

# MILITARY STRATEGY IN TRANSITION

by

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Warfare did not significantly change for over 150 years following the emergence of Napoleon in the 19th century. World War I and World War II were fought using Napoleonic strategic concepts. The advent of nuclear weapons, however, created the conditions needed for change, and the strategic era that began with French musketry ended in the nuclear fireballs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The terrible destructiveness of nuclear weapons forced a reevaluation of the strategic concepts underlying Napoleonic warfare. Clausewitz had articulated the notion of absolute warfare, but modern science made it a reality. Since 1945, warfare has been in transition. Nuclear weapons and the increasing lethality and proliferation of modern, sophisticated conventional weapons have led to a redefinition of winning in warfare.

Nuclear arsenals have made the risks of waging war in the traditional manner so high and the probability of winning such a war so low that the very concept of "winning" has been questioned as it relates to conflicts between the superpowers or their client states.<sup>1</sup> During the past quarter century, the superpowers have generally avoided direct and active military confrontation with each other. The supersophistication of modern weapons, together with their proliferation, has made mid-intensity warfare with even the lesser-developed states a risky proposition. The result has been that the utility of the actual use of force in high- or mid-intensity war is viewed as being minimal for nation-states. However, as Mao, Giap, Guevara, and Marighella have demonstrated, the opposite is true at the lower end of the conflict spectrum for guerrilla movements and terrorists. Deterrence aside, the idea that the utility of force is limited for a nation-state and high for a subnational or illegal irregular force will be significant in the future.

Two other trends reinforce this notion. The 20th century is the age of nationalism. The number of nation-states has almost quadrupled since 1900, and the current international scene has been characterized by

the phoenix-like rise of scores of new states from the ashes of former European colonial empires. Unfortunately many of these new states are authoritarian in nature, providing few opportunities for a peaceful democratic change of government.<sup>2</sup> Opposition groups are driven underground where political discontent festers, only to break out anew in revolutionary guerrilla warfare.

**T**he location of many of these battlefields of the future in the resource-rich Southern Hemisphere and the existence there of indigenous discontent or of guerrilla forces that can be exploited by major powers have added a new dimension to the mid-range strategic environment. Major powers which support these revolutionary forces may gain influence and, perhaps, even control of important geostrategic areas or lines of communication, if the supported movements are successful. This is a low-risk strategy, made lower still by the use of proxies or client states in areas of the world in which the danger of direct superpower military confrontation would otherwise be great. The USSR's pursuit of this proxy strategy puts the United States at a serious disadvantage. If the Soviets and other nations perceive that the United States lacks the will to challenge this type of aggression when it is in the interest of the United States to do so, it could dramatically increase the frequency with which this type of strategy might be encountered.<sup>3</sup>

It is important for the United States to maintain the strategic force structure required to preclude nuclear warfare and to deter even the low possibility of having to fight mid- and high-intensity warfare. The strategy, doctrine, and force structure suitable to wage war in either Europe or Asia, however, should not be maintained to the exclusion of a capability to meet the much more likely challenges posed by client or proxy wars in the resource-rich nations of the Third World. Nor should the US posture itself *solely* for these latter contingencies; a balance must be struck between the US security needs in Europe and the potential US military requirements in the Third World.

Having considered some of the trends of the evolving strategic environment, we may legitimately ask: "How will these trends affect US strategy in the 21st century?" This is not an easy question to answer. The effort to shed light on the future dimensions of US military strategy will first require a consideration of the nature of military strategy itself and some of the factors that serve to constrain it.

## THE NATURE OF MILITARY STRATEGY

Military strategy consists of both a strategic objective and a strategic concept or course of action designed to achieve that objective. The nature of the objective and the means to attain it will vary with the echelon at which the strategy is conceived. At least three distinct, although interrelated, levels of military strategy may be identified:<sup>4</sup>

- *Comprehensive* military strategy is general in nature and has a long-range orientation. It interfaces most directly with the other elements of national power in the planning and implementation of an integrated, global national strategy. Since comprehensive strategy is the military input into the development of a national strategy, it must be orchestrated with the other elements of national power.

- *Coordinative* strategy is focused on mid-range military problems such as the relationship of Northeast Asia to NATO in terms of the competing needs of global military strategy, the importance of the "short war/long war" concept in Europe, and the structure of the forces needed in a non-NATO contingency. Generally, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the military departments are intimately concerned with this coordinative strategy because of its force structure implications.

