Chapter 1

What is military strategy?

Military strategy is the practice of reducing an adversary's physical capacity and willingness to fight, and continuing to do so until one's aim is achieved. It takes place in wartime as well as peacetime, and may involve using force, directly or indirectly, as a threat. Reducing an opponent's capacity and willingness to fight is always a relative matter; one can achieve it by building a quantitative or qualitative superiority in military power well before hostilities might commence.

Although historically people have defined military strategy, or strategy, in various ways, the principal task of the strategist has remained virtually the same. Simply put, that task consists in countering the strengths and exploiting the weaknesses of an opponent in ways that make accomplishing one's purpose ever more likely. In practice, strategy comes down to out-positioning one's rivals, not just militarily, but also diplomatically and, if possible, economically and culturally, even before the first clash of arms and often well after hostilities have ceased. This is true whether the struggle is global or local in scope and whether it involves the highest or least of stakes.

Regardless of scope, scale, or aim, military strategy begins with appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of an adversary as they relate to one's own, and to what one wants. It often requires
revising one's aims and improvising one's courses of action as the struggle progresses. It ends when one party, or the other, has had enough, or literally can do no more.

**Classifying military strategy**

History's military strategists have described their practice in diverse but informative ways. The ancient Chinese military thinker Sun Tzu discussed strategy in terms of gaining material and moral advantages such that a battle is won before it is fought. Others, such as Antoine-Henri de Jomini, a Swiss military theorist and erstwhile member of Napoleon's staff, referred to it as "making war on the map," that is, maneuvering for positional advantages. The nineteenth-century Prussian military writer Carl von Clausewitz drew a sharp distinction between tactics and strategy: he defined the former as the use of armed forces to win engagements; the latter is the "use of engagements to achieve the purpose of the war." Other German military leaders, such as Count Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of the general staff of the Prussian army in the nineteenth century, portrayed strategy as opportunely adapting to war's changing circumstances until victory is achieved. By comparison, the twentieth-century British military critic Sir Basil Liddell Hart defined strategy as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy." On the other hand, the eminent British scholar Lawrence Freedman suggests strategy may well be the art of generating power.

Some modern historians refer to strategy as a long-term vision and stress its attendant need for planning and decision making. Contemporary strategic theorists such as Colin Gray represent it metaphorically, as a bridge linking political aims and military means, while historian Hew Strachan prefers to underscore the importance of strategic dialogue in reconciling what is desired with what can be done. Still others characterize strategy as the intellectual architecture that gives structure and coherence to one's efforts in wartime or peacetime.

Definitions of strategy are indeed many, and experts sometimes muddle the difference between military strategy and strategy in general. Yet, these various definitions are not necessarily unhelpful or contradictory. Each, in fact, refracts strategy through a specific historical and political lens or context, but each also captures recurring themes and activities inseparable from the practice of strategy. Not surprisingly, that practice has evolved with the conduct of war. Jomini's definition of strategy, for instance, deviated little from what the Renaissance political and military writer Niccolò Machiavelli referred to centuries earlier as the art of war. Indeed, the terms strategy and art of conduct of war have been nearly synonymous at times. Nonetheless, from Hannibal's war against Rome to Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine, the practice of military strategy has always come down to finding ways to weaken an adversary's material capacity and willingness to fight with respect to one's aims.

To throw sharper relief on the characteristics of military strategy, we can compare it to what some experts call grand strategy. Military strategy refers to the "business," or concern, of the general, a phrase long associated with the eighth-century Greek word strategia, which, in turn, captures the spirit of two older Greek terms: strategike episteme (generals' knowledge) and strategon sophia (generals' wisdom). Strategia was thus a combination of objective knowledge and subjective skill. By comparison, grand strategy can be thought of as the "concern of the head of state" of which the general's business is but one aspect.

Both grand strategists and military strategists endeavor to out-position rival powers irrespective of whether one's goal is offensive or defensive in nature. Grand strategists normally do so by building alliances and coalitions, or by securing treaties and agreements aimed at increasing or preserving one's power relative to one's rivals. Military commanders make use of the material and psychological advantages made available through such partnerships and agreements to develop specific military
strategies. Grand strategists weigh the potential costs of an impending armed conflict against its expected benefits, and they attempt to set conditions that will minimize the former and maximize the latter. They also balance concurrent military commitments against long-term interests, and they set priorities accordingly. Military strategists, then, work to achieve success without allowing costs to exceed benefits, or permitting short-term interests to compromise longer range ones.

