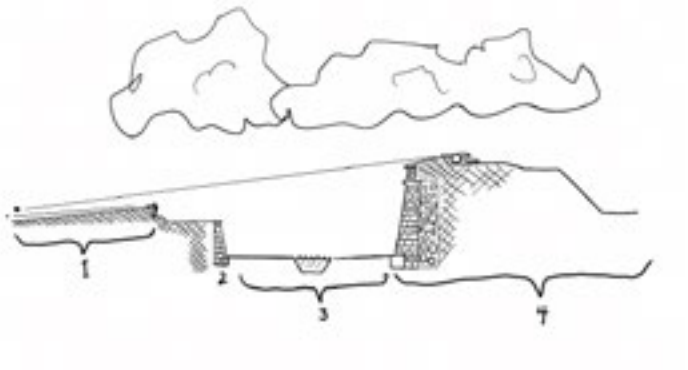

Figure 3: Simplified cross section of a bastion fort showing 1. Glacis, 2. Counterscarp, 3. Ditch, and 4. the main fortress comprising Rampart, Parapet, and so on. The key point here is the immense depth.

Figure 4: A typical bastion salient showing 1. the corbelled Echaugette and 2. the decorative Cordons and Tablette of the wall.

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[xviii] Note how frequently legitimacy is cited in counterinsurgency doctrine. For example, in Britain's Army Field Manual Countering Insurgency, Vol. 1, Part 10 (2010), p. 1-5. And the American FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency (2006), p. pp. 1-21.

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Image attributions and credit

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Figure 2: Source: https://quadralectics.wordpress.com/4-representation/4-2-function/4-2-3-citadels-and-castles/

Figure 3: Source: Drawing by author.

Figure 4: Source: Drawing by author.

Hans Delbrück and the 2001-2021 War in Afghanistan

Francis J.H. Park - US Army War College, United States Army (Ret.)

Pfc. Cameron Boyd, Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U.S._Army_firefight_in_Kunar.jpg, via Wikimedia Commons.

About the author

After being director of the US Army War College's Basic Strategic Art Program, Francis J.H. Park retired from the US Army in 2024 after a 30-year career. He holds a MMAS from the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies and a PhD in military history from the University of Kansas.

Hans Delbrück's theories of annihilation and exhaustion represent a useful organizing framework for a look at the war in Afghanistan, which at the end of it all, was ultimately a civil war. Afghanistan had effectively been at war since 1978 with the Saur Revolution that instituted a communist government in Kabul. Those civil wars did not end until 2021 with the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The duration of the conflict, and the longevity of many of the actors who fought in the various campaigns of the civil wars, gave credence to a Taliban expression told to their Western adversaries that "you have the watches, but we have the time." The strategies that the West and its military forces employed in Afghanistan grossly underestimated the willingness of the Taliban to endure in the face of a far superior Western military force.

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A comparison of strategies in theory

While a discussion of Delbrück's "central problem" focuses on two forms of strategy in the form of annihilation and exhaustion, it also requires an inquiry into the theory of victory and the role that military action plays in the willingness of combatants to come to a negotiated settlement. Both of the other lines of inquiry are a useful complement to Delbrück's strategies of annihilation and exhaustion.[i]

The notion of a theory of victory addresses the transitive aspect of annihilation and exhaustion—in a nutshell, the rationale for those forms of strategy. Both Eliot Cohen and Colin Gray have used the term theory of victory, which in other forms has appeared as a "theory of action" and more recently by Frank Hoffman as a "theory of success." Absent a normative definition, Hoffman describes it as an explicit causal logic that serves as an actionable central idea for achieving the goals of strategy.[ii] Discussion of a theory of victory was conspicuously absent in the practice of strategy until the development of the 2018 U.S. *National Defense Strategy*, for which Hoffman was one of the principal authors.[iii]

A corollary to a theory of victory is the coercive role that military action plays in forcing a negotiated settlement. Barring the total destruction of an adversary, its political entities, and its population as was the case in Carthage in 164 BC, the corollary to practical coercion is that the role of military action is to achieve a more advantageous negotiated settlement. Even the supposedly unconditional surrenders at the end of World War II came with significant conditions granted to the defeated powers, conditions that were ultimately policy decisions at the national level.[iv]