- *Operational* strategy has the shortest time-horizon of the three typologies. Strategic constraints will have their greatest impact at this level of strategic planning, simply because its short-term orientation will not allow sufficient time to resolve all of the

deficiencies that may exist in either capabilities or doctrine. Operational strategies deal with such things as the general defense concept for NATO's Central Region, the coordination of Allied combined forces, and the required overall force readiness of the deployed military forces.

In the past, these subelements of US military strategy were not explicitly recognized, to the detriment of clear strategic thought.<sup>5</sup> US strategic concepts, particularly as they relate to conventional warfare, are the result of the historical study of warfare. However, war tends to obscure the levels of strategy and, as a result, students of strategy were disposed to focus at the operational level. The insights gained from such a focus were not completely relevant to the post-World War II peacetime strategic problems of the United States, which generally were posed at the coordinative and comprehensive levels. Nor will they be totally relevant to the strategic needs of the next 25 years.

### STRATEGIC CONSTRAINTS

Once a strategist recognizes the varying levels of analysis of the strategic equation, he is ready to cope with the complexities created by strategic constraints. The next generation's military strategists will, like their predecessors, face many constraints which will limit their feasible strategic options.

For the greater part of this nation's existence, the two great oceans made the United States virtually unassailable, thereby providing the time needed to mobilize unhindered in two world wars. The merging of the nuclear weapon with the missile ended all that. Because America is vulnerable to a Soviet nuclear attack, it is unable to pursue political policies or military strategies that ignore its survivability. This causes US strategists to avoid a military confrontation with the USSR and has gradually led to the mutual acceptance of spheres of influence. It is not merely that the United States is vulnerable that constrains US strategists; rather it is the *degree* of vulnerability that really matters—the very survival of the

nation is at stake. It is of little solace, but of immense strategic importance, that the USSR is also vulnerable to a US nuclear strike. So the two superpowers have attained a "balance of terror" that promotes the status quo where their vital interests are concerned and allows strategic flexibility only in peripheral areas. The challenge to superpower strategists is to pursue their national interests without precipitating a nuclear confrontation. Although the strategic constraints induced by the vulnerability of the United States to nuclear attack are the most important, they are by no means the only constraints.

The United States, like other nations, has evolved a "way of war" that has deep historical, cultural, and psychological roots, which is to say that it will be difficult to change. Until recently, Americans have been accustomed to wars that were total, violent, and victorious. We are a pragmatic people who attack distasteful jobs directly; we want to finish them quickly, and then get on to other, more pleasant pursuits. American wars also have had an ideological, almost messianic quality about them. Americans believe in fair play—we say we won't hit first. All of this constrains strategy in at least two ways. First, any strategist who contemplates fighting a protracted, limited war starts with two strikes against him. Secondly, and most importantly, Americans will not support a

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war in which the United States is clearly the aggressor, so US strategists cannot contemplate preemptive war. General Eisenhower expressed it this way: "[Considering] surprise attack with nuclear-armed missiles [is not] compatible with a democracy." Morality aside, this could put the United States at a critical disadvantage, because in strategic nuclear war the first use can be decisive—at least that is what the Soviets believe.<sup>6</sup>

National will is a dynamic element of national power and it is composed of at least three subelements: public will, congressional will, and Presidential or executive will. The mass communication media are crucial to the expression and even more significantly to the formation of national will. The impact of the Vietnam experience on national will was clearly evident during the Angolan affair. Intervention in Angola was portrayed by the media and by many congressmen as being "another Vietnam," when in truth the two situations were literally and figuratively a world apart. This perception of a loss of US will might set the stage for costly errors in foreign policy in the future, both by American statesmen and by foreign diplomats. World opinion will also constrain American strategies in the more interdependent and, in some ways, more turbulent world that is evolving. In a democracy, a firm, articulated, and united public opinion can be decisive. Strategists must learn to recognize it and attune to it or their strategies will fail. Certainly, there were options that were closed to decisionmakers during the Angolan affair simply because of public attitudes toward intervention that existed at that time.

There are also political/legal constraints on strategy. The most controversial legal constraint on strategy is the War Powers Act, which many national security analysts consider to be unconstitutional. Nevertheless, it remains a potentially significant constraint on contingency planning. The Nunn Amendment, the withholding of funds from Vietnam, and the War Powers Act are all

recent examples of ways that Congress can constrain strategy.

Geography has a more direct effect on strategy. As noted earlier, the oceans that separate the United States from the Eurasian landmass are still effective barriers to conventional invasion, if not to nuclear attack. The United States, by virtue of its urban character, is more vulnerable to a countervalue nuclear attack, especially in its crowded northeast sector, than other, less-developed countries. The lack of defensive depth in West Germany has caused the United States and NATO to adopt a political strategy of forward defense that might not otherwise be the best military strategy. In this NATO context, the friendly ocean now becomes an extremely fragile line of communication of great concern to US strategists.

