

U.S. and Gulf Cooperation Council forces conduct final field-training event of exercise Eagle Resolve 2017, which focuses on regional challenges associated with asymmetric/unconventional warfare, in Kuwait's Shuwaikh Port, April 6, 2017 (U.S. Army/Frank O'Brien)



# The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy

## A Theory of Success

By Frank G. Hoffman

*By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the study of strategy had become routine for practitioners, but of little interest for theorists. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a matter of endless fascination for theorists, but a puzzle for practitioners.*

—LAWRENCE FREEDMAN, “THE MEANING OF STRATEGY, PART II”

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There are fervent debates today about strategy, especially U.S. grand or national-level strategy.<sup>1</sup> The study of grand strategy is a con-

ceptual minefield.<sup>2</sup> Gallons of ink have been spent on definitions, but these debates have done little to enhance U.S. strategic thinking or performance.



UH-1Y Venom helicopter takes off from flight deck of USS *Boxer*, Strait of Hormuz, July 18, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Dalton Swanbeck)

Some academics dismiss national strategies as vain and hubristic, more grandiose than practical plans to obtain goals. Others criticize the tendency in U.S. policy circles to confuse grandiose objects and rhapsodic prose with pragmatic plans and appropriate means. But others contend that policymakers and their military advisors cannot escape the need to intelligently craft strategies to advance the Nation's interests. As Hal Brands notes, "grand strategy is neither a chimera nor an elusive holy grail, but rather an immensely demanding task that talented policymakers have still managed to do quite well."<sup>3</sup>

Yet scant practical work has been offered to help the next generation of practitioners create strategies in the midst of a disruptive strategic environment. Many books have been written, and numerous laments about lapses in U.S. strategy have been published. There is more art than science to designing a grand strategy, but the practice of strategy has always been a pragmatic art.<sup>4</sup> Scholars at professional military education (PME) schools admit that more needs to be done to educate the joint community

about the basic process and central, causal logic inherent to sound strategy.<sup>5</sup> Most schools teach a general and linear process model, and there is a growing recognition about the need for an explicit causal logic in strategy formulation. As noted briefly in this journal 2 years ago, a theory of victory or success should be central to national planning processes.<sup>6</sup> This is an overlooked element of strategy today both in the classroom and in the U.S. Government. Filling that gap will materially enhance our odds of gaining strategic success in the future and solve the puzzle for strategic practitioners.<sup>7</sup> It is not a panacea to strategic competence, which involves many elements, but it *is* central to strategic success.

This article examines the theoretical debates over strategy, its constituent elements (ends, ways, and means), and how we have conducted or designed such strategies in the past. Next, it reviews how U.S. national strategies have been constructed in the past, too often overlooking the causal logic that should be the most crucial component of strategic thinking. The article next discusses one technique for formulating an actionable

central idea and another technique for assessing a national strategy and its core elements. Hopefully, this article inspires debate on best practices in strategy formulation and assists those who teach the disciplined process of strategic thinking.

### The Silent Ways

Some scholars dismiss the importance of disciplined process and rigorous analysis, contending that strategy "is at the mercy of uncontrollable and often unpredictable political, economic, and military winds and currents."<sup>8</sup> They stress the need to embrace the study of history and adaptability over foresight in the formulation of grand strategy. Historians find that the informed intuition of great individuals and idiosyncratic process is more important "than a clearly thought through approach to the world."<sup>9</sup> Others despair of bureaucracy and strategy by committee or formula.<sup>10</sup> Yet process and comprehensive building blocks do have a role in formulating and implementing strategy, grand or otherwise.

In our joint PME community, the construct of strategy as a linkage

among ends/ways/means is a common shorthand recently subjected to acute criticism. It admittedly has the potential to be abused in application.<sup>11</sup> It is simplistic and formulaic, if one reduces it to an equation or mindlessly uses it as a recipe. Used in such a way, it would fail to capture the artistry and deep experience required to conceive of national strategy. Yet it captures the basic building blocks and underscores the necessity of tying together the main components of a strategy in a holistic or coherent manner. But the underlying hard work of diagnosis, assumptions, and risk are requisite supporting elements toward crafting a comprehensive approach as well.

The most important and creative aspect of strategy is often silent in the many books on the topic. Critical to the selection of the most appropriate way in a strategy is a hypothesis as to its causal logic. This important concept is rarely discussed in strategic theory. It is largely absent in the writings of today's most prominent thinkers.

