

# CHAPTER 13

## TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF MILITARY STRATEGY

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What is military strategy? In ancient Greece, it was the “art of the general.” In its Glossary of Military Terms, the U.S. Army War College lists eight definitions of military strategy. This highlights the first of many problems in the study of this important but complex subject. There is no universal definition, nor even the approximation of a consensus. Today the term strategy is used altogether too loosely. Some consider a strategy to be lines drawn on a map while others believe a laundry list of national objectives represents a strategy. The problem is not just semantics; it is one of using competently, one of the most essential tools of the military profession. In trying to decide between alternative strategies, we are often faced with a comparison of apples and oranges, because the choices do not address the same factors. Only with a mutual understanding of what comprises military strategy can we hope to improve our strategic dialogue. There needs to be general agreement on a conceptual approach to military strategy: a definition; a description of the basic elements that make up military strategy; and an analysis of how they are related. For the purpose of this discussion, we will use the definition approved by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff:

The art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, or the threat of force.<sup>1</sup>

During a visit to the U. S. Army War College in 1981, General Maxwell D. Taylor characterized strategy as consisting of objectives, ways and means. We can express this concept as an equation:

| Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means . |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Component                        | Definition                                    |
| <b>Ends</b>                      | Objectives towards which one strives          |
| <b>Ways</b>                      | Course of action                              |
| <b>Means</b>                     | Instruments by which some end can be achieved |

This general concept can be used as a basis for the formulation of any type strategy—military, political, economic, etc., depending upon the element of national power employed. We should not confuse military strategy with national (grand) strategy, which is:

The art and science of developing and using the political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives.<sup>2</sup>

Military strategy is one part of this all-encompassing national strategy. The military component of our national strategy is sometimes referred to as national military strategy—military strategy at its highest level, and differentiated from operational strategies used as the basis for military planning and operations. Military strategy must support national strategy and comply with national policy—a broad course of action or statements of guidance adopted by the government at the national level in pursuit of national objectives.<sup>3</sup> In turn, national policy is influenced by the capabilities and limitations of military strategy.

With our general concept of strategy as a guide, *Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means*, we can develop an approach to military strategy. “Ends” can be expressed as military objectives and “Ways” are concerned with the various methods of applying military force. In essence, this becomes an examination of courses of action (termed military strategic concepts) that are designed to achieve the military objective. “Means” refers to the military resources (manpower, material, money, forces, logistics, etc.) required to accomplish the mission. This leads us to the conclusion that:

Military Strategy = Military Objectives + Military  
Strategic Concepts + Military Resources.

This conceptual approach is applicable to all three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. It also reveals the fundamental similarities among national military strategy, operational art, and tactics. Strategists, planners, corps commanders and squad leaders are *all* concerned with **ways** to employ **means** to achieve **ends**.

Some readers may question this idea, thinking that while military resources are necessary to support a strategy, they are not a component of that strategy. They would limit military strategy to a consideration of military objectives and military strategic concepts. However, in discussing the importance of superiority of numbers, Clausewitz states that the size of military forces “is indeed a vital part of strategy.”<sup>4</sup> And Bernard Brodie points out the “Strategy in peacetime is expressed largely in choices among weapons systems...”<sup>5</sup> By considering military resources as a basic element of military strategy, we may also alleviate the problem of disregarding the importance of military objectives and strategic concepts while concentrating mainly on force structure issues.

There are two levels of military strategy: operational and force developmental. Strategies based on existing military capabilities are operational strategies and are used as a foundation for the formulation of specific plans for action in the short-range time period. This level of strategy has also been referred to as higher or grand tactics and operational art. Longer-range strategies may be based on estimates of future threats, objectives, and requirements, and are therefore not as constrained by current force posture. Military strategies can be regional as well as global, concerning themselves with specific threat scenarios. These longer-range strategies are more often global in nature, and may require improvements in military capabilities.

Military objectives and military strategic concepts of a military strategy establish requirements for resources, and are in turn influenced by the availability of resources. If we fail to consider military resources as an element of military strategy, we may be faced with what has been called a strategy-capabilities mismatch. This is the usual case when we are developing a long-range strategy requiring improved military force structure capabilities. However, it may be disastrous if we are concerned with an operational strategy upon which contingency plans and military operations will be based. That is why operational strategies **must** be based on capabilities.

