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A CONCEPT OF ASSESSMENT OF COMMITMENT TO CONFLICT

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

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U.S. Army War College
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ABSTRACT

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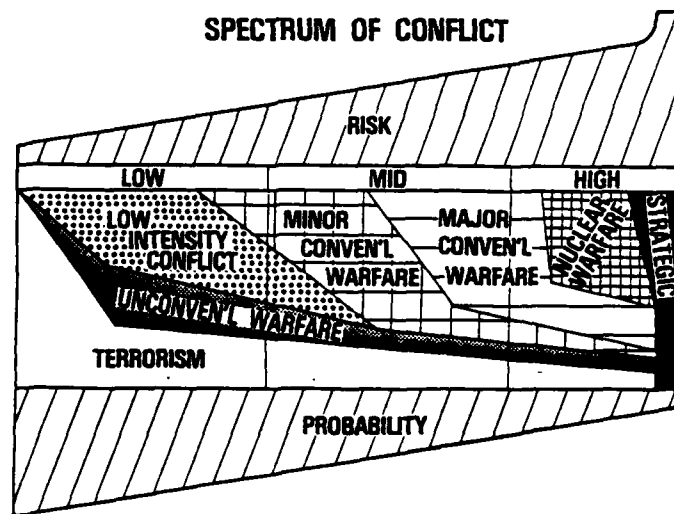


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INTRODUCTION

While much has been written about the nature of war and the essence of conflict, there are few models which portray a simple presentation of the subject. It is very difficult to find a line sketch of the whole elephant. Yet such a model is required so that the totality can be examined and the inter-relationships analyzed.

The best known of the present models is the "Spectrum of Conflict". An early version was put forward by Rear Admiral Henry E. Eccles, USN Retired in his book Logistics and the National Defence (1). The spectrum of conflict is a model used to split the white light of hostility into a spectrum depicting the various levels of intensity of violence. As seen by Eccles, this ranged from absolute peace to unlimited total war. Later refinements have added the risk to the nation and the probability of conflict to the original model, see Figure 1.



Source: US Army War College Course 2 Curriculum

However the spectrum of conflict does not address many of the major questions:

- a. Who are in conflict?
- b. What are they in conflict about?
- c. What power are they prepared to commit to the conflict? and
- d. What and when is the likely outcome?

A four dimensional (4D) model can be developed by answering these questions. The aim of this paper is to develop a concept of commitment to conflict which can be simply presented but which nevertheless addresses the questions asked above.

Much of the information presented in this paper is already well known. Some, such as the utilization of time, has not been well covered. However the value of the paper lies in the synthesis of the components into a single concept.

While presented in a graphical mode, the concept is schematic only and detailed quantification is not intended.

THE POLITY INVOLVED

For convenience, I will restrict this examination of conflict to that organized by a political entity, a polity. A polity is defined in Webster's Dictionary as any body of persons having an organised system of government. The polity will normally be a nation-state but, on a continuum, may range from an insurgency movement within a nation at one end to a superpower at the other.

The problems associated with placing nations on that continuum in their relative order of strength are discussed by Professor Michael Handel in Weak States in the International System. Some factors that form a nation's strength are geography, population, gross national product (GNP), GNP/capita, economic resources, the utilization of energy and the possession of nuclear weapons (2). To these quantitative factors the renowned political scientist Hans Morgenthau would have added national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy and the quality of government (3). The strength of a nation is the product or synergistic total of all these factors.

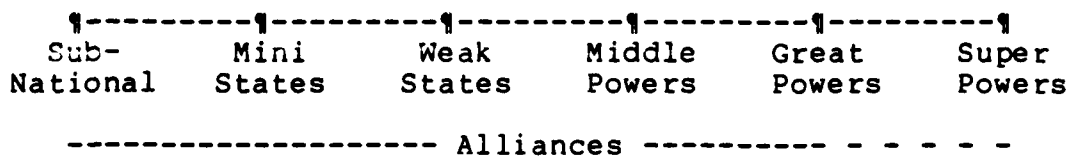
Another method used to gauge the strength of a nation is to look at the ability of that nation to project power. The United States Army War College uses four elements to assess the ability of nation-states to project national power. These are; political, military, economic and socio-psychological (4). This paper will place emphasis on the discussion of military power but this emphasis is not intended to slight the importance of the other elements of power.

