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Strategy, Operational Art, Tactics, Concepts, and Doctrine
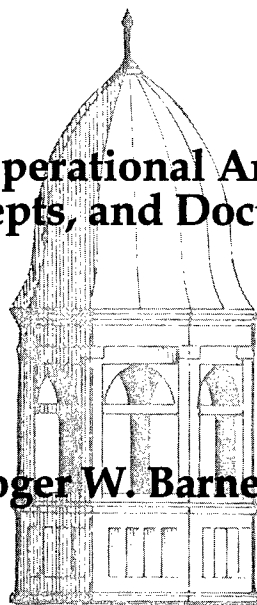
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In the 1960's Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson complained that "We have no foreign policy—and it's being mismanaged." Today, voices are often raised to apply his sentiments to a *national strategy*, but that contention is not new either. Why are such criticisms levied almost incessantly? Is it because the United States seems not to have a clear picture of how it wants to approach the messy world around it? Is it partisan politics pure and simple? Or is it just the nature of the strategy beast to be unsatisfied and unsatisfying?

While perhaps some of those reasons ring true, none really comes to grips with the central issues. In fact, the criticisms persist even though strategists labor diligently to craft ways to accomplish national security objectives. Strategists take objectives provided to them by policymakers, and they integrate time, place, and force in order to deal with potential security problems. Strategists provide options for accomplishing those objectives, and when an option or course of action is chosen, it becomes the preferred strategy.

The objectives to be sought by the strategists are givens. To the extent that the objectives provided are clear and straightforward, the strategy derived to attain those objectives can be every bit as clear and straightforward. To the extent that the objectives are muddled or are inconsistent with the accomplishment of other objectives, strategy will necessarily be less coherent. The strategist's efforts focus on suggesting ways that are economical in the use of force, but effective in fulfilling the objectives of policy. Give strategists a specific adversary, a place to apply their artistry, some forces, and timelines to work against, and they will fashion ways to solve security problems. In the absence of those discrete inputs, however, they are left only to conceptualize; and therein lies the rub. Without an identified enemy, a geographic locale that can be visualized, or

a time-phased plan, strategy seems too abstract, too indefinite, too unsettled.

Relationships Between Concepts and Doctrine, Plans and Practice

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between concepts and doctrine on the one hand, and plans and execution on the other—at the three generally recognized levels of warfare. The left side of Figure 1—the realm of the "dreamers"—differs from the right side—the province of the "doers." The dreamers reside in organizations that formulate doctrine, in the joint and service staffs, and in the war colleges; while the doers occupy the operational commands, from the nine Combatant Commanders in Chief (CINCs)[1] down to the individual units within their commands. Dreamers do not deal with specific adversaries in particular geographic settings at discrete times. Those explicit factors are what distinguish concepts and doctrine from plans and execution—or theory from practice. Clearly, this offers some explanation of why critics claim that the United States has no strategy. To the extent that specific scenarios are unavailable, not useful, or even impolitic, strategists are forced to apply themselves to concepts and doctrine. Thus is the current emphasis on the left side of Figure 1 explained.

At the strategic level one must think of matters having to do with *war*; at the operational level, with *campaigns* and *major operations*; at the tactical level, with *battles*. "Grand strategy," a fourth level above "strategy," refers to attaining security objectives by means of all available instruments—not military forces exclusively. It would include, for example,

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[1] U.S. Combatant Commands comprise the European, Pacific, Atlantic, Southern, Central, Space, Special Operations, Transportation, and Strategic Commands.