As Lawrence Freedman stresses, strategy "is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power."<sup>12</sup> This insight underscores the creative aspect of good strategy: getting more out of a situation than might have been expected by the preponderance of power. Bringing this creative aspect of strategy to the forefront is important, but we need to know more about just how to generate power and how to apply it creatively.

This aspect of strategy is largely absent in U.S. academic literature as well. Western theorists orient on balancing ends and means. Strategy, B.H. Liddell Hart claimed, "depends for success, first and most, on a sound calculation and coordination of the end and the means."<sup>13</sup> John Lewis Gaddis avoids direct contact with the necessity of causality and defines grand strategy as "the calculated relationship of means to large ends."<sup>14</sup> Later, he found strategy as the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited means or capabilities.<sup>15</sup> Other noted scholars emphasize the balancing of ends and means and avoid the

crucial element of ways in their work.<sup>16</sup> One book used in JPME claims that "the marriage of ends and means was the heart of strategy."<sup>17</sup> Another popular book is quiet on the issue of ways as well, stressing the importance of balancing ends and means.<sup>18</sup>

This author's own study of the elements of strategy, with an alliterative list of fundamental considerations, also contains a serious similar shortfall. I emphasized the coherence of the three-legged stool but failed to identify causation as a critical factor.<sup>19</sup> As noted by Army War College researchers, however, "Cause-and-effect relationships lie at the heart of all strategic decision-making."<sup>20</sup>

This consideration is the essence of the strategy function, whereby the strategist exploits the comprehension generated from context and cognitively creates a strategic concept and logic that represent an untested hypothesis that promises to attain policy ends within the means allotted and the constraints that exist. A good strategy must have an internal logic that ties policy to both ways and means to create desired strategic effects. That logic is a continuous thread of thinking that provides strategic intent and informs ways and creates linkages in strategic design that drive the application of means via military operations. This factor is the component that involves calculation, cunning, and the creation of a strategic logic or chain of effects. The strategist's art or most important skill is devising a strategic logic that obtains policy's goals within the given constraints and means.

Military strategists are enjoined to think identifying the center(s) of gravity of the opponent. Grand masters contend that we should ignore this aspect of military theory. They argue that strategists should seek to gain a positional advantage or competitive edge.<sup>21</sup> One of the keys to sound strategy is focusing power and effort where it will have the greatest impact. The goal is to build and apply situations of strength, positional advantage, or exploiting leverage.

Others have long argued that the targeting of critical vulnerabilities of one's adversary is a better orientation rather

than a source of strength that may well be unassailable.<sup>22</sup> Richard Rumelt found that to exploit leverage, a leader has to create and concentrate strengths against a critical vulnerability (not always singular) of the opponent, or what he calls a pivot.<sup>23</sup> This might seem to readers to stand at odds with the Clausewitzian conception of a center of gravity as a source of strength. Rumelt argues that strategy is not only defining sources of strength but also quintessentially about bringing "unexpected strength against discovered weakness. Not simply the deft wielding of power, but the actual discovery of power in a situation, an insight into a decisive asymmetry."<sup>24</sup> Other security scholars have made the same point.

### Strategy as Hypothesis

This brings us to the central question of how one frames this fundamental determination in the strategy process, especially national strategies. How does a strategy team develop decisive asymmetry and leverage? This is a gap in our understanding of strategy and how to educate students in the formulation of sound strategy. This is the "essence of the strategy function," as stressed in my earlier study, where a strategist "cognitively creates a strategic concept and logic that represents an *untested hypothesis* that promises to attain policy ends within the means allotted and the constraints that exist."<sup>25</sup> At the U.S. Army War College, the best academics stress that the establishment of an if/then hypothesis is central to the development of strategy.<sup>26</sup> This consideration, "Involves calculation, cunning, and the creation of a strategic logic or chain of effects."<sup>27</sup>

Overall, strategy formulation should rigorously examine different conceptual approaches framed around a hypothesis about how each strategic option can obtain the specified desired aims. Some military strategies may be thought of as a "theory of victory," obtaining a distinctive goal over an opponent or adversarial coalition. The idea of a theory of victory is well established at the Army War College and studied by students at the Air University.<sup>28</sup> But as Eliot Cohen and Jeff



Navy officer answers questions from U.S. and international students of U.S. Army War College during tour of USS America, San Diego, California, March 1, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Kyle Hafer)

Meiser note, it is useful to define strategy, especially grand or national strategies, as a theory of success.<sup>29</sup> Given that their purpose is rarely to defeat an adversary but instead is to develop institutional muscle and apply statecraft to desired strategic ends, this is more compelling than victory (and defeat) per se.<sup>30</sup> The common benefit from both concepts is the requirement to define, in general terms, the causal relationship that converts ways and means into the desired end(s) for testing during strategy refinement.