National Power cannot be quantified as it is composed of both quantitative and qualitative factors: take as an example military power. When discussing Relative Strength in On War, Clausewitz concludes that power is gained not only by numbers of soldiers but also by other factors such as courage and morale (5). When examining conflict it should be noted that it is not only the standard indicators (such as money, % of GNP allocated

to defense and armed forces/1000 population) which comprise a nations's military power; the force multipliers of quality (such as the quality of leadership, morale and health and the utilization of technology) are essential components of the assessment. The problems associated with assessing relative power are well documented. Three publications are cited for information (6).

Strength of the Polity

For this concept, Handel's five level categorization needs to be extended to cover sub-national polities and international alliances. This is shown in the following diagram (7).



Insurgencies (sub-national polities) have been included because it is too limiting to restrict the discussion to disagreements between nation-states. Looking at the 44 years since the conclusion of World War II, a significant proportion of conflict has been generated by insurgencies trying to take control of nation-states or operating across national borders; for example the Mau Mau, Viet Cong and Contras to name but a few.

While alliances might help to strengthen weaker states, they may work both ways for a super-power. On one hand, an alliance might assist a super-power by producing greater combined strength; but on the other, it might be a limiting factor on the super-power because of a requirement for combined decisions. For example, the United States in alliance with other nations achieves a greater combined strength in Europe through NATO. Yet the need to consult with NATO on some out of area operations restricts the flexibility of the United States in using its military power.

Thus the first question, who are in conflict, can be answered by examining the first continuum, or dimension. The polities involved can be categorized by their relative position on the continuum of strength. The components of that strength can be analyzed by either the factors which give that polity strength or the elements of power which result from it.

INTERESTS INVOLVED

There are numerous theories on the causes of war, or conflict. Two of the better known schools are the economic theories and the balance of power theories (8). Whatever the cause, polities fight either to project, or to protect, their perceived interests. This helps establish the next dimension of the model; what are they in conflict about? Inherent in this

question are such questions as: what are the national interests involved? what are national interests? are they changing or fixed? who defines them?

National Interests

Many associate national interests with the realist school of the 40s and 50s and the works of Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan. Yet Morgenthau traces the concept of national interest forward from Thucydides past George Washington to the present day. Morgenthau quotes Washington as saying that "interest is the governing principle of mankind and no institution not built on that assumption can succeed." (9)

While there are many definitions of "vital interests" there are few of "national interests". One worth considering, but expanded to include sub-national polities, is:

'The national interest is the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to the sovereign states comprising its external environment'. (10)

Don Nuechterlein, in his book America Overcommitted, argues that each nation has national interests which may be graded in accordance with their intensity. This intensity may vary over time. The gradations he uses are:

- Survival, where existence is at stake
- Vital, serious harm to the nation
- Major, potential serious harm
- Peripheral, little if any harm (11).

This analysis is more detailed but similar to the one by Lincoln Bloomfield who wrote that "'vital interests' can only refer to the danger that the United States can be destroyed or mortally hurt." He went on to say that other interests may be "important...desirable...appropriate...just interesting" (12)

Historically the idea was that nations would only fight to protect their vital interests. This philosophy is contained in many arguments, books and doctrines. It can be argued that nations feel the need to defend or fight for secondary interests in order to defend vital interests in advance. The example often quoted is the U.S. involvement in Korea. The counter argument is that it is a problem of articulation of the vital interest concerned; for example in Korea, the security of Korea was not the issue but rather the containment of communism.