economic warfare, diplomacy, and non-military portions of information warfare. This analysis focuses exclusively on military elements of the use of force, and therefore excludes the "grand strategy" level. One hastens to add, however, that the connections between grand strategy and military strategy— either theoretical or practical—are often not close or evident, a fact that provides further ammunition to critics.
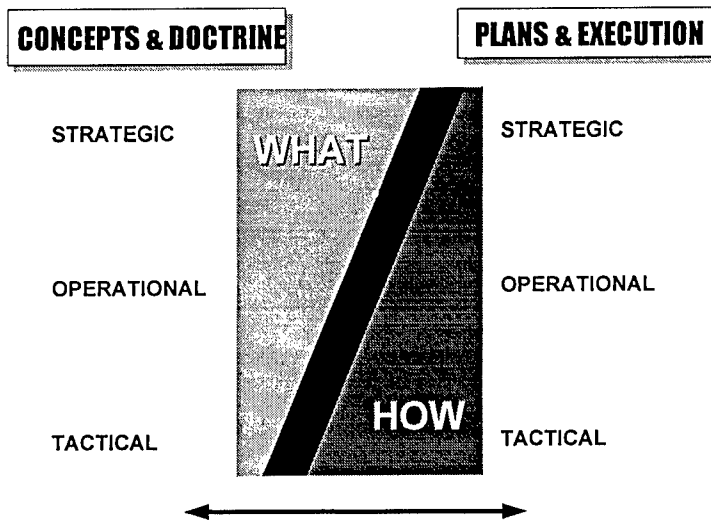

Figure 1.

As one proceeds down the hierarchy of warfare, from the strategic to the tactical level, the proportion of the "how" increases, while the proportion of the "what" declines. This makes sense, for strategy and operational art constitute funda- mental inputs to tactics. Operations and tactics divorced from strategy might accomplish the wrong things—winning battles or campaigns, perhaps, but not contributing to a favorable con- clusion of a war. Unattached from strategy, they might also

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attempt to attain objectives that are not strategically possible. Errors made at the lower levels tend not to be as weighty as those made at or near the top, however. Getting "how" wrong generally matters less than getting "what" wrong.

Well-formulated concepts and doctrine, on the other hand, can tip the scales in war. Before the outbreak of World War II, for example, the German General Staff spent much time and effort conceptualizing about the next war. They prepared and organized forces to fight a kind of war that had never been fought before. The operational and tactical execution of the German way of war in 1940-41 was so effective that the German Army defeated the world's most well-equipped and—to all appearances—best trained army, that of the French Republic. The German *blitzkrieg* triumphed with ease. This provides an example of the victory of better concepts and doctrine over what were widely considered to be superior forces. By extension, German tactical excellence and brilliance in operational art could not overcome their deficiencies in strategy. A similar case for the power of concepts can be made for the interwar development of amphibious warfare by the U.S. Marine Corps.

Churchill once wrote that "A modern navy is a totally untried weapon of warfare. It is the resultant of a host of more or less conflicting theories of attack and defence."[2] Typically, weapons, systems, and plans developed in peacetime must be annealed in the heat of war. Many modern weapons, even major systems, have no operational history from which to draw experience. U.S. strategists, for example, assert that the best antisubmarine weapon is a nuclear-powered attack submarine. Unarguably, the United States is the foremost operator of such submarines in the world today. No areas of warfare in the U.S.

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[2] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol VI (London: Cassell, 1954), 554.

Navy can claim higher level core competency and excellence. Yet, actual experience in submarine-on-submarine action in combat situations is exactly zero. The United States has no real-world combat experience in this type of undersea warfare; indeed, all of history has recorded cases of battles between submarines that can be counted on one hand, none of which involved nuclear-powered ships.

Other examples are not difficult to conjure up, for they involve many current weapon systems. So, while history counsels that concepts and doctrine can make key strategic, operational, and tactical contributions—even decisive ones—it warns us also that catastrophic failures might also flow from concepts that break down under the pressure of actual operations. Surprises and failures happen! Recognition of these pivotal issues means only that one must tend carefully to the dynamic interactions between concepts and doctrine and plans and execution. The interplay between them must be continuous and very rich in content, and should failure, occur it should—by design—be graceful rather than precipitate.

The common threads that underlie theory and the practice—symbolized by the two-headed arrow at the bottom of Figure 1—are such central factors as force structure, organization, international law, and strategic culture. Each of these shapes and constrains strategic possibilities. The fact that these important variables are shared between the dreamers and the doers reveals the further necessity for the two never to be far removed from one another.