While strategies can be changed with a stroke of the pen, it takes considerably longer to develop the forces, equipment, doctrine, and training needed to implement them. This means that any single change in strategy in the midterm, because of force structure alone, will be marginal or incremental in nature. The mistake of the 1960's which attributed to a strategy—the 2-1/2 War Flexible Response Strategy—a capability that it never achieved should not be repeated.

The quantitative and qualitative nature of the threat also constrains the strategist. When the enemy is superior in manpower, the strategist will be required to seek allies—and the introduction of allies always leads to strategic constraint, because allies generally are asymmetrical in power or in interests within and especially outside of the alliance area. Israel in 1973 and the 1956 Anglo/French invasion of Egypt are cases in point. The military capability of the enemy also impacts on strategy. If the enemy is weak, then a direct approach may be the answer; but if he possesses the power of the USSR, then a more indirect approach is indicated that capitalizes on US strengths and exploits Soviet vulnerabilities.

In considering more creative approaches to

strategy, planners are constrained by bureaucratic inertia. Because resistance to innovation is endemic to bureaucracies, strategic concepts are usually compromise positions—no wonder that generals are so often accused of preparing to fight the last war. Michael Howard has commented on this phenomenon:

NATO strategy and the NATO force structure has taken so much labor to construct—it is the result of such agonizing disagreements, such precarious compromises—that no senior NATO official cares even to contemplate proposals for its alteration. Even to suggest them is to be branded as irresponsible.<sup>7</sup>

Imperfect knowledge also constrains strategy. Strategists must act on the observable capabilities of the enemy because they cannot reliably discern his intentions. Improvements in the ability to observe the enemy's capabilities continue to be made, but are not accompanied by similar strides in discerning enemy intentions.

The economic resources that a nation is willing to devote to defense constitute a major factor in the formulation of comprehensive and coordinative strategies. Economists correctly tell the strategist that he is competing for scarce resources, and even in a country as affluent as the United States, there is never enough to go around. "How much can I afford?" is the politician's question, while "How much do I need to do the job?" is the strategist's question. This difference of perspective is at the root of most national security debates. Ideally, strategy would derive from interests, and resources would be allocated to implement the strategy; realistically, however, the budget drives strategy, and the shortfall is termed "risk" to balance the books. So the strategist must be pragmatic and must not propose strategies that are fiscally unobtainable—i.e., the 2-1/2 War Strategy of the 1960's.

**F**inally, the most significant conventional strategic constraint, at least for the US Army, is the lack of draft legislation. Essentially, the zero draft has dismantled the

Selective Service System, has had a near-fatal effect on the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR), and has left the United States without a timely personnel mobilization capability. The Selective Service machinery would take months to resume effective operations, and the IRR—especially in the Army combat arms and in the maintenance specialties in the other services—will virtually cease to exist within the next several years. When this personnel mobilization problem is linked to a "cold" production base, the result is that today the United States basically has a "paper strategy" as far as a long war is concerned. This mobilization problem, with its adverse impact on deterrence, is a constraint today and becomes more critical with each day that it goes unresolved.

### STRATEGY IN TRANSITION

The strategic environment of the next 25 years will be a very different one from that which existed a generation ago. The world has fragmented into over 160 sovereign nations, and some political analysts predict that the total could eventually reach 300 by the turn of the century. Although the anticolonial revolutionary struggles seem to have peaked, the West is now faced with the relatively more aggressive economic and political policies of the resource-rich Third World. Advances in weapon technology, both nuclear and conventional, will make this a potentially more dangerous world in the year 2000. The USSR has steadily increased its military strength to the extent that today it can claim strategic parity with the United States—and Russia shows few signs of slowing its military buildup in the future. All of these trends, and others, are straining the strategic concepts that evolved in a less ambiguous strategic era.

During World War II, when the current US strategic concepts were established, the objectives were clear: to wage total war and defeat the enemy armed forces of Germany, Italy, and Japan; and to force their governments to surrender unconditionally. Since World War II, however, there has been a broadening of the strategic mission. The focus of strategic problems has moved from

the operational level to the more ambiguous and complex coordinative and comprehensive levels. Strategists today—and increasingly in the future—will concern themselves not only with plans for general war, but also with lesser contingencies that may occur simultaneously with a general war or, more likely, quite apart from one. They must be prepared to plan throughout the entire spectrum of warfare. And, perhaps most importantly, US strategists will continue in the foreseeable future to be *defenders* of the status quo, whereas their strategic military objective during World War II was to *overturn* the unfavorable status quo that had been achieved by the Axis Powers. The former is a defensive mission, while the latter required offensive operations. The point is that the strategy, doctrine, and force structure that respond to today's strategic environment are perhaps already irrelevant and almost certainly will not be responsive to the strategic environment postulated for the 21st century.