Bernard Brodie, in War and Politics, devotes a chapter to discussing what are vital interests (13). Nuechterlein goes on to argue that it is unlikely that military force would be used to protect major or peripheral interests (14). I do not agree. While I recognize that military force may not be the instrument of choice in the protection of lesser interests, it is used frequently as an instrument of power. Examples are the United States action in Grenada and the Indian use of force in the Maldives. Neither could be said to be more than a peripheral national interest. It has also been argued that the larger the polity the more likely it is that vital interests will be defined broadly to include less direct threats to the nation (15). Conversely at the lower sub-national level, it can be argued that an insurgency will direct all its efforts at survival.

Stability of Interests

Are national interests enduring or subject to change? Referring back to the definition it can be seen that, although relatively enduring, interests will change as the perceived needs and desires of the polity change. The number of national interests will also change as increased interaction between polities generates new issues. The intensity of an interest can also change as the threats to the nation change.

For super-powers the threat to the nation is unlikely to change rapidly, therefore the survival and vital interests are likely to remain reasonably constant. Less intense interests may change more rapidly as the polity takes an interest or loses interest in a particular issue. As an unsupported assertion, while liberal democracies appear more fickle and seem to gain or lose interest in an issue more quickly than central authoritarian governments, it is the latter which can change their policy interests overnight while the former are somewhat constrained by public opinion.

For smaller nations, the rate of change may be faster. A minor adjustment in policy by a super-power, such as a change in the subsidy to agricultural products, may spark a significant threat to the viability of a small nation's economy. This is encapsulated in the traditional Burmese saying that "When China spits, Burma swims."

Who Defines National Interests

Theodore A. Coulombis and James H. Wolfe describe two schools of thought on who defines national interests. The first school follows Plato and believes that the national interests should be determined rationally and objectively by a philosopher-king and a few highly learned advisors. The other school follows the line of Aristotle, who considered that the public good (or interest) could best be arrived at through the democratic process (16).

In this paper there is no need to focus on the decision making process which produces the national interests within the polity (17). What is important is the outcome of that process and the articulation of national interests by the polity.

The second dimension of the model can be established by examining the national interests over which the polities are in conflict. The examination should consider what the interests are, the intensity of those interests and articulated them. It should also examine whether or not the interests changed over time.

MILITARY POWER COMMITTED

In the first dimension of the model the amount of military power a polity could project was considered as an element of national strength. The third dimension in the model considers how much military power the polity is prepared to commit to the

conflict to resolve the issue in doubt. This problem was highlighted during the Korean war when the United States had to determine how much military power it was going to commit to Korea and how much it was going to deploy against other possible conflicts.

It can be assumed that the maximum power will be generated and used in the survival interest of the polity. Simplistically, this is the maximum burden of defence expenditure that an economy will bear. During the Second World War the United States spent 40% of GNP on defence without collapse (18). Perhaps the nations to come closest to the survival level of expenditure were the USSR during the Second World War and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Figures are not available for these cases. If another conflict is expected at the same time, survival power may have to be split between the two issues. For example, the U.S. had to split its power between the conflict with Germany and the conflict with Japan in the Second World War.

Nuechterlein considers that the principal difference between survival and vital interests is one of time (19). This suggests that the power generated for the protection of vital interests is a step on the way to full commitment. Mobilization could be considered such a step.

Conversely, it is unlikely that a nation would expand its military force for the protection of major or peripheral interests. If it does expand its forces in these cases the following questions should be asked: has the interest been

clearly defined and is the interest worth the effort? If a polity does use military force as a policy instrument in the pursuit of major or peripheral interests, it is likely that it would use the force-in-being or some part of it. Current spending on the force-in-being can be used as a yardstick for a nation's commitment to its major interests. For peripheral interests it is probable that a nation would only use its "operationally ready" forces.