Ideally, a military strategy should be formulated within the parameters established by a grand strategy so the objectives and priorities of each can be rationalized. However, both levels of strategy function more or less as “open systems,” with players and variables changing frequently. As a consequence, military strategy sometimes drives grand strategy or simply operates independently of it. This situation can occur even when military strategy and grand strategy are embodied in the same person, as was the case with Napoleon. Such arrangements can offer benefits with respect to unity of effort, but they can also bring serious disadvantages by overburdening a single decision maker. At other times, military strategy might be hampered by an indecisive grand strategy. Carthage’s council of elders, for instance, remained divided between landed interests, which wanted to acquire territories in Africa, and maritime interests, which sought to increase Carthage’s influence in the Mediterranean Sea. This division ultimately undercut Carthage’s political will and determination in its series of wars against Rome.

In today’s defense literature, the term grand strategy can refer to alliance or coalition strategy or to national strategy (or national security strategy). Alliance or coalition strategies identify objectives and courses of action for multinational partnerships such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). National strategy sets forth goals to be achieved by the sum of a party’s power: its diplomatic, economic, military, and informational resources. For example, the West’s grand strategy of “containment” during the Cold War served both as an alliance strategy for NATO and as a national security strategy for the United States.

Military strategy’s equivalent in contemporary defense literature is national military strategy, and it may include any number of supporting strategies for individual regions or theaters. A national military strategy describes how a state will use its military power in pursuit of its policy goals. A regional or theater strategy specifies how military resources are to be used to achieve objectives within a given geographic area. The national military strategies supporting containment, for instance, included deterrence in central Europe and on the Korean Peninsula, as well as several types of coercive strategies carried out in the Middle East and Latin America. Military strategy is thus frequently nested or tiered, particularly when the endeavor is a global one and multiple parties are involved.

Crafting military strategy

Modern defense analysts often divide military strategy (and grand strategy) into three essential components: ends (objectives) + ways (courses of action) + means (resources). This model was advanced by Arthur F. Lykke Jr., an engineer by training, who taught a generation of military professionals in the United States. Ends or objectives may include intimidating, deterring, persuading, coercing, punishing, subduing, or conquering an adversary. Ways are essentially types of military strategy; or combinations of them. Means equate to military power. An example of how these components fit together is NATO’s military strategy in central Europe: its objective (end) was to deter an attack by the Warsaw Pact, and it was accomplished by maintaining formidable defensive postures (ways) involving nuclear weapons and a combination of conventional and special forces (means).
Some analysts add the element of risk to Lykke's equation. A good strategy is said to be one in which all three components (ends, ways, and means) are in balance, that is, the means are sufficient to accomplish the ends through the designated ways. The basic rationale for balance is it reduces risk. However, military commanders tend to view risk differently from heads of state, and it is important to understand why. Commanders define risk as the likelihood a mission might fail: high risk means high probability of failure. They usually try to reduce risk by increasing resources in some way. In contrast, heads of state view risk as a function of the political capital they might have to invest, or have already invested. Put simply, political capital is the trust and confidence the public has in its leadership. As the commitment of resources (lives and treasure) increases, so too does the risk to political capital. Accordingly, political leaders prefer to keep the resources they commit to a military action, especially human lives, as low as possible.

Today, representing strategy as ends + ways + means + risk is common in defense circles. It offers policymakers and military personnel a basic framework for discussing the particulars of a strategy, especially whether the resources are adequate for the desired ends. However, no scientific method exists for determining how much military power is enough, or when balance is achieved. The answer depends largely on the professional judgment of military commanders, and on what domestic conditions will allow in terms of the expenditure of fiscal resources and political capital. In truth, balance, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

In fact, the Lykke equation or structure provides little more than a starting point for planning. One could use it to build a bridge or any complex edifice, for instance. What distinguishes a strategy from a plan is the nature of the environment and the presence of an adversary or a rival. If the environment is competitive and an adversary is present, one needs a strategy; otherwise, a plan will suffice.

Practicing military strategy

Experts have long debated whether military strategy is an art or a science, and they will probably continue to do so for ages to come. Today's military strategists would do better to think of it as a practice; it combines the objective knowledge of science (insofar as it can be objective) with the subjective knowledge (or skill) associated with an art. The practice of military strategy, or any type or level of strategy for that matter, can be thought of as applying technical knowledge, or an understanding of what is possible, and social intelligence, or a sense of what is likely as regards human behavior, to achieve one's aim. Put differently, the ends-ways-means-risk equation assumes one has an appreciation for military power, what it can and cannot do, and an understanding of some of the fundamental types of military strategy and how they can be linked to form operations and campaigns to achieve what one wants.