The strategy that will be relevant to the strategic environment of the year 2000 will be composed of the following three elements:

- Conflict Avoidance
- Battlefield Stabilization
- Negotiation

Regardless of what our current military strategy is purported to be, in actual practice it has tended to adhere to the pattern above.

It is clear that probably since World War II and undoubtedly since the USSR obtained nuclear weapons, the United States has sought to avoid open conflict with the Soviet Union—and she with us. This tacit understanding has served both countries well and should underlie superpower strategy for the next quarter century; the prospect of open warfare between the superpowers carries with it the unwanted risk of escalation to nuclear warfare. Conflict avoidance has led to the widespread, but erroneous, perception that the utility of force in international affairs is near zero. The recent experience of the Vietcong and North Vietnamese indicates

that at least a *certain* type of force does have utility—even against superpowers. Yet, it is probably true that the actual use of force at the high- and mid-intensity end of the conflict spectrum between nuclear powers has become less useful. This is not necessarily the case for lesser, but still major, conventional military powers. The 1973 Arab-Israeli War is an example of the use of force in a mid-intensity war which had utility. Curiously, it had utility for both Egypt and Israel.

**A** key observation from that war is that the battlefield was first stabilized and then negotiations to end the war followed, although the armies were still in the field—albeit the Arab armies were badly mauled. Lest this be considered an aberration, recall that from the US perspective both the Korean Conflict of the 50's and the Vietnam misadventure of the 60's all reflect this pattern. Any future war in either Western Europe or Korea could end in a similar way, provided that neither side allows the other to gain an overwhelming preponderance of combat power. After stabilization, negotiation of limited political objectives would quickly follow to prevent the war from escalating to nuclear warfare. The limitation of political goals is the result of the perception that the outcome of prolonged warfare is so uncertain and the risks so high that it has become an unprofitable venture for nation-states.

This does not mean that the war would necessarily end quickly—warfare is too unpredictable for us to have much confidence in such an assertion. In Korea more than two years passed before a cease-fire was effected, and in Vietnam it was eight years after the first US combat units were introduced before the cease-fire was established. But the US and USSR were not in direct conflict in those two wars, as they would be in NATO. Furthermore, the configuration of the operational theater in Western Europe will not permit the Allies to trade very much space for time; there would not be much to negotiate if the Allies were backed against the Rhine or the North Sea. Nevertheless, if the USSR were deprived of a quick victory and

the battlefield stabilized in West Germany, then the danger of escalation to strategic nuclear warfare would dominate the councils of the two chief protagonists, tending to drive them to the negotiating table. If the direct confrontation of the superpowers occurred outside of Western Europe, then the drive to negotiate might be somewhat weakened because—initially at least—the vital interests of the superpowers might not be involved, and the time required to begin negotiation could stretch out. But the spectre of nuclear weapons should also govern strategy in these areas as well.

**T**his is nothing more than a recognition that both the technological improvements to nuclear weapons and their delivery means and the proliferation of supersophisticated conventional weapons of unprecedented lethality will tend to preclude premeditated direct conventional war between the superpowers in areas that they consider vital. The risk of escalation to nuclear holocaust is too great. The combination of two other trends—fragmented nationalism in the Third World and the increasing dependence of the industrialized world on the resources found in the weak, vulnerable states of the Southern Hemisphere—should operate to shift the battlefields of the superpowers to areas in which their vital interests are not at stake. This could mean that the most probable areas of conflict between the superpowers in the next quarter century will be in the peripheral areas of the Third World. The Soviet/Cuban military activity in Africa may be an indication that this battle has already been joined.

In a sense, the United States should welcome a shift away from the European landmass, where it must face the USSR at the point of the Soviets' main strength, to areas in which the United States can bring its maritime power to bear. To confront the USSR in the peripheral areas, however, will present some problems in view of the strategic constraints discussed earlier. First, there is the problem of the American "way of

war" to consider. The Russians have shown great imagination in developing a proxy strategy to promote their interests in the Third World. The type of conflict that is most likely in the Third World—limited, protracted, guerrilla warfare—is anathema to most Americans. The manpower constraint that has caused the United States to enter into alliances to protect its vital interests in Europe and Asia has tied down US troops in static positions. Political realities for the most part preclude the use of these alliance or theater-specific forces in other contingency areas. Moreover, virtually the entire US military force structure, active and reserve, is being configured for the NATO mission. There will be relatively few other US ground forces available for major contingency missions—there is even talk of mechanizing the Marines. That means that the Reserve components must be mobilized if the United States is to embark on any major sustained contingency operation. The mobilization experience of Vietnam—or rather the lack of it—would not lead a military planner to be very optimistic.