This line of argument has links with the concept of graduated or measured response. Thus the amount of power a nation might generate or commit in protection of its interests can be shown on a continuum with mark points shown in descending order (see below):

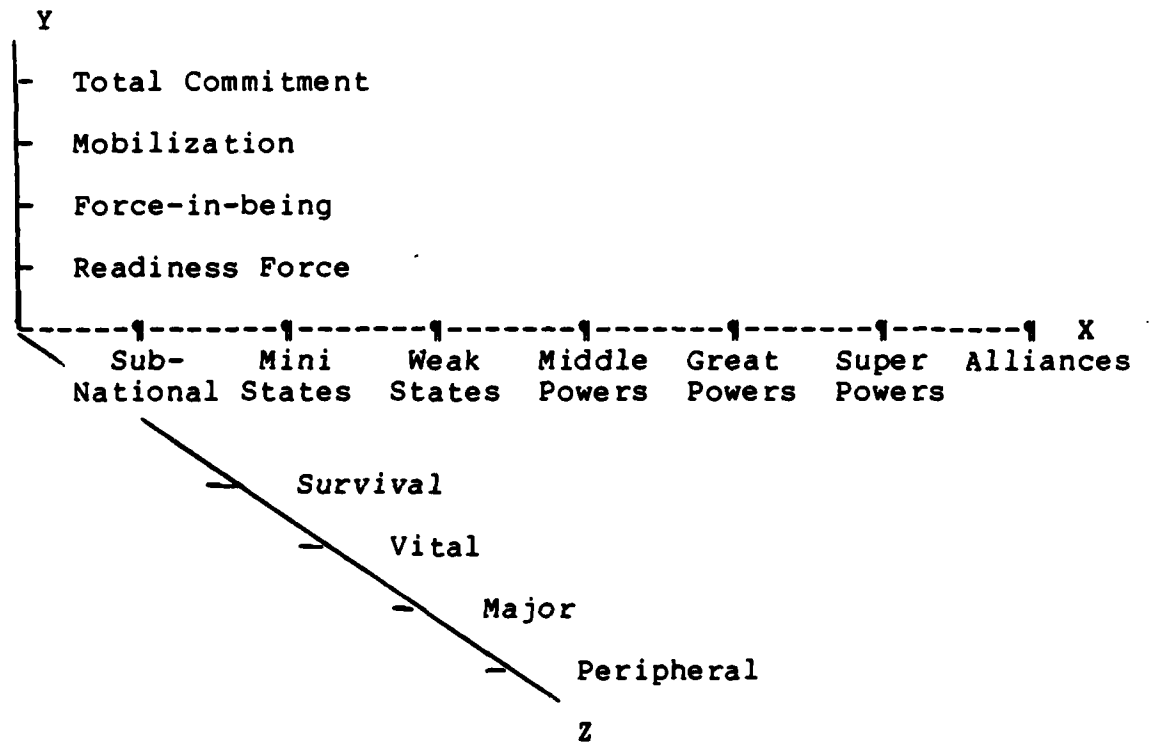
- Total Commitment
- Mobilization
- Force-in-being
- Readiness Force

CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

A concept of conflict can now be constructed by using the three dimensions or continuums discussed above (see Figure 2). The matrix is established by plotting the strength of the polity on the x axis. The intensity of values for which a polity will fight are placed on the z axis and the amount of power committed to meet this combination is shown on the y axis.

Figure 2

CONCEPT OF COMMITMENT TO CONFLICT



The matrix can be filled in with a symbolic representation to illustrate the concept (see Figure 3). This illustration is a symbolic representation of the inter-relationships to help provide understanding of the various factors involved. No sense of detailed quantification is intended. However judgements applied to the magnitude of the several dimensions can be a useful tool in assessing strategic balance and in aiding the decision-maker in the formulation of defence policy.