Meiser goes on to argue that “Defining strategy as a theory of success gives a clear sense of how strategy is distinct from means-based planning and facilitates a superior strategy-making process.” He further notes, “Defining strategy as a theory of success encourages creative thinking while keeping the strategist rooted in the process of causal analysis; it brings assumptions to light

and forces strategists to clarify exactly how they plan to cause the desired end state to occur.”<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to disagree. This is the critical component of the process and the place where the strategist earns his keep, crafting a solution that describes how proposed efforts gain the achievement of the stated aim. Meiser, however, removes one “sin” of American strategic competency, its *means*-centricity, by overemphasizing the missing aspect of *ways*. But a way-centric application is just as faulty, and also problematic. Ultimately, ways do have to be resourced, either by applying existing sources of power or creating them. In short, Meiser correctly identifies the missing component—a plausible if not rigorous logic embedded in a stated theory of success. There must be more than “stuff happens,” when it comes to ways, and a theory of success has merit because it focuses greater attention to this element

of the process.<sup>32</sup> Some find the ends/ways/means framework to be a procrustean tyranny.<sup>33</sup> The only tyranny from the proverbial three-legged stool one escapes from by abandoning such a framework is strategic discipline, founded on a coherent conversion of desired policy ends and means into appropriate action. Instead, we should fix the broken leg with quality strategy education.

Among strategic scholars, Colin Gray seems to have gotten this element of theorizing correct. As he emphasizes in *Teaching Strategy*, “The military planner is, *ipso facto*, a theorist. A plan is a theory specifying how a particular goal might be secured. Until the course of future events unfolds, the chief planner and the commander, who may be one and the same person, are deciding and acting only on the basis of a *theory of success*.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to observe that “strategies are theories, which is to say they are



Platoon commander with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, gives professional military education class explaining strategy the Marines of 2/8 used when they landed on Red Beach 3 in November 1943, Betio, Kiribati, July 22, 2018 (U.S. Marine Corps/Timothy Hernandez)

purported explanations of how desired effects can be achieved by selected causes of threat and action applied in a particular sequence.”<sup>35</sup> However, despite a wealth of published books on strategic theory and original contributions to strategic thought, Gray offers limited guidance on how to enhance the application of theory to practice.

A rare example of any reference to the inherent theory of success in historical studies is found in *Successful Strategies*. In this book, the editors argue for more than balancing ends and means, as success “hinges almost entirely on the conformity of strategic aims to available military means and *the validity of the theory* according to which the latter are committed.” While failure is often the product of overextension beyond one’s means, this team of editors notes, failure is “perhaps more likely to reflect *mis-taken theories of success*.”<sup>36</sup> But the editors

never identify who, when, and how political leaders and their strategists define any theory of success in the case studies.

Too often policymakers and military leaders make implicit and untested assumptions about causality. But causality and its underlying hypothesis should be explicit so that it can be rigorously explored for historical and logical validity.

### Case Histories

Historical examples may shed some light. President Abraham Lincoln held to a theory of victory and struggled to find a general both to accept and to apply his formulated “way” to preserve the Union.<sup>37</sup> George Kennan’s assessment of Russia’s deeply inbred faults was more accurate and logical for exploitation. Thus, the Cold War grand strategy of containment was based on a clear theory of success, predicated on Kennan’s assessment of the ineluctable

internal decay of the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> The implied theory of success in the Eisenhower-era “New Look” strategy was a not-so-subtle threat to deploy nuclear weapons against challenges large and small. The logic presumed that an emphasis on efficiency through the threat of a massive offensive retaliatory capability would offer a sustainable strategy.<sup>39</sup> A reliance on strategic weapons is preferred, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated, “Instead of having to try to be ready to meet the enemy’s many choices. That permits . . . a selection of military means instead of a multiplication of means. As a result, it is now possible to get, and share, more basic security at less cost.”<sup>40</sup> A close reading of the basic document and Dulles’s comments reveals a blurry if not flawed linkage between cause and effects.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the New Look denied the adversary any real vote. The underlying