**O**ther constraints will also inhibit US action in future contingency operations.

If the President and Congress were at odds, the War Powers Act could tie the hands of the President. Being untested, it would add another element of uncertainty to an already unpredictable situation. Although the national will cannot be prejudged, the Vietnam experience will weigh heavily on the scales against protracted counterinsurgent interventions in the Third World. Consider that the military bureaucracy, once Vietnam was over, hastily turned its attention to a European land war a la World War II.

Finally, there is a very real, though hidden, danger in superpower interventions in the Third World. Paradoxically, while the utility of force is high in the proxy wars being waged by the USSR and its clients in Africa, the risk of uncontrolled escalation is also high. The stability that has evolved since World War II in central Europe is a result of the perceived mutual interest of the US and the USSR to

preserve the peace. Armed with nuclear arsenals that could mortally wound one another and with too few deployed conventional forces to guarantee either side a quick victory, the superpowers could not conceive of any possible political utility resulting from the actual use of military force in Europe. Deterrence worked particularly well in this context because of the asymmetry of power projection capability between the superpowers outside of the Eurasian continent. Until Admiral Gorshkov expanded the Russian fleet to its present dimensions, the United States was unchallenged in the Third World, particularly in Africa and South America. The problem today—and for the future—is that the Soviets are developing the power projection capability to challenge the United States in these turbulent peripheral regions. While the Kremlin has thus far refrained from using large numbers of Soviet soldiers in the Third World, it is a self-imposed constraint, reflecting perhaps satisfaction with the proxy strategy and a caution induced more by inherent Russian characteristics than by a fear of US military response. It is important that the United States have the conventional military (primarily naval) power to deter Soviet adventures in the Third World.

The dynamics of detente aside, cold war animosities still linger. These smouldering enmities could be sparked into the flame of war by a superpower military confrontation somewhere in the Third World. The cyclical-sequence escalation process, wherein an action by one side results in a similar but more intense reaction by the other, could quickly spread outside of the Third World trouble spot—and if this happens we are all in trouble.<sup>8</sup>

This tit-for-tat escalation could occur precisely because the vital interests of the superpowers were not initially called into question—as they would be in central Europe, for example. Because each superpower would have room to maneuver, the crisis could be prolonged. But if the crisis were to be protracted, then national honor, alliance credibility, and the chance for accident or miscalculation would come into

play. After the escalation had exhausted all of the possibilities for leverage in the local area, the next step might be to escalate outside of the local area. This scenario is by no means inevitable, but has been made more likely by the convergence of the force projection capabilities of the superpowers.

## TOWARD SHAPING FUTURE STRATEGY

Given the evolving nature of the strategic environment and of strategy, it is necessary to determine what must be done *now* to cope with these dynamic factors. Obviously, the current US military strategy is the base from which strategic changes must be made. The current US conventional strategy is to maintain two concentrations of forward deployed military forces—one in Western Europe and one in Northeast Asia. It is a 1-1/2 War Strategy that envisions the conventional capability to deal simultaneously with one major contingency—Western Europe—and one minor contingency. The Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Korea are the primary, although not the only, minor contingency areas of concern. The sea and air lines of communication must also remain open, particularly to Western Europe, to Japan, and to those countries which supply the United States with critical resources. Because of the magnitude of the potential threat and the scarce resources—particularly manpower—that are available to the United States, it is necessary to depend on allies, Reserve components, and a declining mobilization capability.

**O**verall, the international trends that have been at work since World War II are altering the nature of warfare in ways that could put the United States at a disadvantage by the year 2000. The path of the United States is not irreversible, but major changes will be required in US strategy and force structure to cope with the future strategic environment. Among these changes must be: (1) a reorientation of US strategy away from its almost exclusive preoccupation



with Western Europe; (2) the construction and maintenance of a strong Navy; (3) the creation of a strong combat contingency force that can project US power in the Third World to deter Soviet adventurism when it is in the US interest to so do; and (4) the retention of the capability to deter nuclear war and major conventional war.

By emphasizing a strong non-NATO contingency force and a rejuvenated Navy, US military strategy will truly become flexible. This strategy will not be devised overnight, nor will it be possible to build the force structure necessary to implement it in a short time; but now is the time to think the thoughts and to debate the issues that will establish the parameters of the US national security establishment in the 21st century.

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