Let's discuss the first basic element of any military strategy—a military objective. It is defined as a specific mission or task to which military efforts and resources are applied. Several examples come to mind:

1. Deter aggression,
2. Protect lines of communication,
3. Defend the homeland,
4. Restore lost territory, and
5. Defeat an opponent.

The objectives should be military in nature. While Clausewitz, Lenin, and Mao have all emphasized the integral relationship of war and politics, military forces must be given appropriate missions within their capabilities. Liddell Hart stresses that:

In discussing the subject of "the objective" in war it is essential to be clear about, and to keep clear in our minds, the distinction between the political and the military objective. The two are different but not separate. For nations do not wage war for war's sake, but the pursuance of policy. The military objective is only the means to a political end. Hence the military objective should be governed by the political objective, subject to the basic condition that policy does not demand what is militarily—that, is practically—impossible.<sup>6</sup>

In our definition of military strategy, the ultimate objectives are those of national policy. Sometimes policy guidance is unclear, ambiguous or difficult to find. National policy also concerns itself with all the basic elements of national power: political, economic, socio-psychological, and military. To make things even more interesting, national policies in these various fields are often overlapping, and may even be contradictory. There are seldom "purely military" or "purely political" objectives. National leaders may choose to use the military instrument of power in pursuit of national policy objectives that are primarily political or economic in nature. This can cause problems because sometimes-military force is not the appropriate tool. Military commanders may then have difficulty in deriving feasible military objectives from the objectives of national policy.

Now for an examination of a military strategic concept. It can be defined as the course of action accepted as the result of the estimate of the strategic situation.<sup>7</sup> Military strategic

concepts may combine a wide range of options, such as: forward defense (forward basing and/or forward deployment, strategic reserves, reinforcements, show of force, prepositioned stocks, collective security, and security assistance. These are a few of the ways military forces can be used either unilaterally or in concert with allies. The determination of strategic concepts is of major importance. However, one should not make the mistake of calling a strategic concept a strategy. Strategic concepts must always be considered in relation to military objectives and resources.

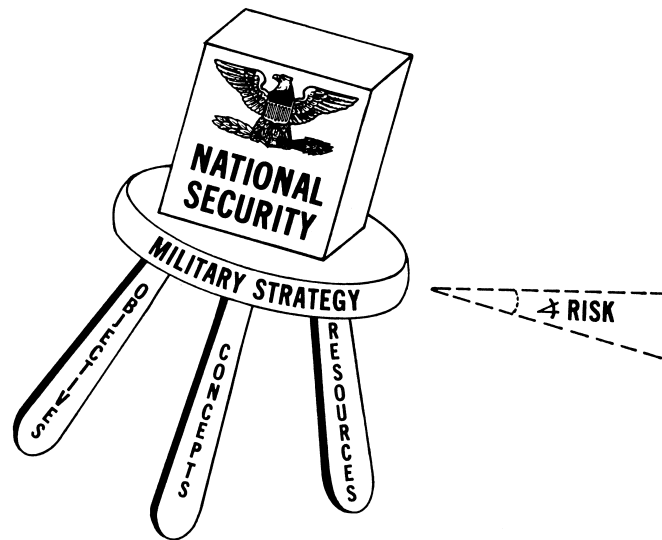
Finally, we should study the “Means” portion—the military resources that determine capabilities of our military strategy equation. These may include conventional general-purpose forces, strategic and tactical nuclear forces, defensive and offensive forces, active and reserve forces, war materiel and weapons systems as well as manpower. We should also take into consideration the roles and potential contributions of our allies and friends. The total force package must be well rounded with combat, combat support, and combat service support elements that are adequately equipped and sustained. Depending upon the type of strategy we are developing, the forces we consider employing may or may not currently exist. In short-range operational strategies, the forces **must** exist. In longer-range force developmental strategies, the strategic concepts determine the type of forces that **should** exist and the way they are employed.