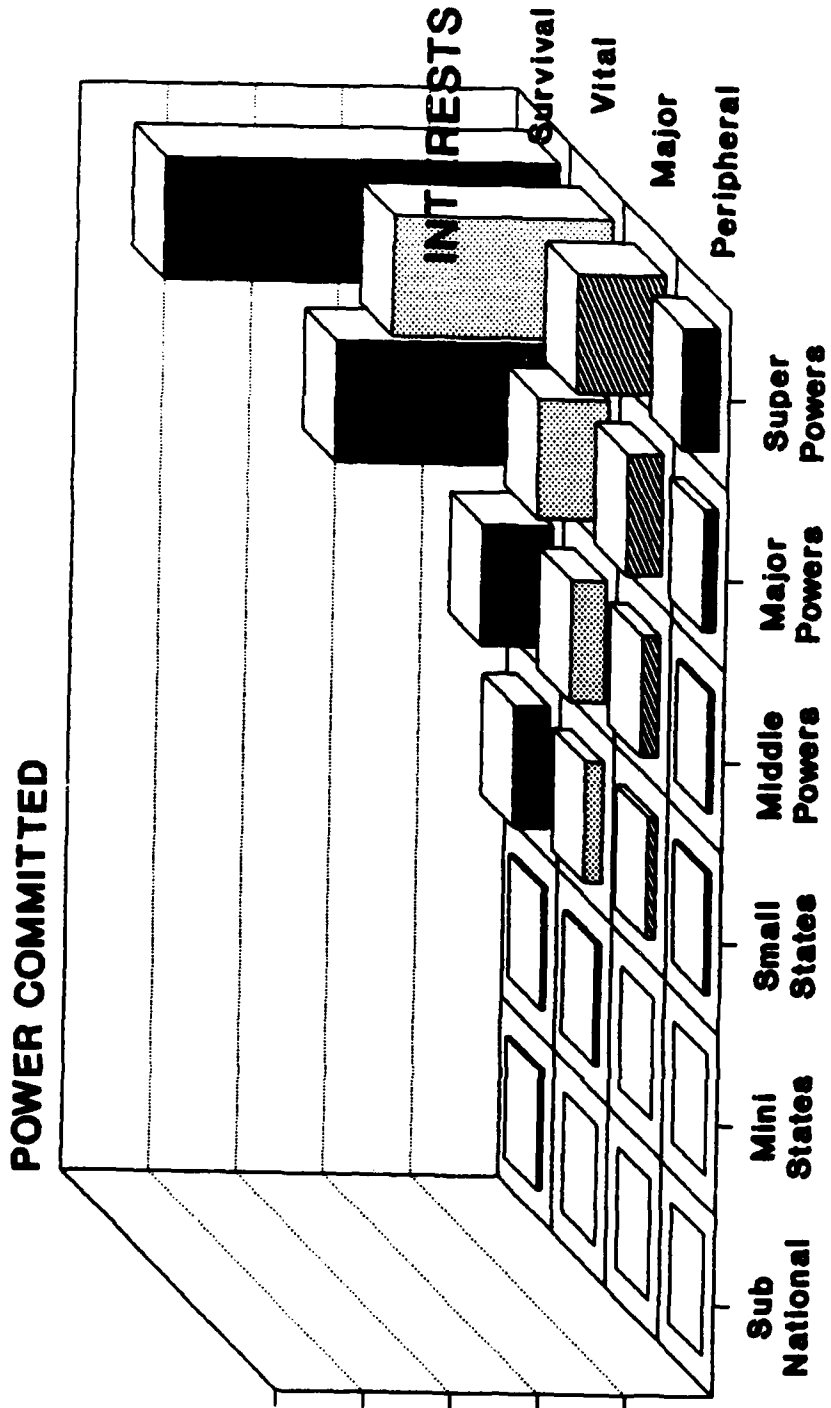
TIME

The concept has been drawn showing a specific set of data at a particular instant in time. The idea of variation or accumulation of power over time is an essential factor in the concept of conflict. An examination of time, that is the duration of time, provides the fourth dimension to the concept.

Trend Lines

Using historical data, the figure could be drawn for different years in the past. Similarly using forecasting techniques, it would be possible to project the shape of the figure at different times in the future for a variety of different circumstances. These reconstructions and projections could be joined to give trend lines. An example is shown in Figure 4. In this figure, it is assumed that the projection of the future power commitment to the issue for Nation B will be a continuation of current trends. This assumption is unlikely to

