



# Executive Summary

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## STRATEGY AND GRAND STRATEGY: WHAT STUDENTS AND PRACTITIONERS NEED TO KNOW

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The student who wishes to comprehend strategy, and the national security practitioner who wishes to work successfully in this difficult realm, must make the intellectual effort necessary to grasp all that it entails and all that it demands. In our attempts to talk about strategy, to teach it, and to make it comprehensible, we use phrases (“a calculated relationship between ends, ways, and means”) and charts and graphics that do not and cannot fully capture the inherent complexity and nonlinear nature of the enterprise. While these are not without utility as they give us a point of departure into unpredictable and fraught terrain, we must recognize that they are only starting points. Once we set off, we must rely on analytical skills, critical thinking, wisdom, and adaptability to navigate forward towards the political end state we seek. Only by fully appreciating the inherent complexity of strategy—by being alert to its potential pitfalls and its myriad twists and turns—can we hope to attain better products and better outcomes. The purpose of this monograph is to give both students and practitioners the intellectual equipment they need to apply critical thought to the challenging art of devising and implementing strategy.

The first section of the monograph lays out the problem and motivates the need for a fuller appreciation of the inherent difficulty of strategy. The author argues that strategy demands a theory—a proposed causal relationship—that can be clearly articulated and that can stand up to rigorous analysis. In addition, it must be adaptable enough to stay in step with a fluid and unpredictable environment. A theory, in its most basic form, can be expressed as: “if x, then y.” Thus, the strategist must be able to explain

and defend the statement, “If we use resource X, then we will achieve objective Y” (or at least move in the direction of achieving objective Y). But the word “then” carries a heavy burden since it must be able to do a lot of work and bear up to intense scrutiny—and this must include, above all, a close examination of one’s assumptions since these serve as the building blocks of the causal relationship linking ends and means. Often, though, such careful scrutiny does not take place, either because no one takes the time for it or because it would question or challenge organizational culture or individual preferences. Too often the explanatory logic of strategy ends up being little more than an organizational mantra, a statement (or a number) that briefs well, an assertion about the overwhelming power of a particular military instrument, or a claim about an opportunity based on enemy weakness.

The second section of the monograph takes a close look at the way the terms “strategy” and “grand strategy” have been used and defined by scholars and practitioners. There is no commonly held definition of either “strategy” or “grand strategy” within the national security community, and, indeed, various sub-groups within the field use the phrases in different ways. The author uses both classic literature and recent scholarly investigations to give students and practitioners alike a comprehensive understanding of the meanings and ideas attached to these phrases, and the ways that they have evolved over time. In the subsequent section, the author explains why political actors traditionally have sought to develop strategies and grand strategies to guide their behavior in the international system. What ends do political actors typically seek, and how do they attempt to

employ ways and means to attain them? Next, the monograph examines strategy in history; the author argues that the way strategies and grand strategies have been devised and implemented by actors in the international system has followed a historical arc determined largely by the changing character, over time, of social, political, and military organizations.

Building on this groundwork, the author presents an in-depth examination of the challenges posed by strategy and grand strategy. This portion of the monograph analyzes the many reasons why the causal logic within the statement “if X, then Y” is frequently faulty or flimsy. These include the limits of human perception, organizational and bureaucratic imperatives, pressures imposed by short timelines, and challenges that political actors face in discerning their true national interests. Even if the basic logic of a strategy is sound, its implementation will create myriad opportunities for breaks in the linkage between ends and means. These include the natural tensions and communication challenges that arise between implementing organizations (and coalition partners); demands imposed by the adversary’s resistance, adaptation, and countermoves; hurdles and setbacks imposed by unforeseen events; physical and emotional exhaustion; and heavy demands imposed by the need to maintain an ongoing and robust civil-military interaction.

The author concludes by observing that, “In any situation where lives are at stake, we have a powerful moral obligation to proceed carefully and with restraint, and to craft strategy and grand strategy that is as sound, efficient, and adaptive as possible.” She adds:

Because it is so challenging on so many levels, strategy is difficult to practice in any idealized form. But it does not follow, however, that it is an

impossible art. Diligent students of strategy who are fully alive to its complexities and demands will be prepared to anticipate and accommodate the inevitable twists and turns, setbacks, disappointments they will face – and will be asked to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

## ENDNOTE

1 . Tami Davis Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students and Practitioners Need to Know*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, December 2015.

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