John Lewis Gaddis, front left, Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University, speaks to U.S. Naval War College faculty during Teaching Grand Strategy workshop, in Newport, Rhode Island, August 16, 2012 (U.S. Navy/Eric Dietrich)

logic and its political fallout with allies made it problematic.<sup>42</sup>

The Nixon administration had a more implicit logic in its national strategy. It understood that U.S. power and credibility had been decremented by the costly and protracted Vietnam War and that domestic support for extended strategic objectives was lacking. Yet the Nixon/Kissinger team remained confident that deft diplomatic maneuvers could buy time, reduce risk, and still sustain U.S. interests.<sup>43</sup>

The Reagan Presidency also issued a grand strategy, one that reversed the pessimism and constraints of the Eisenhower/Nixon years with a force buildup and the resumption of an ideological element to defeat rather than contain communism.<sup>44</sup> More specific policy statements on the Soviet Union were issued a year later, with more granularity but little effort at prioritization and no evident logic or theory of success.<sup>45</sup> Arguably, there was an implicit hypothesis to Reagan's thinking and that of his counselors. It was a successful strategy, credited by many with ending the Cold War.<sup>46</sup>

Arguably, we had a narrow and implicit theory of military victory for Afghanistan in 2002 and in Iraq in 2003, but the United States lacked a more comprehensive theory of success. General David Petraeus's question, "Tell me how this ends?" is poignant.<sup>47</sup> A theory of success should have answered that question. Such a theory would tie together the desires of policy to what defined ends and ways are being employed. It appears to have been completely lacking.<sup>48</sup>

The first war against Iraq had a limited theory of victory, freeing Kuwait from Saddam's invasion. However, history suggests that it produced a triumph without victory or success over the long run.<sup>49</sup> The second war against Iraq, after a decade of sanctions and enforcement actions, embraced a larger theory of military victory, yet it too failed to connect to a larger and more politically relevant theory of success.<sup>50</sup> It is difficult to assess when the United States ever framed a coherent theory of strategic success in Afghanistan that would ensure a politically viable and stable country. The emergent strategy of 2002 effectively and efficiently produced a victory

of retribution against the Taliban and drove it from power. General Stanley McChrystal notably used "strategy of success" several times in his commander's assessment in Afghanistan in the summer of 2009.<sup>51</sup> Yet it remains America's longest war today. Was it predicated on a narrow theory of victory, or did conditions change that required a shift in political aim and an altered strategy?

More recently, a number of new U.S. strategic documents have been issued. The current National Security Strategy has an implicit logic, emphasizing reestablishing a competitive economic basis for prosperity first and a modernized and somewhat larger military to preserve security at home and abroad.<sup>52</sup> The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy seeks an endstate that restores a favorable balance of power in Asia and Europe. It has an explicit theory of success, predicated around the integration of three major lines of effort: extensive modernization, a strengthened network of allies and partners, and a reformed bureaucracy that drives greater performance and innovation into the joint force.<sup>53</sup> The defense innovation enterprise must generate more

value rapidly and at lower costs. Each element of the strategy leverages assumed competencies: joint warfighting, alliance leadership, and an innovation ecosystem. Revitalizing these competencies at scale and in time is the central hypothesis behind the Pentagon’s strategy. Both the classified strategy and unclassified summary contain an explicit theory of success.<sup>54</sup> But it does not appear to have universally reached across the larger joint warfighting community.

### Formulating the Theory of Success

How does a policymaker and staff consider constructing a way that solves the central problem or gains the specified desired aim? The question is not “Tell me how this ends?” The central question is “How and why does this work?” Inherent to the strategy is an argument that the solution solves the central aim or problem. This is often derived from a supporting theory. “The role of theory in practicing the art of war,” P.J. Maykish argues, “is particularly critical since war provides little or no opportunity for hypothesis testing before life and death is upon the strategist, statesman, warrior, and civilian.”<sup>55</sup> Yet if strategy is applied theory, the merits of the underlying theory (strategic airpower, paralysis, industrial web, “maximum pressure”) should be understood and testable.

