

A DIALOGUE ON STRATEGY

On Strategy as Ends, Ways, and Means

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William F. Owen, and Jeffrey W. Meiser

ABSTRACT: This dialogue regarding teaching, understanding, and practicing strategy stems from Jeffrey W. Meiser's article "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy" published in the Winter 2016–17 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 46, no. 4).

The Value of a Model. Gregory D. Miller and Chris Rogers

Like Dr. Jeffrey W. Meiser, we are frustrated by the formulaic ends, ways, and means model commonly equated with strategy. We acknowledge the handicap created by the lack of a common definition of strategy, and recognize the need for one that does not exclusively rely on a formula but also effectively incorporates the interests and decisions of other actors—allies, adversaries, and neutral states alike. Yet, we were profoundly disappointed in Meiser's criticism, which appeared to diminish not only the Department of Defense's approach to strategy but also how strategy is taught.

We assume Meiser understands models merely simplify reality and are never intended for literal use; they only provide a starting point to develop skilled practitioners who can wisely deviate from them. From Meiser's perspective, a dangerous impression might develop of American professional military education churning out automatons incapable of critical, much less creative, thinking, who simply rely on a formula to develop and implement strategy. We think *Parameters'* readers will be encouraged by the fact that Defense Department programs actually expose senior military officers to a number of strategic models and require critical analysis of such fundamentals.

At the National Defense University's Joint Advanced Warfighting School curriculum, no single definition is taught as the "right answer" and no specific model of strategy is the "right approach." Future practitioners are not only required to articulate their own definitions and models but also to justify when, how, and why they deviate from or improve upon existing models. Thus, the curriculum incorporates complexity and design thinking, both of which challenge conventional approaches to solving problems, especially complex problems, which would include nearly all national security decisions.

Consequently, senior US military officers and their equivalent civilian counterparts who complete this and similar programs are more than capable of moving beyond simple formulas when advising senior leaders. This is true precisely because these students do not rely on simple constructs of ends, ways, and means when developing theater strategies and theater campaign plans. Moreover, these professionals

understand the nuances of incorporating a whole-of-government approach (interagency collaboration) and of applying instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement tools), which Meiser mistakenly treats synonymously. With this understanding, strategy practitioners recognize the military frequently does not want to address problems outside its expertise, even though its capabilities and capacities often result in it being tasked to “do something.”

In closing, students should never be told they can solve the world’s problems by checking all the boxes. Instead, students should learn complex problems rarely have simple solutions because of second- and third-order consequences and the competing interests arising from other actors’ cultures, histories, and principles. At best, a strategist’s efforts can help mitigate conflict or produce more favorable outcomes.

Where Are Policy and Risk? Francis J. H. Park

While I agree in principle with the flaws Dr. Jeffrey W. Meiser identifies in the practice of strategy, his analysis omits the roles of policy and risk as critical elements influencing strategy. The relationship between ends, ways, and means had been part of the US Army War College curriculum for some eight years when it appeared in *Military Review* (1989). Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr.’s model of strategy originally appeared in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application*, a US Army War College student text he edited from 1981 to 1994. Lykke’s model bears influence by contemporaries such as Colonel Harry A. Summers Jr. whose work on the Army’s Vietnam Lessons Learned project eventually bore fruit as *On Strategy* (1982).

While Lykke articulated strategy in the form of an equation, only the most mechanistic application of the model would suggest that the formulation of strategy is merely a balancing act of ends, ways, and means. In practice, strategists consider other factors such as policy, which is conspicuously absent from Meiser’s analysis. Lykke warns that military strategy “must support national strategy and comply with national policy.” This interplay between policy and strategy is essential because policy outlines the bounds of what strategy should attain while strategy identifies the costs of policy’s goals. Although military strategists can influence policy, as Eliot Cohen so notes, it is inherently an unequal dialogue.

Risk, which receives only passing mention in Meiser’s article, is the most important product of the dialogue between policy and strategy. The current risk assessment methodology from the Joint Chiefs of Staff manual 3105.01, *Joint Risk Assessment*, describes risk simply as “the probability and consequence of an event causing harm to something valued.” In practice, risk is the ultimate expression of a strategy’s feasibility and not something that is quantitatively derived from an imbalance of ends, ways, and means.

In Afghanistan, coalition forces and their Afghan partners still had to secure areas and their populations while buying time to build the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, and Afghan civil institutions—a Herculean task requiring functions and resources

not available in any reasonable capacity within the Department of Defense. None of those considerations would have been apparent in an equation consisting solely of ends, ways, and means. Those charged with crafting policy may not have had discussions in such terms, but those charged with developing strategy, both inside and outside the Defense Department, certainly did. The policy constraints and the realities of the environment did not impede critical and creative thinking. But, any nontraditional approach would have incurred considerable, if not unacceptable, political and strategic risk.