Delbrück described annihilation in terms of military defeat of an adversary, after which the victor imposes conditions on the defeated power. In comparison, exhaustion seeks to wear out an adversary, whereby the defeated power accepts the conditions of the victor in lieu of continuing to incur losses in a campaign where military defeat is unattainable. A key aspect where the two approaches differ is the role of battle. In Delbrück's description, in annihilation "it is the one means that outweighs all others and draws all others into itself," whereas in exhaustion "it is to be regarded as one means that can be chosen among several."[v] The implication is that a militarily inferior power can defeat a superior adversary through bleeding away the will to continue fighting.

A comparison of strategies in practice

After the end of the Cold War, the United States wielded more military might than any other country in the world. The attacks on September 11, 2001, however, came from al-Qaeda, a non-state adversary, who was allowed to operate out of states that afforded salutary neglect if not safe haven. Such was the beginning of what eventually became Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the name for combat operations in Afghanistan and more broadly against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The goals of the campaign started in 2001 was to capture or kill members of al-Qaeda and to overthrow the Taliban government in Kabul. The method by which this would be achieved would not be an incremental one; as Sir Michael Howard observed shortly after the attacks, "It cried for immediate and spectacular vengeance to be inflicted by America's own armed forces."[vi]

At the conclusion of initial military operations in 2002 that resulted in the rapid military defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, fears of a subsequent attack on the United States led to an ongoing troop presence that complemented an effort to rebuild Afghanistan. In a profoundly myopic act of mirror-imaging, the United States and its coalition partners assisted in establishing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a democratic government in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai, and with it a national army out of the tribal leaders and their militias that had supported the fight against the Taliban.[vii]

However, Afghanistan had never been a unitary state; it had always been a loose confederation of regions where loyalties were primarily tribal in nature far more so than to an abstract government administered from Kabul. Unfortunately, Western foreign policy was predicated on the presumption of strong national institutions, something that had never existed in Afghanistan, and the creation of which was inimical to many Afghan power brokers, from President Karzai on down who valued political loyalty far more than a meritocracy that was alien to the tribal politics that dominated Afghanistan.[viii]

However, U.S. military policy goals for Afghanistan focused overwhelmingly on counterterrorism under OEF, which was in tension with, if not actively counterproductive to the other Western powers' governance and reconstruction work in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that was initially focused on the new government in Kabul and the provinces. The fear of terrorist attacks on the United States after 9/11 made the United States unwilling to negotiate with former Taliban to reintegrate them into the Afghan transitional government.[ix] However, there was neither published strategy nor policy, and the resultant theory of victory remained the military destruction of al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts.

Mirror imaging also led to Western policy goals, such as reforms for women's rights and ethnic distribution at the national level, in ways that strengthened the Taliban, splintered the power base of the government in Kabul, or both. Attempts at attacking corruption in Kabul and in the provinces and districts foundered on the industrial levels of Western spending to develop the Afghan military, government, and economy, exacerbated by the lack of

conditionality in the application of that spending given the need to find Afghan proxies to administer those resources. The long-standing tribal loyalties that transcended any national identity combined with the strong role of Islam in Afghan culture to catalyze the Taliban as an entity in opposition to Western, non-Islamic outsiders.

As to military action, neither the United States nor its allies were willing or able to send forces of sufficient capability or quantity to gain momentum in the first few years of the campaign. The demand for U.S. forces for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) after 2003 meant that what was left for Afghanistan was an understrength divisional task force and a joint task force headquarters that called itself "the world's most forward-deployed AARP chapter."[x] After 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld consistently opposed any increase in U.S. forces to OEF. Instead, responsibilities and force requirements were to be offloaded to ISAF, which assumed responsibilities for security operations previously under OEF from 2003 to 2006.[xi]

Many ISAF troop contributing nations had come to Afghanistan assuming operations would be peace enforcement much like the Balkans, not the high-intensity combat operations the British and Canadians faced in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Other countries immediately invoked national caveats to prevent their forces from being sent to those areas.[xii] Those national caveats were a symptom of the lack of consensus on what ISAF's true mission was to be—and by extension, a lack of consensus on any meaningful theory of victory. American contributions still dwarfed every other country in ISAF even after the transfer of responsibility from OEF.