So how does a national strategy team develop a theory of success? Is a theory of success captured in a single concept like containment, or is it an orchestrated series of strategic activities akin to a campaign plan? This is what Rumelt called a “guiding policy.”<sup>56</sup> Our colleagues in the United Kingdom call this the “big idea,” with the Royal Defence College claiming that a “strategy which has no unifying idea is not a strategy. The importance of strategic ideas is often over-looked. The innovative and compelling ‘big idea’ is often the basis of a new strategy. It must not only bind the ends, ways and means but also inspire others to support it.”<sup>57</sup> This guiding policy or strategic concept may evolve iteratively as the strategy team evaluates different ways and attempts to

**Table 1. Causal Mechanisms**

<b>Inform/Influence/Persuade</b>	To disseminate information that shapes perceptions and influences target audiences toward a desired perception.
<b>Negotiate</b>	To bargain with the intent of gaining desired objective(s) while offering to compensate another actor with benefits or compromises.
<b>Induce</b>	To offer incentives, without formal agreement, to influence the actor or an actor in the network of the target actor.
<b>Create</b>	To create an institutional competency or capacity lacking in U.S. institutional capacity or arsenal or one of its allies or partners.
<b>Enable</b>	Security or economic development designed to buttress or augment extant capabilities, to selectively strengthen a desirable component of U.S. or allied state.
<b>Disable</b>	To selectively weaken or make inoperable a critical component of the adversary’s defensive system or governance capacity.
<b>Coerce</b>	To threaten to employ direct force or deny the target actor access to a resources or benefit, by threat or sanction, to make the adversary withdraw or settle.
<b>Subdue/Compel</b>	To apply violent force and means to force an adversary to stop doing something already initiated.
<b>Neutralize/Destroy</b>	To apply violent force in such a way that it severely degrades or eliminates the opponent’s capacity to defend itself.

**Figure. Notional Strategic Action Mechanisms**

- a) Persuade Europeans to extend NATO C2/readiness levels and enable NATO’s forward forces in Baltics and Poland to increase deterrence (DOD, DOS, NSC, OMB).
- b) Coerce Russia economically by threatening energy exports with alternative sources and trade barriers, coupled with persuading EU countries to diversify energy imports (DOS, Treasury, Commerce, NSC).
- c) Enable Ukrainian defenders to enhance their training/lethality via advisors and security cooperation programs (DOD/SOCOM, DCSA, DOS, and NSC).
- d) Negotiate with Russia to address its theater missile defense concerns with NATO (DOS, NSC, DOD).

generate advantage by combinations of assets. The strategic cell strives, in the words of the Royal Defence Academy, “to develop the ‘big ideas’ that could unite ends, ways and means in an innovative and creative manner that confers competitive advantage.”<sup>58</sup>

Of course, big ideas are simply that, a generalization. A strategy should convert or amplify that general guiding idea into objectives and actionable tasks to bring it to life. Table 1 presents a number of what might be termed causal mechanisms and their definitions. These are adapted from the National War College’s national security strategy primer, which gives considerable attention to approaches in the development of ways.<sup>59</sup> These range from nonviolent means to total military defeat. Defeat by maneuver and attrition remains viable and necessary causal mechanisms when reduction of the opponent’s capacity to resist is needed.<sup>60</sup>

These approaches can be combined in an orchestrated way into the overall strategic approach to develop and justify a causal logic.<sup>61</sup> The National War College employs a technique using “objective instrument packages” to help students operationalize their strategies toward defined objectives.<sup>62</sup> This is one method of translating a big idea or combination of activities into specific mechanisms across all instruments of national power into a comprehensive strategy of action.

The figure shows a notional suite of such packages that are directed toward a national strategy against Russian aggression in Europe. In support of a strategic concept that seeks enhanced stability and a deterred Russia, this approach exploits combinations of mechanisms that a strategy team must develop.<sup>63</sup> The astute team accepts the utility of combinations and sequencing in the formulation of strategy. In developing such a suite or combination

**Table 2. Final Assessment Questions**

Stages	Critical Considerations
Diagnosis	Does the strategy rigorously diagnose the environment, including friendly and opposing actors? Does the diagnosis account for critical interests and identify where they are at risk? Does the diagnosis identify the central challenge(s) or problem? Does the strategy process reflect the interactive nature of competition and anticipate adversary reactions?
Formulation	Does the strategy generate a better outcome than the initial power position; does it build upon or create new sources of leverage and influence? Does its central logic generate a competitive advantage at the strategic and/or operational level? Does the selected approach have a causal link to desired policy aims? Does the central “way” degrade or defeat the opponent’s strategy or shift the competition to a different domain? Does the strategy and its logic create a compelling argument for consensus and resourcing? Does it apply resources efficiently and gain priority goals within available resources? Does the strategy prioritize objectives and capability investments?
Implementation	Does the strategy acknowledge risks, and prudently address them? Does it have an implementation plan, with metrics or signposts for assessment? Is there a communications plan? Will the strategy be presented to stakeholders/allies?