Traditional views of war—divided into strategy, operational art, and tactics in many military discussions—tend to glide over discussions of policy; however, strategy is inherently incomplete without policy and its interactions. The current definition of strategy certainly runs the hazard of ham-fisted execution by unskilled practitioners who might construe strategic ends as full stops. Nonetheless, a new definition of strategy is not required; but as Professor Meiser so notes, a good strategy is.

Strategy Is Not a Sum. William F. Owen

Dr. Jeffrey W. Meiser correctly suggests the Lykke model is flawed. A poor model based on a widely known fallacy, its adoption was and is symptomatic of a failure to understand extant strategic theory stemming from an incorrect description of strategy equaling ends, ways, and means. Lykke, and those who saw merit in his model, either did not read or did not understand Clausewitz. Otherwise, they would have likewise framed ends as the policy objectives (the desired behavior or condition), means as combat (the acts of violence designed to overthrow the violent objector), and ways as the link between the two. In short, as Clausewitz stated, strategy is the “use of the engagement for the purpose of the war.”

When Meiser referenced the dysfunction highlighted in the 2009 Afghanistan policy review, his failure to recognize nation-states’ successful application of “strategy” accomplished as a campaign within a theater becomes evident. Nonstate actors, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Hezbollah, the Tamil Tigers, and even the Irish Republican Army, employ the same model with only a slight variation.

Simply put, strategy in Afghanistan—or anywhere else—is the link of tactical action to policy objectives, and those objectives should be achievable with the removal of the armed objector. As Clausewitz clearly warned, if that is not the case, one should not be using violence to attain the policy. Violence is the means that makes strategy unique. Thus, the whole-of-government approach Meiser referred to attempts to describe a process that aligns tactical means with policy objectives.

To conclude, Lykke’s model remains incorrect within the framework of classical strategic theory and has never had the utility ascribed to it. Strategy is not the sum of ends, ways, and means: rather, ways is strategy, ends is policy, and the means is combat. That the article did not point out this principle is as alarming for obvious reasons as is the fallacious implication that English-speaking militaries do not have adequate strategic theories to formulate successful strategy. Highly practical and effective strategic theory exists. But, the confusion demonstrated in the article is simply the product of a choice to ignore it.

In Response. Jeffrey W. Meiser

“Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy” was written to add clarity to the broad conversation about strategy. I was disappointed with the existing definitions of strategy as being either too narrow and confining or too broad, inclusive, and vague. Both approaches tend to produce bad strategy either by eliminating creative and adaptive thinking or by encouraging the reproduction of vacuous generalities.

After conversing with scholars and practitioners, researching, and teaching over several years, I settled on the definition for strategy: a theory of success. This definition is based on the writings of Barry R. Posen and Eliot A. Cohen, but influenced by a broad range of scholars including Richard P. Rumelt at UCLA Business School, Hal Brands at Johns Hopkins SAIS, and Sir Lawrence Freedman at Kings College, among others. My goal is to develop a definition that can fit all contexts in which strategy is relevant, including business strategy, grand strategy, and military strategy.

My article focused on military strategy because I see significant problems in US military strategy, including how it is taught in US military institutions, how it is discussed in the English-speaking defense community, and how it is implemented within the US government. It is a great honor and privilege to have this opportunity to respond to three thoughtful and well-articulated critiques of my essay. I thank Dr. Gregory D. Miller, Colonel Chris Rogers, Colonel Francis J. H. Park, and Mr. William F. Owen for taking my article seriously enough to write responses.

Defining Strategy

The only point of consensus among the commentators is that Arthur Lykke’s formula of ends + ways + means = strategy is an inadequate definition of strategy. Owen takes the strongest position, arguing that Lykke’s approach never had any utility and is profoundly misguided. Miller and Rogers see some value in Lykke’s approach, but agree that it should not be rigidly applied and must be supplemented by other concepts, definitions, and approaches. This consensus is important. Anyone relying only or primarily on Lykke’s formula should reconsider whether he or she is taking into account the complexity of the world as well as the intense and difficult task of being an adaptive, critical, and creative thinker.

Agreeing on what strategy is not, the contributors disagree on how strategy should be defined. The general definition for strategy proposed in the article is derived from the strategy literature, but refined to focus on what strategy is as a distinctive concept applicable across domains and disciplines. Only one of the commentaries actually proposes a rival definition for strategy: Owen endorses Carl von Clausewitz’s definition of strategy as the “use of engagements for the purpose of the war.” This definition is so narrow that even if we think only in terms of military strategy, it is not very useful. Furthermore, in this statement, Clausewitz does not tell us what strategy is, he tells us what to do with it. I would be relatively happy with a definition of military strategy stated as “a theory of the use of engagements for the purpose of war.”