Military power can be defined as the ability to perform specific combat missions in a given situation. For example, a force consisting of nuclear submarines and cruise missiles would offer little useful military power in a situation calling for counterinsurgency techniques. Likewise, a well-equipped but poorly trained militia might offer little in the way of genuine military power against a similarly equipped, but better trained, regular force.

Like all forms of power, military power is inherently multidimensional. It is typically categorized as land power, sea power, air power (or aerospace power), and informational and (more recently) cyber power. Land power is the ability of one's ground forces to exert control over centers of authority and influence, which are usually based on land. Sea power can be thought of as the ability to control maritime lines of communication and commerce, and to project military forces ashore. Aerospace power typically refers to two domains, air...
and space (to orbital distances) and the ability to operate within and project force from them. Informational power has come to include what was once referred to as propaganda and psychological warfare but has now evolved into the much larger category of strategic communications. Information can magnify, or in some cases dampen, the repercussive effects of physical force, and it can also help cultivate useful impressions among targeted audiences. Cyber power is the ability to operate with relative security within cyberspace, and it is usually associated with the ability to facilitate or impede the flow of information or code.

Military power can be augmented by what analysts call principles of war or principles of operations. These principles are sometimes characterized as timeless and universal, but they are not necessarily either. Although they can offer advantages to one party or the other, the extent to which they do so is driven largely by the situation. The following nine principles appear most frequently in professional military literature: (1) **objectives**, defining the goal and ensuring every military action contributes toward achieving it; (2) **maneuver**, gaining positional advantage; (3) **surprise**, attacking one's foe in an unexpected manner; (4) **mass**, concentrating military power to achieve superiority; and its converse (5) **economy of force**, ensuring secondary efforts receive only as much force as necessary; (6) **offensive**, gaining the initiative or the temporal upper-hand; (7) **security**, ensuring one's forces are well protected; (8) **simplicity**, avoiding complicated schemes and communications; and (9) **unity of command**, placing the direction of the war under a single political-military authority to avoid conflicting interests.

The elements of military power are interdependent, and combining them usually enhances the potency of each. Airpower, for instance, can make some of the tasks armies and navies must accomplish that much easier; armies and navies, in turn, can provide the staying power that air forces lack. Also, military power is rarely used in isolation. It is normally employed in conjunction with some degree of diplomatic, informational, and economic or financial power. Military leaders might not exercise direct control over all these elements in democratic societies, but that is not necessarily the case in other societies. In any event, strategists must understand how these elements work individually and in combination with others.

There are many types of military strategy. Among the most common historically are annihilation, dislocation, attrition, exhaustion, coercion, deterrence, terror and terrorism, and decapitation and targeted killing. Each is worth exploring further.

Annihilation and dislocation represent the "ideal outcome" in military strategy: a swift victory with as few friendly casualties and economic costs as possible. These strategies often work hand-in-glove, and therefore they can be difficult to distinguish from one another in practice. However, the key difference is annihilation seeks to reduce an adversary's physical capacity to fight, usually in a single battle or "lightning" campaign; on the other hand, dislocation endeavors to reduce an opponent's willingness to fight by causing confusion or disorientation through an unexpected maneuver or the use of surprise. Both can employ operational maneuvers, such as double or single envelopments or increased tempo.

Attrition and exhaustion are the polar opposites of annihilation and dislocation. Attrition means reducing an adversary's physical capacity to fight; exhaustion amounts to wearing down the opponent's willingness to do so. Again, a close relationship exists between the two, which can make them difficult to distinguish in practice. Nevertheless, the basic difference is that attrition assumes an opponent's willingness to resist is strong and will not break until its physical capacity to do so is eliminated. Conversely, exhaustion assumes a party's willingness to resist is weak and can be broken well before its physical capacity to do so is destroyed. Unlike annihilation and dislocation, these strategies accept that
the process of defeating an opponent may take considerable time. Hence, they are less than ideal for most societies because they put an enormous and prolonged strain on one's own material capacity and morale. Nonetheless, they are important because many strategies devolve into one or the other of these two, and thus it is not always possible to avoid them. As some experts maintain, attrition and exhaustion represent the most fundamental, if also the most brutal, of military strategies, and all other types may well be but variations of these two.