of approaches, the strategy cell presents an explicit claim for testing and discourse that these activities, properly orchestrated and sequenced, will produce the desired change in context or Russian behavior desired. Collectively, they constitute an implicit theory of success. But that theory should be explicit and debated. Per Professor Tami Davis Biddle’s conception, *if* these actions are taken, *then* the desired political outcome of a deterred Russia and stabilized Ukraine is theoretically feasible.<sup>64</sup> The strategy team should explore that logic and ensure it is the most feasible course of action and explicitly state it in the strategy.

The multi-instrumental character of national strategies adds complexity to the process and challenges the internal coherence of any strategy. This is the element in the ends/ways/means (plus policy and risks) construct where strategists are most challenged. It may initially come off as formulaic, but it arguably helps ensure some discipline without prescriptively shoehorning the creativity needed by the policy and strategy community.

The figure is entirely illustrative and must be drawn from the diagnosis and strategic assessment conducted earlier in

the strategy’s formulation. That assessment would identify friendly strengths and potentially critical vulnerabilities that could be leveraged. This is why understanding context, founded on a thorough diagnosis, is so critical to strategy. For this reason, the National War College includes a comprehensive understanding of the strategic environment as a fundamental element of the strategic logic process.<sup>65</sup> The primer also appropriately incorporates risk and cost/benefit analysis as part of its overall strategic logic.<sup>66</sup>

### Assessing Strategic Logic

The formulation of a strategy is the first step, and its implementation (including assessment and adaptation) is just as much of the process as the initial diagnosis of the environment. Prior to implementation, a final step is included in most descriptions of the strategy formulation process. The National War College primer includes a set of five evaluative elements, including feasibility, which addresses the ends/ways linkage.<sup>67</sup> This aspect of the strategy process is a final check on its integrative coherence and logic. A more extended assessment process is offered in table 2. A similar

framework was used during the development of the 2018 U.S. Defense Strategy. Questions 5 through 9 deal with the consideration of ways and causality. The list is not a checklist or a recipe, nor is it a crutch for incurious policymakers or lazy strategists. (Anyone expecting shortcuts and magic potions should shift to another line of work.) Equally, a strategy team that has not thought through the answers to these questions has not completed its mission.

Strategy is more art than science, and the practitioner, whether policymaker or military strategist, needs to recognize the need for humility.<sup>68</sup> The rigor of the assessment process cannot dilute that reality, but it can mitigate consequences of flawed assumptions, poor decisions, and biases. More important, this set of questions expands on existing doctrine to focus on the causal links in the logic train about its approach, not just the balance of ends to means.

The confluence of contingency and competitiveness produces the need for an additional component—that of constant evaluation of ongoing operations and continuous measurement of progress. “Like a vessel under sail,” notes retired Army strategist Rick Sinnreich, “grand strategy is at the mercy of uncontrollable and often unpredictable political, economic, and military winds and currents, and executing it effectively requires both alertness to those changes and constant tiller correction.”<sup>69</sup> This is the basis for co-adaptation in form and function as our strategy interacts with the real world and the will of an opponent. We must recognize that in both Great Power competitions and war, the execution of strategy is locked into an iterative relationship, which rests on an inherently dynamic and changing situation and which has to respond to the counters of the enemy.<sup>70</sup> No strategy should be seen as unalterable or a fixed blueprint written in stone; the critical questions and the central logic should be continuously questioned.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion

Hopefully this brief article catalyzes an extended conversation about causality and theories of success/victory. It



may not clear the messy minefield of grand strategy. If it achieves anything at all, the argument should stimulate the community to turn the corner from debating whether strategy is possible toward exploring what it takes to teach and conduct “good” strategy. Given that U.S. strategies will no longer be privileged with materiel and technological dominance, it behooves the strategic community to refresh its thinking about how to develop creative strategies.