In the meantime, the Taliban rebuilt after its initial tactical defeats in 2002. They attacked symbols of the government, whether at the national, provincial, district, or local level, eventually becoming a full-blown offensive in the south.[xiii] By 2006, the Taliban had become such a threat that a major named operation was required to dislodge them, and the Taliban had gained a foothold in the south and east of Afghanistan that neither ISAF nor Kabul were able to dislodge or defeat. The absence of coalition combat power meant that Taliban tactical defeats were strategically inconclusive.

While policy direction remained elusive, a military strategy started to emerge after the 2007 appointment of an American four-star general to command ISAF. Until then, military operations were reactive attempts to capitalize on local opportunities.[xiv] The U.S. framing of counterterrorism operations under OEF did not change, even though most of its resources were spent on counterinsurgency and defense institution building that became ISAF missions. What did change, especially after 2010 was the willingness of the coalition to resource the efforts to build the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and devote to it the monies and expertise required to begin training. [xv] The Afghans who were to be the backbone of the ANSF were not unlike their Taliban counterparts. Unfortunately, ISAF was also trying to communicate tenets of operations and policing that were alien to most of those Afghans and required levels of literacy, let alone education, that were not the norm in the Afghan population.[xvi]

By the time the ISAF and OEF combat missions gave way in 2015 to the non-combat Resolute Support (RS) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) missions respectively, the strategy became that of "advise and assist" operations, which were crafted in such a way as to prevent U.S. and NATO forces from deliberately engaging in direct combat. As with the ISAF mission, the theory of victory for the United States and its coalition partners was a nationally controlled, fully capable ANSF of mixed tribal and ethnic composition that could defeat the Taliban, or at least protect the government in Kabul and its interests without the requirement for an ongoing Western troop presence. What was missing was the umbrella of coalition combat forces that had been the security guarantor of the ANSF. Afghan special operations forces benefited from enablers provided by OFS forces, but in doing so became utterly dependent on the coalition.[xvii]

In comparison, the Taliban remained a credible military threat throughout, and were able to draw into Afghan tribal and ethnic identities in ways that never materialized for the ANSF. The Taliban were able to fight harder on less resources than their ANSF counterparts. They were motivated through religious ideology and a cultural imperative to conduct *jihad* against the foreign invaders from the coalition and the government in Kabul.[xviii] The Taliban also had the benefit of not trying to create a Western-style professionalized volunteer military force.

The ANSF were never able to compel the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, and Afghan power brokers were inimically opposed to a strong national force beholden to an abstract democratic government in Kabul rather than to longstanding ethnic or tribal identities. The structure of the parts of the ANSF where the army, police, and border police all answered to different chains of command meant that numerical superiority was often frittered away in rivalries between competing power centers. That competition remained a basic fact of the ANSF apparatus to the end.

The Taliban strategy to exhaust the ANSF and its Western benefactors achieved considerable success after the 2015 shift to an advise and assist mission.[xix] Western domestic disinterest in the war against the Taliban, combined with the absence of any effective attacks from al-Qaeda after 2014 meant strategic exhaustion of the coalition, and increasing pressure for coalition forces to leave Afghanistan. The death knell for Kabul was the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. The disintegration of the ANSF and the government in Kabul took weeks.

Delbrück's View

A contributor to the ineffectual Western strategy in Afghanistan was the combination of a theory of victory that did not factor in the effects of domestic politics on foreign policy and military strategy. In spite of alarming early reports from the OEF commander and the U.S. ambassador, force commitments in the first eight years of the Afghanistan campaign were insufficient to enable U.S. or ISAF forces to consolidate gains in security force assistance or governance, let alone both, and the prospect of being an army of occupation was anathema in any Western capital. By the time ISAF got serious about building the ANSF in 2010, it was already too late.[xx]

The influence of domestic politics was also apparent in President Barack Obama's announcement of the Afghan surge forces that doubled U.S. presence in the theater of operations from 2009 to 2011. In that statement, Obama telegraphed the end of the OEF mission at the end of 2014.[xxi] Coalition initiatives such as population-centric counterinsurgency and the Afghan surge were attempts at seizing a quick win—in effect, attempts at different forms of annihilation. In the end, those initiatives were attempts to defeat the Taliban operationally, but they were beholden to a defective theory of victory that required far more time than could have worked. In effect, those operational attempts were never reconciled with the strategic goal in any meaningful manner.

