

The Utility of Force is Contextual

Written by Andreas Aagaard Nohr

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ANDREAS AAGAARD NOHR, APR 6 2012

Nothing New Under the Sun: The Utility of Force is Contextual

'With the advent of each new revolution in the art of war men have predicted the collapse of contemporary civilization or the end of war itself.' William W. Kaufmann (1956)[1]

When new weaponry technology, in combination with other organizational, systematic and technical changes, is introduced onto the battlefield, it often brings about a transformation of the very conduct of war; what scholars have conceptualised as a 'revolution of military affairs.'[2] Despite the free usage of the word 'revolution', what Robert Jervis calls the 'nuclear revolution' brings about 'a change that turns established truths about the relationship between force and statecraft on their heads.'[3] The 'established truth' Jervis talks about is that force, as it was known before the nuclear age, has utility.

What does it mean to say that force has utility? To give a Clausewitzian answer, we should emphasize two central points: First, the very definition of war, that 'War is ... an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.'[4] Second, that 'war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.'[5] Thus, the two points imply that war is a clash of political wills and that force is a tool of policy that has utility to the extent that it can compel our enemy to do our will. I will continue this consideration later in this essay. Nevertheless, the central question is: what new ways of thinking about the utility of force has the development of nuclear weapons provoked?

A substantial amount of academic work has been focused on the question of how nuclear weapons may be strategically useful and what implications that utility actually would have.[6] Thankfully, nuclear strategy and all-out nuclear war has been a subject that so far has only been dealt with theoretically and hypothetically. The impact that nuclear weapons have had on the utility of force debate has been somewhat ambiguous. In the early stages, it was hypothesized that nuclear weapons could be used in line with conventional weapons; this line of thought has also been referred to as 'conventionalism.'[7] As the debate continued, however, a well-established political statement that 'no one can win an all-out nuclear war' has become the predominant conclusion regarding the use of nuclear weapons. [8] In this regard McNamara concludes: *'Nuclear weapons serve no military purpose whatsoever. They are totally useless—except only to deter one's opponent from using them.'*[9]

Nevertheless, with the end of the Cold War, the humanitarian interventions in the 90's, the war of terror in Afghanistan and at home, the Iraq War and recent engagements in Libya, a new discussion of the utility of force has become ever more relevant. This recent discussion has generally not revolved on the non-use of nuclear weapons. Rather, it discussed how the potency of nuclear weapons have proven useless in conflicts with limited aims or with states that do not possess a nuclear arsenal. The potency of nuclear weapons is thus not its potential usage. It is rather the threat of nuclear retaliation that has changed the nature of the use of conventional force. Because nuclear weapons allegedly hold no direct military utility, this essay will focus on the utility of conventional use of force.

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War is Becoming Obsolescent: The Optimist School

Above all else, the declining utility of force has been ascribed to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. The sheer potential for destruction that these weapons possess has caused states to sort out their disagreements by means other than war. It is in the wake of this nuclear revolution that a movement, termed by John Orme as 'the optimist school,' started to form.[10] The 'optimist school' can be seen as a challenge to what Michael Handel calls the 'traditional strategic paradigm' in that they, excluding Smith, make the crucial move away from being pessimistic about human nature.[11]

In his book, *The Blunted Sword*, Evan Luard argues that the international system has moved away from a system where scarce resources cause constant conflicts, because of the fact that the ability to provide sustainable growth has made such problems obsolete. The major characteristics of such a system are 'political' rather than 'economical'. According to Luard the prevalent types of conflict after 1945 have been wars within states (e.g. civil wars or wars of state collapse) rather than between them, with the recurrent cause being majorly political in its consideration. Luard believes that post-war international politics work through the 'persuasive power of political systems' (democracy) rather than the use of force. Luard makes this point most clearly when he argues that 'it is in relation to nuclear weapons that the declining value of military power in the modern world is most obvious.' [12] Subsequently, he points to the fact that 'Argentina was not deterred by Britain's nuclear capability from invading the Falklands', nor were the North Vietnamese compelled to give in to the American's.[13] This leads Luard to conclude that the use of force is constituted by a paradox, as he argues 'the major states of the modern world dispose of a power unmatched in former times. [...] Yet this capability is of no value. [...] They do not make it possible for those countries to impose their will on other states.' [14] However, the observant reader would recognise that the British used conventional rather than political force to retake the Falklands.

Another proponent of the optimist school is John Mueller with his book *Retreat from Doomsday*. Mueller makes two related arguments. First he states that 'war is merely an idea – an institution, like duelling or slavery', and as such, it can, like duelling and slavery, disappear from human affairs.[15] His second argument is that the decline in the utility of force has longer historical roots than the atomic bomb; conventional war has become so destructive that nuclear weapons make little to no difference to the deterrence of major war. Thus, the reasoning behind Mueller's 'obsolescence of war' is rather the fundamental change in the *costs of waging war*, the change in the *moral and aesthetic valuation of human life* and an ever-growing hunger for *economic prosperity*. [16] This argument is very similar to the one Francis Fukuyama put forward in *The End of history*. At its basis, this argument is a contestation of the predominant pessimistic view of human nature, which of course makes it open to dispute.

A third prominent author is Rupert Smith, the single 'military man' of the optimist school. As was presented above, optimist arguments have generally found their basis outside the conduct of war. In contrast, Smith ascertains the problem to be inherent to the conduct of war, naming it the 'interstate war paradigm'. [17] 'War', Smith claims, 'exists no more' or at least the kind of war we associate with the 'interstate war paradigm.' The general tendency, Smith argues, is that 'military force may have achieved a local military success, but frequently this success failed to produce political promise: there is no decisive victory' and thus force, despite its impressive display, has lost its utility. [18] What is needed is 'a new paradigm'; a paradigm that Smith describes as 'war amongst the people', which recognizes the limitations of the use of force and believes that the *clash of wills* is more important than the *clash of strengths*. [19]

The Persistent Relevance of War: The Pessimists

In contrast to the optimist school, some scholars have come to the opposite conclusion; force, despite the development of nuclear weapons, still has utility as a tool of policy. [20] Hence, the declining utility of force is a premature conclusion. There are at least two strains of thought that defy the grounds for optimism; one does so by challenging the *logic of escalation*, the other by considering *future developments of international politics* and *new revolutions of military affairs*.