Admittedly, the historical record of grand strategy formulation and execution is littered with failure. Most so-called strategies were not strategies at all.<sup>72</sup> They were lofty objectives and wish lists of unrelated effort. The role of creative approaches and causation, the central art of strategy, is rarely explored.<sup>73</sup> Skeptics of strategy offer few insights on how to improve the development of sound strategy to inform future strategic leaders. This article has attempted to explore the complexity of strategy formulation with an emphasis on the need to improve the ways element of a true and complete strategy. A concept of a *theory of success* for national and grand strategy is proposed as the central idea for such a strategy.

We should not be formulaic in crafting strategy, nor should we dispense with rigorous processes that support causal logic. Devoting more attention to *ways* fills in the black hole, enhances the art of sound strategy, and resolves a key puzzle for practitioners. JFQ

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard K. Betts, “The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020), 7–22.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018), 53–73.

<sup>3</sup> For the former, see Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski, *The End of Grand Strategy: U.S. Maritime Operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 1, 161. For a more optimistic perspective, see Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 190–191.

<sup>4</sup> Hew Strachan, “Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019), 188.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew A. Hill and Stephen J. Gerras, “Stuff Happens: Understanding Causation in Policy and Strategy,” *Parameters* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2018), 13.

<sup>6</sup> James Hasik, “Beyond the Third Offset: Matching Plans for Innovation to a Theory of Victory,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 91 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2018), 14–21.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Robinson et al., *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017). For a broad overview of strategic thinking and advice on enhancing U.S. national strategy formulation, see Mark Cancian et al., *Formulating National Security Strategy: Past Experience and Future Choices* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hart Sinnreich, “Patterns of Grand Strategy,” in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 256.

<sup>9</sup> Williamson Murray, “Thoughts on Grand Strategy,” in Murray, Sinnreich, and Lacey, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> MacGregor Knox, “Conclusion,” in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 615–621.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 81–91.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xii.

<sup>13</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 322.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 32.

<sup>15</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategy in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 4; Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice*, 36, 55–56, 341.

<sup>17</sup> Terry L. Diebel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy*, 196, 199.

<sup>19</sup> F.G. Hoffman, “Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations,” *Orbis* 58, no. 4

(Fall 2014), 472–485.

<sup>20</sup> Hill and Gerras, “Stuff Happens,” 14.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Freedman, “Stop Looking for the Center of Gravity,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2014, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2014/06/stop-looking-for-the-center-of-gravity/>>.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Strange and Richard Iron, “Center of Gravity: What Clausewitz Really Meant,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 35 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2004), 20–27.

<sup>23</sup> Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2011), 85, 97–98, 101–102. Rumelt contends, “Finding such crucial pivot points and concentrating force on them is the secret of strategic leverage.”

<sup>24</sup> Rumelt, cited in Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *Regaining Strategic Competence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2009), 15; Lukas Milevski, “Asymmetry Is Strategy, Strategy Is Asymmetry,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 74 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2014), 77–83.

<sup>25</sup> Hoffman, “Grand Strategy,” 469. Emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Tami Davis Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students and Practitioners Need to Know* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Hoffman, “Grand Strategy,” 469.

<sup>28</sup> For a general discussion, see J. Boone Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory,” *Parameters* (Summer 2008), 25–36; P.J. Maykish, “Upstream: How Theory Shapes the Selection of Ways in Strategy” (Ph.D. diss., School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 33, 177, 212.

<sup>30</sup> For an example of this, see Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “After the Responsible Stakeholder, What? Debating America’s China Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 2 (February 2019), 71.

<sup>31</sup> Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” 86.

<sup>32</sup> Hill and Gerras, “Stuff Happens,” 13–25.

<sup>33</sup> Matt L. Cavanaugh, “It’s Time to End the Tyranny of Ends, Ways, and Means,” *Modern War Institute*, July 24, 2017, available at <<https://mwi.usma.edu/time-end-tyranny-ends-ways-means/>>.

<sup>34</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Schools for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, November 2009), 44. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30.

<sup>36</sup> Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *Successful Strategies: Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 439–440. Emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Kenneth T. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War*, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1952); Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 167–171, 357–361.

<sup>38</sup> On George F. Kennan and containment, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> *A Report to the National Security Council [NSC] by the Executive Secretary on Basic National Security Policy*, NSC Memorandum #162/2 (Washington, DC: The White House, October 30, 1953), 5, available at <<https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-162-2.pdf>>.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 248–249.