Strategies for the Use of Naval Forces

Military strategies, then, describe the "ways" to fight wars. More than one strategy is almost always available; and strategy formulation, therefore, is a process of selecting among

alternatives. The alternatives involve blending together the *dimensions* of strategy: space (or geography), intensity, and time. Who has not heard the phrase, "We'll act at the time and place and with the forces of our own choosing"? That is a quintessentially strategic notion, because it involves the dimensions of strategy and also the idea that strategy identifies choice. It is the *way* one elects to act.

Within an overall national military strategy, strategies for the use of naval forces are available for the choosing. One can analyze the naval component of a national military strategy by examining the contribution naval forces can make and how they might be called upon to participate. Alternative naval strategies, however, are not infinite in number. In fact, their numbers are not even large.

Ways to use naval forces to support an overarching military strategy fall into two clusters: offensive strategies and defensive strategies. Historically, three offensive and three defensive strategies have been employed by states. States have been known to opt for complex strategies by selecting more than one at a time, and sometimes both an offensive and a defensive strategy, in their prosecution of a war.

On the offensive side are battle, blockade, and power projection. The defensive list is: *guerre de course* (commerce raiding), coastal defense, and fleet-in-being. So far, at least, states involved in war have selected one or a combination of these strategies. Generally speaking, states that had large, powerful navies adopted offensive strategies, and states with small or inferior navies opted for (or were forced to embrace) defensive strategies or variations of them. When the United States had a weak Navy, it was a proponent of commerce raiding and coastal defense. When the Navy has been strong, more vigorous strategic options have been selected. Through-

out history there have been very few states with sufficient maritime power to opt for offensive naval strategies. The majority of states, then and now, look upon sea power as a defensive burden rather than an offensive lever.

To reiterate, strategy involves ways to use forces to accomplish objectives. Given current or projected forces, adversaries, organizational structure, strategic culture, and objectives, strategists combine three dimensions—space, force, and time—to produce strategic options:. Historically, how the United States has combined these dimensions to produce strategies for the use of naval forces is recounted in Figure 2.[3]

A brief moment of reflection will reveal that when the strategy called for protecting the United States from foreign invasion, selections within the three dimensions were far different than they are today. Indeed, with but a few exceptions—air defenses, for example—the United States has not acquired conventional military forces for the direct defense of its territory since World War II. The use of space, intensity, and time today by U.S. armed forces is not for direct homeland defense, but for the defense of U.S. interests and allies abroad. This stark fact affects how the United States conducts foreign policy, how it prepares for war, what forces it procures, and what risks it is willing to assume—to cite just a few of its key ramifications.

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[3] This matrix is intended to highlight U.S. naval strategies in an illustrative way only. Four points in time were selected from a much larger set. Unquestionably, more than can be accomodated in a matrix cell underlies the strategies under discussion. Condensation of both time and substance distorts the issues, but the point of the matrix is to portray a variety of strategies that changed markedly over time. Accordingly, Figure 2 is not intended to offer a comprehensive or authoritative review of strategies for the use of U.S. naval forces.

	SPACE	FORCE	TIME
Pre-Mahan	Coastal defense of CONUS; protection of trade and U.S. citizens; raids and small amphibious ops in overseas littorals.	Defend against invasion; commerce raiding; insertions ashore.	Defend as long as necessary. Respond to adversary acts from forward positions.
Mahan	Wherever enemy battleforce and shipping located.	Destroy enemy battlefleet.	Bring enemy fleet to battle as early as possible.
Cold War	Eurasian littoral; Meditterranean Sea; support land battle in Europe; threaten deep strategic targets in northwest Pacific; protect reinforcement and resupply routes.	Counterattack USSR deep in-land and on flanks; destroy strategic submarines; convoy shipping; block-ade or destroy Soviet Navy; operate with other services & allies.	Threaten prolonged conventional war; threaten escalation/short nuclear war.
From the Sea; Forward From the Sea; 2020 VIsion	Global littorals; forward positioned; threaten deep strategic targets.	Complement allies and other services; strike and seize land targets; dominate battlespace.	Maneuver inside adversary time lines.
Beyond . . .	. . .	. . .	. . .