The Taliban, on the other hand, enjoyed a consistency of direction that far outlasted anything the West could bring to bear. Unlike the fragmented governance of the Western coalition and its allies in Kabul, the Taliban had clear leadership from Mullah Omar or his trusted lieutenants. Moreover, the Taliban were attempting to re-establish a prewar status quo culture based on Islam, not a new government with institutions such as a national police force and reforms for women's rights hitherto unseen in Afghanistan. Such a positive aim for the Taliban contrasted with the American negative aim of preventing another terrorist attack on the United States. At the same time, al-Qaeda and the Taliban had an ambiguous relationship that made American disengagement from Afghanistan difficult.[xxii]

As a by-product of that positive aim, the Taliban's identity as a fundamentalist Islamic religious order, and traditional Afghan resistance to occupation, were motivations for many who joined their ranks.[xxiii] After Obama's announcement of a withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the Taliban could afford to wait before resuming the war in earnest. They were willing to endure whatever degree of punishment that the West was willing to mete, and they were far more representative of the rural Islamic order than the urban democracy that had emerged in Kabul.

Consequently, the notion of Taliban victory was effectively overdetermined. The competing demands and absence of any common threat consensus meant that a strategy of exhaustion is the only one that could've worked—and the West was singularly unsuited to prevail in that kind of a war. While military victory in Afghanistan was theoretically possible, prosecution of such a campaign was not an acceptable method for the West, and the Western theory of victory was never remotely sufficient to achieve the ends it sought. While the West may have achieved tactical successes that were attempts at a strategy of annihilation, the Taliban's strategy of exhaustion paid off with the ignominious end of the Kabul government two decades after the beginning of the war.

References

[i] While the translation of ermattungsstrategie is often a "strategy of attrition," I use the translation "strategy of exhaustion," a convention also used by the U.S. Marine Corps in their Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-1, Strategy. Hans Delbrück, History of the Art of War: The Dawn of Modern Warfare, trans. Walter J. Renfroe Jr., vol. 4, History of the Art of War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 293.

[ii] Frank G. Hoffman, "The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success," Joint Forces Quarterly 97 (2d Quarter 2020): 56–59; Paul J. Maykish, "Upstream: How Theory Shapes the Selection of Ways in Strategy" (dissertation, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2016), 29–31.

[iii] I was privy to some of those discussions given the need to reconcile the upcoming 2018 National Military Strategy with the defense strategy published immediately prior.

[iv] I am indebted to Stephen Biddle for his observations on this topic in multiple discussions over the last two years.

[v] Delbrück, History of the Art of War: The Dawn of Modern Warfare, 4:293–94.

[vi] In the absence of primary sources from the Taliban, I have used Carter Malkasian's 2021 history of the war in Afghanistan as the evidentiary basis for the arguments being made. Malkasian's history, which involved interviews with participants (to include the Taliban) represents as close to an even-handed treatment of the war as currently exists. Carter Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan: A History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 59; Michael Howard, "What's In A Name? How to Fight Terrorism," Foreign Affairs, December 1, 2001, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/whats-name-how-fight-terrorism..

[vii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 90.

[viii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 329–31.

[ix] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 86.

[x] The AARP is the acronym of an advocacy group formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons. Christopher N. Koontz, ed., Enduring Voices: Oral Histories of the U.S. Army Experience in Afghanistan, 2003-2005 (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008), 47, https://www.history.army.mil/html/books/enduring_voices/CMH_70-112-1.pdf.

[xi] Sten Rynning, NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 101–3.

[xii] Rynning, NATO in Afghanistan, 120–23.

[xiii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 123–24.

[xiv] "Dan McNeill, Lessons Learned Interview (Redacted)," Washington Post - The Afghanistan Papers, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/documents/background_ll_07_xx_xx_undated_mcneill1.pdf?v=26.