CONCEPT OF CONFLICT



STRENGTH OF POLITY

Figure 3

TREND LINES

POWER COMMITTED TO AN ISSUE

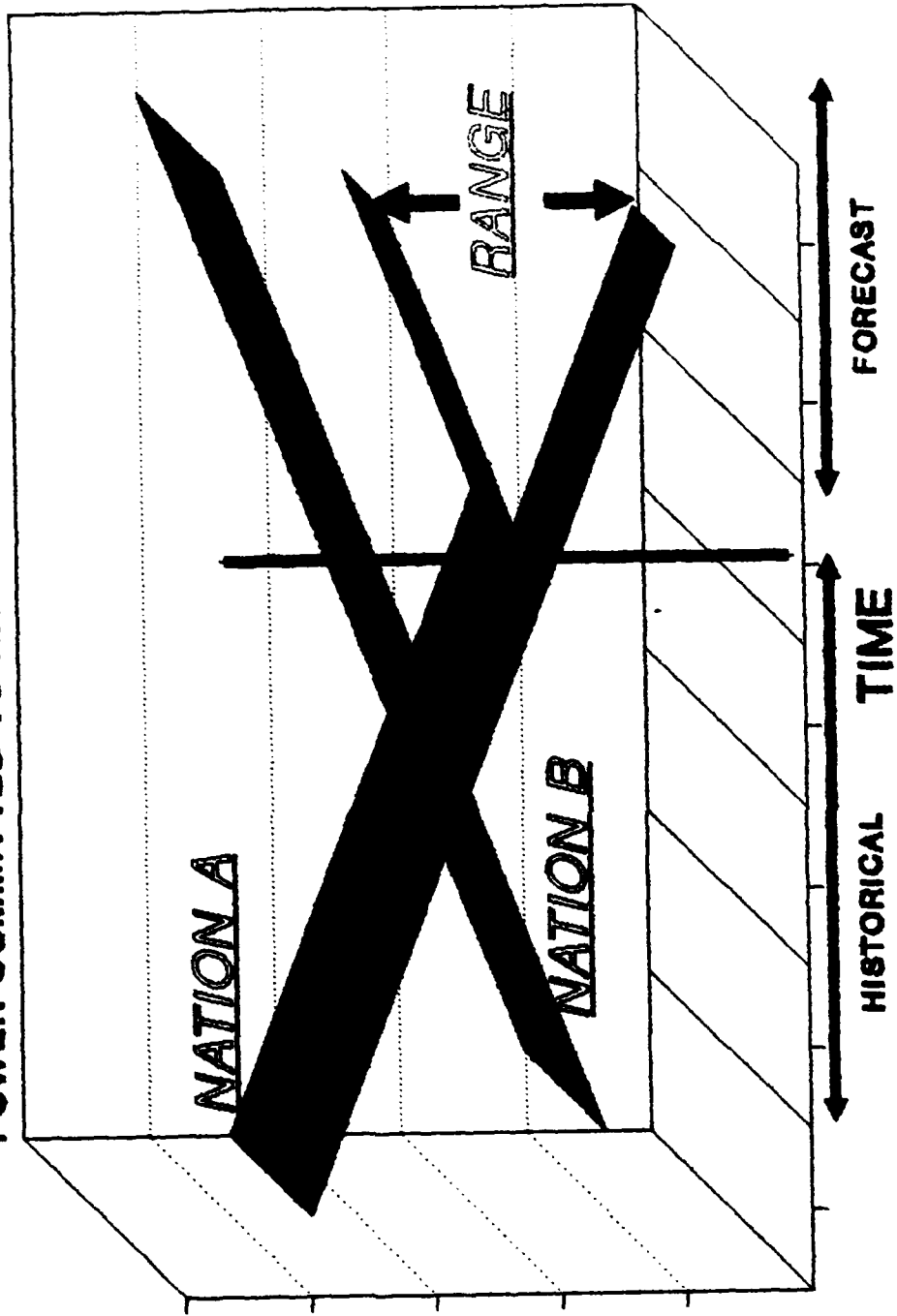


Figure 4

hold. What is more likely is a range of possible options for the future depending on the assumptions made. This is projected for Nation A. The lower limit of the range is seen to be a continuation of current policies (as could occur under an on-going administration) while the upper limit of the range is produced by a sharp reversal of policy (perhaps as the result of the election of a new administration).