It is quite common to refer to means as resources, as Lykke did and many others continue to do. In some contexts, means is synonymous with method, (e.g., the ends justify the means); however, it is not appropriate to assert that combat is the only possible means relevant to strategy. Finally, strategy can be applied to a wide variety of circumstances expanding well beyond a specific military campaign within a given theater of operations.

Overall, Owen's rigid, narrow reading of Clausewitz is not consistent with contemporary discourse in the English-speaking defense community even though the call to rethink our concepts in a more Clausewitzian framework is well taken and deserves additional consideration. Returning to *On War* is never a bad idea.

Strategy, Policy, and Risk

Whereas Owen wants to define strategy narrowly, Park argues it must be broadened to include policy and perhaps risk. I agree strategy is influenced by policy, it could hardly be otherwise; however, as I note in "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," strategy should have a clear definition that does not include other phenomena. An overinclusive definition distracts from the core purpose of strategy—articulating exactly how we will achieve our goal. Policy should also have a distinct definition. Once clear and distinct definitions are established, it is possible to discuss how the concepts relate to one another.

Let us accept for the moment the definition of strategy as a theory of success and use Park's definition of policy as a statement of "what strategy is to attain." These definitions tell us that policy defines the nature of success; policy tells us what we are trying to cause with the actions we take. Strategy tell us how we will achieve the stated policy. Therefore, we have a tight linkage between strategy and policy after we define them as distinct concepts. Just because two concepts are related does not mean they cannot have distinct definitions; instead, distinct definitions are essential to forming a clear understanding of each concept's role and exactly how they relate to one another.

Park also notes the importance of risk as "the ultimate expression of the feasibility of a strategy." I do not object, except to propose a more cost-benefit expression of feasibility. An action may be likely to cause harm to me, but it may also be likely to result in major benefits or to disproportionate harm to my opponent. Risk is another important concept, but again, it is different from strategy even if it is a necessary component to strategic planning and assessment.

Park concludes by noting the need for good strategy, but not a new definition of strategy. It is not clear whether this is an endorsement of Lykke's definition of strategy or not. If it is, Park does not tell us why or how my critique is wrong or why he thinks my proposed Posen-Cohen model is misguided. I am interested in hearing his position on this point.

On Models

Miller and Rogers describe a fine institution and show an admirable awareness of the broad range of issues relevant to teaching strategy in a very compressed time frame. Though I asserted that Lykke's model of strategy is influential in the broad US defense community, my intent was not to make an inclusive critique of the US defense community.

Programs and individuals relying solely or primarily on Lykke's formula should feel defensive after reading my article, but those who do not, should not.

As a general note of caution for instructors, educators have a hard time seeing the curriculum as students see it. A wise mentor once told me, it is not what you can teach, it is what the student can learn. This phenomenon can be a particularly thorny problem for 10-month long master's degree programs where the curriculum can easily become more about what can be taught and less about what the students can learn. When students and teachers are drowning in material, they sometimes grab onto whatever is easiest to comprehend, such as an easily articulated formula for strategy.

Agreement on a simple, distinctive definition of strategy will improve intellectual discourse on strategy in the defense community, the strategy-making process within the US government, and cross-disciplinary dialogue on the application of strategy application. I suggest the definition "strategy is a theory of success." The point is not to insist on absolute conformity. Thinking of strategy as a theory, logic, narrative about the future, or argument are all productive because they allow sufficient room for creative thinking while grounding us in the basic understanding of strategy as pushing us to think about how our actions are going to cause the future outcome we desire.

I commend *Parameters* for publishing these comments and enabling this dialogue, which I hope continues.

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Chris Rogers

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Francis J. H. Park

Colonel Francis J. Park currently serves as the chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategy Development Division. A career Army strategist, he executed several joint forces planning, strategy, and policy duties for Combined/Joint Task Force 101 (2008–09) and Operation Inherent Resolve (2017) as well as the International Security Assistance Force (2013–14).

William F. Owen

William F. Owen is currently the editor of the *Infinity Journal* as well as a consultant on a range of military issues for various armed forces. He served in the British Army and has worked on security and advisory projects in Algeria and Sierra Leone. He holds a masters degree in research and is widely published on military matters ranging from armored fighting vehicle design to classical strategy.

Jeffrey W. Meiser

Dr. Jeffrey W. Meiser, an assistant professor at the University of Portland, taught at the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, and published *Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898–1941* in 2015.