<sup>41</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 125–159.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick J. Garritty, “A New Look at the New Look,” *Claremont Review of Books*, December 14, 2012, available at <[www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/a-new-look-at-the-new-look/](http://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/a-new-look-at-the-new-look/)>.

<sup>43</sup> Brands, *What Good Is Strategy?* 59–100; Dan Caldwell, “The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (September 2009), 633–652.

<sup>44</sup> National Security Decision Directive (NSSD) 32, *U.S. National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 20, 1982).

<sup>45</sup> NSSD 75, *U.S. Relations with the USSR* (Washington, DC: The White House, January 17, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Mahnken, “The Reagan Administration’s Strategy Toward the Soviet Union,” in Murray and Sinnreich, *Successful Strategies*, 403–431; William Imboden, in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremy Suri (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 155–166; Brands, *What Good Is Strategy?* 102–142.

<sup>47</sup> Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> Craig Whitlock, “Stranded Without a Strategy,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, A1, A12–A15.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Crown, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America’s Great Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 387–415.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew C. Brand, *General McChrystal’s Strategic Assessment: Evaluating the Operating Environment in Afghanistan in the Summer of 2009*, Air Force Research Institute Paper 2011-

1 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2011), available at <[https://media.defense.gov/2017/jun/19/2001765050/-1/-1/0/ap\\_brand\\_mchrystals\\_assessment.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2017/jun/19/2001765050/-1/-1/0/ap_brand_mchrystals_assessment.pdf)>.

<sup>52</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017).

<sup>53</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. The penultimate paragraph states, “A more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners, will sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order.”

<sup>55</sup> Maykish, “Upstream,” 4.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Rumelt, “The Perils of Bad Strategy,” *McKinsey Quarterly* (June 2011), available at <[www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-perils-of-bad-strategy](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-perils-of-bad-strategy)>.

<sup>57</sup> The Royal College of Defence Studies, *Getting Strategy Right (Enough)* (London: Ministry of Defence, 2017), 20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler, eds., *A National Security Strategy Primer* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 37–40, available at <<https://nwc.ndu.edu/Portals/71/Documents/Publications/NWC-NDU-Primer.pdf?ver=2019-07-30-105821-630>>. The list proposed herein adds “Inform” to more distinctly operationalize the informational instrument of national power. This adapted list dropped “Eradicate” but adds “Create.” This was added to support the development of capability or means creation function of national strategies. National strategies may need to create new functions or activities.

<sup>60</sup> On the tendency to seek short wars, see Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: How Wars Are Won or Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> See Joint Doctrine Note 1-18, *Strategy* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, April 25, 2018), III-1–III-3. These are derived from the defeat and stability mechanisms in joint operational art. See Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 16, 2017), IV-31–IV-33.

<sup>62</sup> The concept of an “objective instrument package” is drawn from Diebel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*, 181.

<sup>63</sup> The idea of a team rejects the notion of a singular master strategist, as debunked by Lawrence Freedman, “The Master Strategist Is Still a Myth,” *War on the Rocks*, October 14, 2014, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2014/10/the-master-strategist-is-still-a-myth/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy*.

<sup>65</sup> Heffington, Oler, and Tretler, *A National Security Strategy Primer*, 7–14. See also Hoffman, “Grand Strategy,” 475–476.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–48. Cost/risk analysis as a necessary aspect of a strategist’s tool kit, as noted by Francis J.H. Park, “A Dialogue on Strategy,” *Parameters* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 126–127.

<sup>67</sup> The National War College uses the phrase *viability assessment*. See Heffington, Oler, and Tretler, *A National Security Strategy Primer*, 45–46.

<sup>68</sup> Strachan, “Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice,” 188.

<sup>69</sup> Richard H. Sinnreich, in Murray, Sinnreich, and Lacey, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy*, 256.

<sup>70</sup> Hew Strachan, “Strategy and Contingency,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November 2011), 1281–1296.

<sup>71</sup> Hal Brands, *The Promise and Pitfalls of Grand Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 49; Hoffman, “Grand Strategy,” 481.

<sup>72</sup> Freck Vermeulen, “Many Strategies Fail Because They’re Not Actually Strategies,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 8, 2017, available at <<https://hbr.org/2017/11/many-strategies-fail-because-theyre-not-actually-strategies>>.

<sup>73</sup> Lukas Milevski, *Grand Strategy Is Attrition: The Logic of Integrating Various Forms of Power in Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, April 2019).