Prolonged War

The idea of the application of power over time has been poorly covered in the literature on conflict. Clausewitz seems to reject the concept of the application of force over time when he writes:

'It cannot be the intent of the strategist to make an ally of time for its own sake, by committing forces gradually, step by step....all forces intended and available for a strategic purpose should be applied simultaneously; their employment will be the more effective the more everything can be concentrated [in] a single action at a single moment.' (20)

The best article on the subject is "Space and Time in On War" by Harold W. Nelson which has a section on 'Considerations of Time as a Factor in War'. Nelson considers that the essence of Clausewitz's general view of time to be that the defender must delay the decisive moment as time favors him (21). Sun Tsu could also see no advantage in prolonged wars. "If equally matched, we can offer battle; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him." However he also advises that "cleverness has never been associated with long delays. There is no instance of a country having been benefited from prolonged warfare." (22)

Both Sun Tsu and Clausewitz saw that time favors the weaker side. Yet neither advised the strategist to plan for the prolonged war. Therefore the weaker polity must strike a delicate balance. It must commit sufficient military force to avoid defeat while at the same time building and shepherding its strength to outlast the opponent. This is shown graphically in Figure 5 with an example discussed below.

It can be seen that there are two approaches. Nation A has adopted "the first with the most approach". If it is to achieve victory, it must apply sufficient military force quickly to achieve a winning differential in combat power (1 in Figure 5). If Nation B is to avoid defeat, it must apply sufficient force to maintain that differential below a war winning level. For whatever reasons, if Nation B is able to avoid defeat and apply military power for a longer period of time (2 in Figure 5) it may emerge the victor. It is not necessary that the total amount of military power committed by Nation B exceed that committed by Nation A.

An example of this situation was the USSR in Afghanistan. The superpower tried to achieve a quick victory by the application of substantial military power. The Mujihadeen in Afghanistan (a sub-national polity) could not match this military power, but they could apply sufficient to avoid defeat. For various reasons the USSR was unwilling to maintain its level of commitment to the conflict. While the superpower commitment declined the Mujihadeen were able to sustain their commitment over time and, in the long run, claim victory.