[xv] While the term changed to "Afghan National Defense and Security Forces" after 2014, I use the original term in the interests of simplicity.

[xvi] Martin Loicano and Craig C. Felker, No Moment of Victory: The NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan, 2009-2011 (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 2021), xiv–xviii.

[xvii] I observed that phenomenon indirectly as a common theme of reporting on the Afghan National Army Special Operations Forces in 2013-2014.

[xviii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 332–40.

[xix] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 404.

[xx] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 131–32.

[xxi] President, "The New Way Forward - The President's Address," The White House: President Barack Obama, December 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/12/01/new-way-forward-presidents-address.

[xxii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 162, 175.

[xxiii] Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, 159–62.

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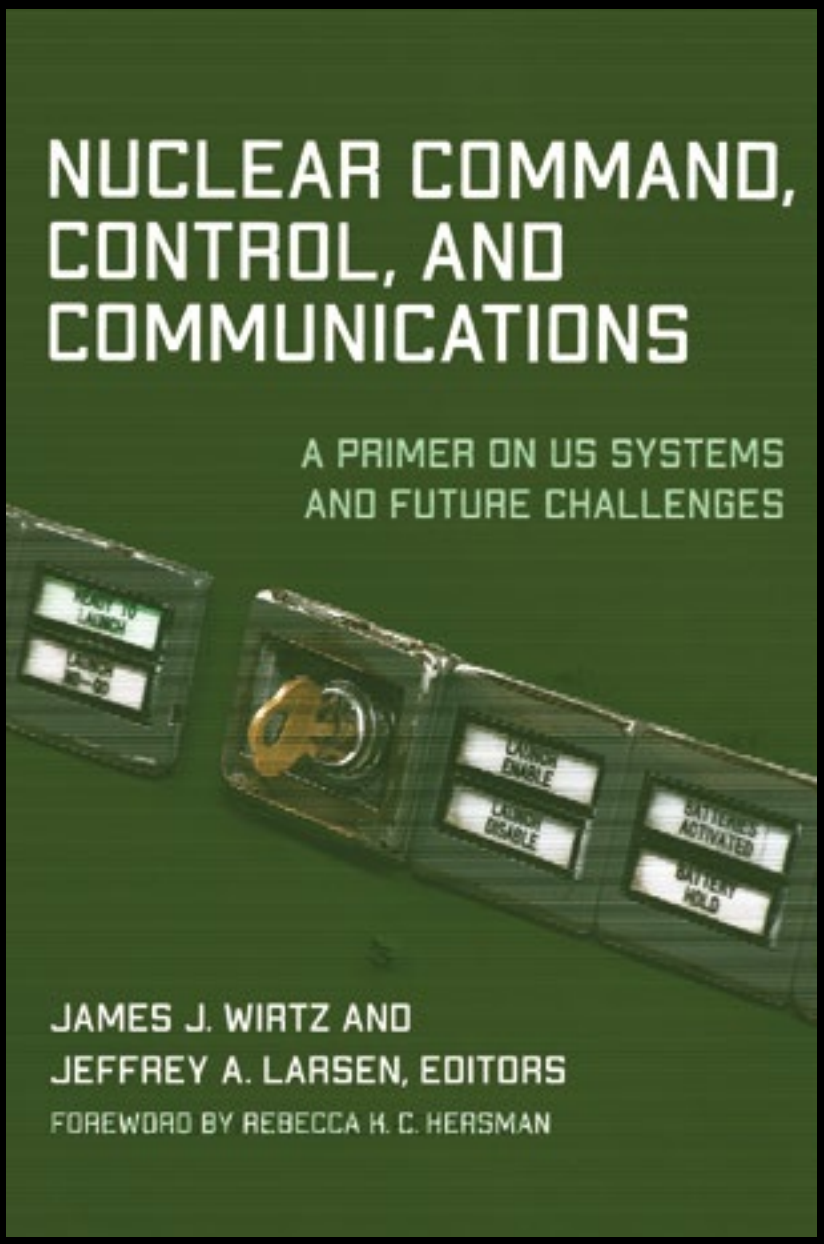

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