**Figure 1. A Model for Military Strategy.**

Now that we have looked at the basic elements of military strategy, let's try to put them together in some meaningful way. Figure 1 shows one possible model. National Security, our most vital interest, is supported on a three-legged stool entitled *Military Strategy*. The three legs of the stool are labeled *Objectives*, *Concepts*, and *Resources*. This simple analogy leads to the observation that the legs must be balanced, or national security may be in *jeopardy* (Figure 2). If military resources are not compatible with strategic concepts or commitments

and/or are not matched by military capabilities, we may be in trouble. The angle of tilt represents risk, further defined as the possibility of loss or damage, or of not achieving an objective. It is, of course, the duty of the military to determine if there is risk associated with a strategy and the degree of risk. It is also the duty of the military to bring it clearly and forcefully to the attention of civilian leaders. To ensure national security, the three "legs" of military strategy must not only exist, they must be balanced.



**Figure 2. Unbalanced Military Objectives, Concepts, and Resources May Jeopardize National Security.**

Let us test our model with an example to see if it is useful in explaining military strategy. The Carter Doctrine was a statement of national policy:

Let our position be absolutely clear. An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf Region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America. Such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

Let's devise a military strategy to carry out this policy. One implied objective is securing access to our Persian Gulf oil supplies. This economic/political objective must first be translated into military objectives, such as maintaining freedom of passage through the Strait of Hormuz and defending key oil fields, refineries, and ports. The strategic concept might be by means of a rapid deployment force from our strategic reserves. But do we have sufficient strategic mobility and power projection capabilities in place today to keep the stool level? Which leg needs to be adjusted? Military resources? It may take years to program and produce the required airlift and sealift forces. In order to have a feasible short-range operational strategy, it may be wiser to change the strategic concept to that of forward defense and station or deploy more U. S. military forces in the region.

Perhaps we have examined the subject of military strategy in sufficient depth to arrive at some initial conclusions on its nature. First, it is not the title of a strategy that is important;

it's the content that counts. The names are often changed for cosmetic reasons reflecting little substantive alteration. A study of history shows that military strategies have been identified by a wide variety of labels such as: the "Massive Retaliation" of the Eisenhower Administration, the "Flexible Response" of the Kennedy Administration, and the more recent "Realistic Deterrence". We had the "2 ½-war strategy" of the Johnson Administration changing to a "1 ½-war strategy" following the Sino-Soviet split and the realization that buying a military force in time of peace that could fight 2 ½ wars simultaneously was just too costly. These latter examples of strategic statements describe procurement guidelines for a force structure rather than military strategies. Other names for strategies over the years have been attrition, annihilation, counter value, counter force, deterrence, warfighting, direct and indirect approach, search and destroy, oil spot, assured destruction, containment, and countervailing.

One should remember that under ideal circumstances military objectives and strategic concepts determine force structure and worldwide deployments of military forces. However, the capabilities and limitations of the military forces in being necessarily affect military objectives and strategic concepts. Military strategy may be declaratory or actual. In other words, as stated by our leaders, it may or may not be our real strategy. U.S. military strategy has seldom been clearly expressed, and infrequently described in sufficient detail for all to understand. Some say that it is unwise, impossible, or even dangerous to enunciate openly a military strategy. This very act may limit our options in a crisis situation, or tip-off our potential adversaries on what our actions might be. A nation may need *more than one* military strategy at a time. For instance, if a nation has only a deterrent strategy, and deterrence fails, what does it do then? Surrender? Submit to piecemeal attacks and incremental losses? Unleash a massive strategic nuclear attack? These are some of the options if it does not also have a warfighting strategy. Military strategy can change rapidly and frequently, since objectives can change in an instant. However, it takes much longer to alter the military forces so that they may be responsive to new objectives and concepts.

In summary, military strategy consists of the establishment of military objectives, the formulation of military strategic concepts to accomplish the objectives, and the use of military resources to implement the concepts. When any of these basic elements is incompatible with the others, our national security may be in danger.

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 13

1. *JCS Pub. 1: Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 1987, p. 232.

2. *JCS Pub. 1: Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 1985, p. 244.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1976, p. 196.

5. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1965, p. 361.
6. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1975, p. 351.
7. *JCS Pub. 1: Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 1987, p. 349.