Coercion and deterrence are two basic military strategies that occur not just in wartime but also in peacetime. In fact, if war breaks out it can mean the peacetime form of one or both of these strategies has failed. Coercion simply means compelling adversaries to do something, while deterrence is dissuading opponents from doing something. Together, these strategies constitute the fundamental dynamic driving most peacetime and wartime situations, at the highest echelons of diplomacy as well as the lowest levels of tactics. Interestingly, very little of the vast literature concerning these two strategies treats them as a single, but linked, dynamic. From the standpoint of military strategy, it is rarely sufficient to compel one's foes to do something; usually one must also deter them from doing something else. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns, for instance, are contemporary examples of this dynamic at work: the aim is to neutralize hostile terrorist groups or insurgents, but to do so in ways that do not add to their recruitment efforts.

Strategies of terror and terrorism endeavor to succeed by leveraging fear. Strategies of terror include the aerial bombing of a hostile party's vital centers so as to cause its population to demand peace. Terrorism has many varieties, but in general it endeavors to compel a change in a party's behavior by instilling fear either through selective targeting or through mass targeting of noncombatants. Both terror and terrorism have decidedly coercive aspects, but each also has a deterrent capacity because each can bring about a desire not to act. Whether terrorism constitutes a strategy or a tactic is still a matter of debate for some scholars. However, recent research suggests using terror tactics over a prolonged period of time to shape the public's perceptions and to change its behavior equates to a strategy.

The use of decapitation and targeted killing has increased markedly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly with the widespread production of remotely piloted vehicles or drones. Decapitation and targeted killing derive from dislocation and attrition, respectively. Decapitation is the attempt to paralyze or collapse a group by removing its leadership. Targeted killing is the systematic elimination of an organization's members, whether these individuals occupy key positions or belong to the rank and file. Both strategies are controversial due to questions regarding how effective and ethical they truly are.

The emergence of cyberspace illustrates how a virtually ubiquitous technology may alter the execution of military strategy. The futurist and visionary Ray Kurzweil declared in 2003, "The twenty-first century will see about a thousand times greater technological change than its predecessor." Even if his prediction is only an approximation of what kinds of innovations might lie ahead, it underscores the point that technological change can be both vast and profound.

Technology is vital to the practice of military strategy because it speaks to one's means. The means obviously influence the ways, or what one can do. In any assessment it is essential to ask how particular technologies might influence one's ability to out-position one's rivals. Biotechnology and nanotechnology are two emerging fields that will surely alter the practice of strategy; however, cyberspace has already done so. Today's strategists need to worry less about whether there is such a thing as "cyber war," which experts continue to debate, and more about how to achieve and maintain cyber power and how to leverage it to augment military strategy.
Practicing military strategy successfully frequently requires dividing the conflict into phases or campaigns, the sum of which should culminate in achieving the war's purpose. In practicing military strategy, we might design a battle of encirclement and annihilation as part of a campaign of dislocation, which, in turn, might contribute to an overall strategy of attrition or exhaustion designed to coerce our opponent into agreeing to our terms. The art or business of the general, in other words, has as much to do with understanding how each of these strategies works individually as well as how they might be combined for best effect.

As Sun Tzu once said, “Victory is the main object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale depressed.” For this reason, most parties want to win quickly. The military strategies of annihilation and dislocation are classic ways of doing that. Annihilation strategies aim to do so by severely reducing or eliminating an opponent's material strength through one or two major battles. Such battles usually entail encircling an adversary's military force or enveloping its flanks. Some examples, discussed in more detail below, include Hannibal's victory over the Romans on the plains of Cannae in 216 BCE, Napoleon's defeat of the Austrians and Russians in 1805 and the Prussians in 1806, and the American destruction of Spanish flotillas at Manila Bay and Santiago Bay in 1898, which has long been hailed as the quintessential battle of encirclement and annihilation. Notable twentieth-century generals, such as Erwin Rommel and Norman Schwartzkopf, are known to have compared some of their own victories to Cannae. However, Cannae also represents the classic pitfall of winning battles only to lose wars since Rome eventually overcame its staggering losses and finally defeated Carthage fourteen years later at the battle of Zama.

Whereas annihilation strategies seek to win by destroying an opponent's physical capacity to resist, dislocation strategies endeavor to achieve victory through an unexpected maneuver that achieves