Figure 2. Strategy: The Use of U.S. Naval Forces

Note that from coastal defense in pre-Mahanian times to the threatening of deep strategic targets, from defending against invasion to striking and seizing targets ashore, and from the defensive non-use of time to the aggressive maneuvering inside the adversary's time lines, the differences in naval strategy options are light years apart. The U.S. Navy has done neither its thinking nor its planning in the shadow of Mahan—not even at the Naval War College—for decades. From Figure 2 one can see how far the United States has diverged today from the

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intentions of Mahan for the use of naval forces within national strategy.

But where, one might ask, does one find deterrence in this picture? Or sea control? Aren't these vital parts of U.S. strategy? The answer is that both are central to U.S. strategy, but they cannot be found in this scheme because they are among the important *objectives* of strategy. Strategy describes the way to accomplish such objectives as deterrence and sea control. One accomplishes deterrence by demonstrating and communicating an ability to carry out the strategy. Sea control is either an objective or a by-product of the ability to execute the strategic concepts successfully.

The naval strategic concepts articulated over the past four years—from the appearance of *...From the Sea* in 1992 to the forthcoming *2020 Vision*—indicate what naval forces must be prepared to do along the three dimensions of space, force, and time. The ink is still wet in those cells of the diagram, and one can only speculate what lies in the *Beyond* line. It seems assured, however, that history will not end with a set of ellipsis marks. Yet, some powerful future thinking will be required to fill in those cells in the matrix. Already interest has grown with respect to a revolution in military affairs, which might combine new technologies with futuristic organizations and concepts. Information warfare is a new, burgeoning field with which policymakers are just coming to grips, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction carries the promise of making warfare even more costly and deadly. It seems axiomatic, moreover, that the compression of time will require completing the *Beyond* line much sooner rather than later.

Summary and Conclusion

At times when no specific threats appear credible, and no scenarios cry out for attention, it might well appear that "we have no strategy." That is when the dreamers must work diligently to articulate, in a self-consciously abstract manner, what military forces might be called upon to do to achieve national strategic objectives. Insofar as adversaries can be identified, and times and places established to confront them, however, the dreamers give way to the doers, who craft and execute the plans to deal with them. Doctrine must continue to evolve based on inputs from the "doers" to rectify the outputs of the "dreamers." The so-called "two Major Regional Contingency" strategy places weighty demands on all the doers, not just the two commanders of the regions in which those contingencies are located.

All the variables in the strategy calculus interact continually. It is very difficult to separate out any one of them, because all are interdependent. To understand the strategy for the use of naval forces, one must appreciate the concurrent use of space, force, and time and how they are deeply intertwined. The threads that tie them together are also variable in color, strength, length, and composition. Those threads are one's own fighting capabilities, the capabilities of adversaries and friends, organization, command and control, logistics, information, technology, and strategic culture. The last-named characteristic —strategic culture—is the one that molds and constrains the others.

Over time, U.S. strategists have blended space, force, and time in a variety of ways to satisfy national security needs. From a range of possibilities, the United States today has chosen a strategic concept requiring its naval forces to be

positioned forward in the littoral areas of the globe. From those locations they will threaten deep strategic targets, and deploy to complement actions taken by U.S. allies and U.S. sister services. Operating inside the adversary's ability to make decisions and act on them, U.S. maritime forces will seek to dominate the battlespace and strike and seize land targets. To discuss in greater detail how they will pursue such a strategic concept moves the focus one notch down the how/what continuum to the operational level. There one finds other dreamers busily constructing operational concepts for the attainment of strategic and operational objectives. One such concept, *Regional Engagement With Naval Forces*, is presented in companion paper to this one.