TWO APPROACHES TO TIME

POWER COMMITTED TO A CONFLICT

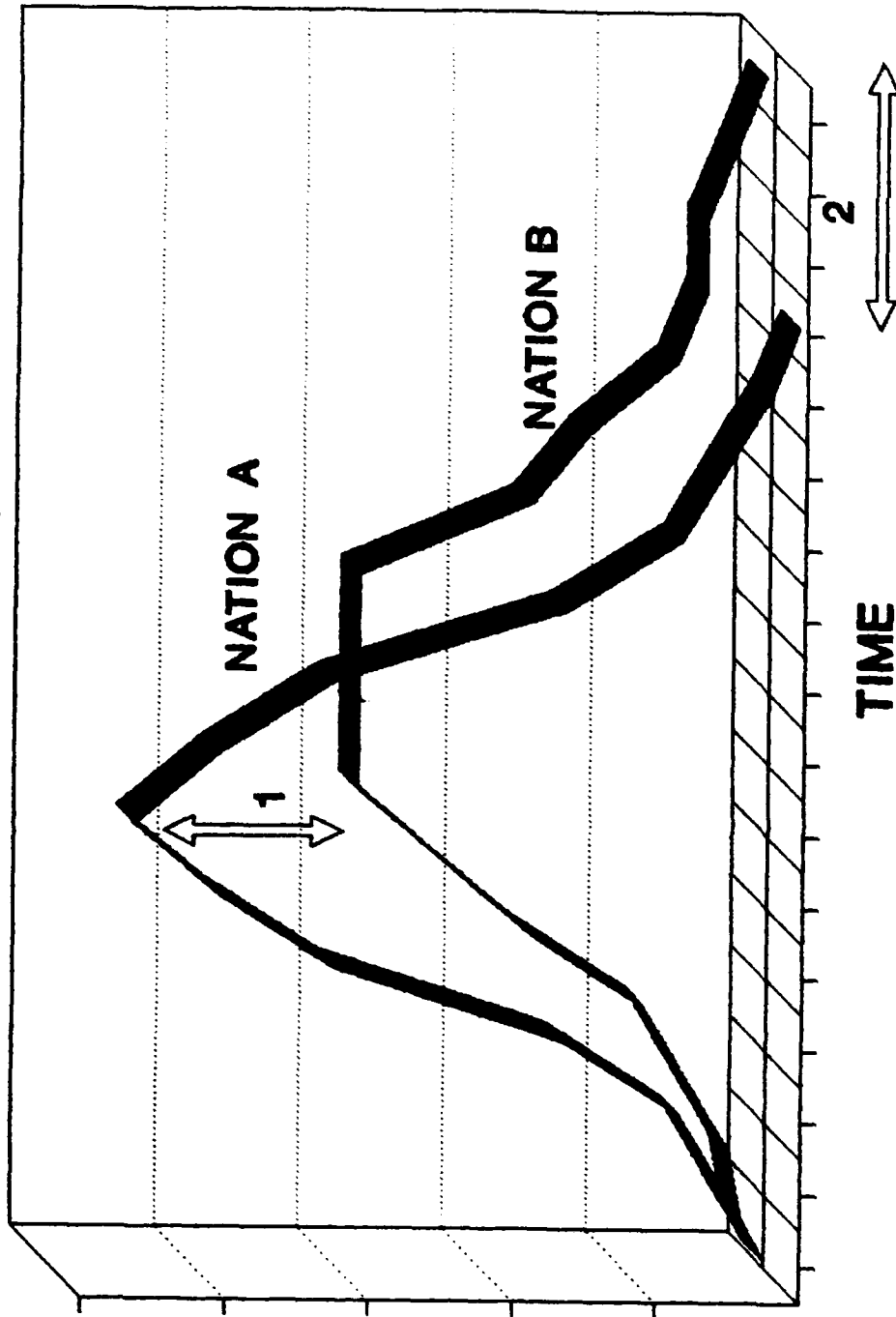


FIGURE 6

APPLICATION

For two main reasons, it is not intended that this concept be applied in a mechanical or numerical way. Firstly, the problems associated with the quantification of ideas such as the strength of a nation and military power virtually preclude such an approach. Secondly, considerations other than the purely logical intrude on the decision maker. A vast range of subjective and sub-conscious factors are involved in any analysis of conflict and these factors may lead nations to commit themselves to wars they cannot win. Rather, the application of the concept is in the provision of a tool that enables decision makers to think about the dimensions of the problem and the inter-connections involved.

As drawn, the concept portrays a world view. It is anticipated that different users would restrict the concept to their particular interests. For example, Australia would restrict the polities listed to those in the SW Pacific, SE Asia and those portions of the superpower's forces that might be deployed into the region. CINCPAC would have a model that covered his particular theater. At the regional level, or for a particular conflict, the examination might be restricted to the two polities in conflict.

The concept of conflict described above provides an overview of the differential in power between any two (or more) polities who are, or could be, in conflict over a particular interest or set of interests. Strategic planners could use this knowledge in a variety of ways. At the international level, a smaller nation prepared to protect a vital interest might have a significant differential of power against a larger nation who has only a peripheral interest in the issue. Planners in the smaller nation would be encouraged to continue and might work towards keeping the issue at a peripheral level in the larger nation. On the other hand, planners in the larger nation need to decide whether or not the escalation in power needed to resolve the issue in their favor is worth the national interest at stake.

This analysis could lead planners to avoid conflict over a certain interest. If the other nation's relative power on the 4-D scale is such that the differential of power is in their favor, a decision could be made not to engage that nation on this particular issue.

At the national and unified command level, the allocation of forces to theaters of war and theaters of operation is a key task in the strategic planning process. The concept could be used to assess the forces required in particular areas when conflict is likely or begins over a particular issue.

CONCLUSION

The spectrum of conflict is useful in conveying the varying intensities of conflict but it does not address many of the key questions. A concept of commitment to conflict is required which presents, in a simple way, the many dimensions involved.

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