In his book, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, Morton S. Halperin uses the Korean War in the early 50's as evidence

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for the claim that war, despite the introduction of nuclear weapons, has not become obsolescent. According to Halperin, the escalation of limited warfare can be kept under control by the super powers, although it is very precarious to do so. As long as certain types of aggression, such as homeland invasions, can be detained, conflicts remain 'local limited war[s]'. [21] However, local wars are still dangerous because of the risk of sparking a 'nuclear holocaust'. [22] The logic of escalation is thus not deterministic; rather it is contingent and highly dependent on how belligerents act and are perceived to act. Therefore, to argue that nuclear weapons prevent states from resorting to conventional war is a bit brazen, similar to when one wishes 'to believe in magic'. [23] In fact, as Kaufmann suggests, 'The existence of nuclear stalemate may actually invite the resort to local action with conventional weapons'. [24] In this reasoning, military force is still a tool of policy to states whether or not they have a nuclear arsenal. Thus, depending on the 'character and scale' of a conflict, limited military operations can maintain their utility. [25]

In his paper, *The Utility of Force in a World of Scarcity*, John Orme seeks to give a serious and systematic response to the proponents of 'the optimist school.' [26] According to Orme, the optimist school commits the fallacy of taking a 'linear view of history,' which leads them to believe that history cannot change for the worse. [27] Development is perceived as irreversible. To describe the state of history of humanity used by the optimist school, Orme invokes Francis Bacon's observation about ambition. Three types of ambition can potentially dominate history: the *domestic* strive for power, the *international* strive for power of their country over mankind, and the power and 'empire of mankind in general over the universe', the last of which is nobler than the other two. [28] According to Orme's perception of the development of history, we currently live in the 'noble time' of mankind's dominion over the universe, and the ultimate arbiter of international politics is no longer the use of force. In short, Orme's argument is that, while the proponents of the optimist school may be right about the declining utility of force in the contemporary world, an incoming 'world of scarcity' will create the conditions for force to have utility once again.

The argument builds on two deductions about the future: Orme's starts out by outlining a new revolution in military affairs, what is called the *military technical revolution*. According to Orme, this revolution 'can be expected to ease the restraints, reduce the costs, and increase the effectiveness of the use of force for some purposes.' [29] Second, *population growth* and the *spread of industrialization* will, with their endlessly greater demand for food and raw materials, put pressure on the limits of earth's natural resources. [30] Orme concludes that 'the combination of environmental threats and resource constraints may eventually bring a fundamental alteration in the basic conditions of international politics' and he continues 'when the empire of man over nature can no longer be easily extended, then the only way for one people to increase its standard of living is by redistributing the sources or fruits of industry from others to themselves. The surest way to do so is by extending man's empire over man.' [31]

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In light of both the optimists, that foresee the end of war itself, and Orme's assertion that civilization once again will return to man's empire over man, it is worth considering whether there really is something new under the sun or not. In that regard, there are two issues that should be raised here. One is our ability to predict the future; the other is the use of force and its alternatives as tools of policy.

In a recent paper, Colin S. Gray addresses these two issues in relation to the utility of force. According to Gray, it is imperative to recognize that 'times change – history is chronological, but it is not reliable linear.' [32] While we might have a good idea of what the first decade of the 21st century will bring, we have no reliable means to know anything about the second. Because times change for better or worse, there is no reason to believe that current trends will continue; change needs not mean the progress that the optimist emphasizes. The optimist assumption that progress is irreversible is thus a fallacy. Instead we ought to acknowledge that 'we do not know what the 21st century will bring.' [33] The same argument can be extended to Orme's thesis that the world will change for the worse when scarcity kicks in. Such types of deductive predictions have not had great success in the past, [34] nor will they in the future, which is why states around the globe, according to Gray, should 'prepare rather than ... plan' for the future. [35]

The other problem concerns the tools that governments have to pursue their political goals. By examining Joseph Nye's concepts of 'hard' and 'soft' power, Gray finds some particular issues within the promises of soft power troubling. According to Gray, 'soft power lends itself too easily to mischaracterization as the (generally unavailable)

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alternative to military and economic power.' The exercise of power is, like war, reciprocal in nature, hence the ones, which power is directed at, also have a vote. Thus, when Luard emphasizes the persuasive power of political systems, or when Mueller stresses the importance of changing moral and aesthetic of human life, they discard the question of how such powers are to be exercised. Emptying the toolbox of governments by substituting hard with soft power in this way is certainly not desirable. Hence, while optimists call for the use of soft power, pessimists call for the continued relevance of hard power. The use of hard power, when reading Orme's version of the future, seems too much without consequence. The problem arises with the alleged revolution of military affairs which he takes for granted. In contrast, Eliot Cohen points out that a bigger conflict is needed to determine if there really is an on-going revolution of military affairs.[36] With this argument in mind, the idea of *frictionless war* as the norm for the future, as proposed by Orme, seems absurd when the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are considered. The utility of force is in this regard overemphasised.

While both positions discussed above hold a lot of value on their own merit, they miss the central point. They fail to grapple with the core of the issue and thus do not bring anything new to the understanding of the utility of force. Their contributions were known all along; acts of war are always, because of their political nature, bound by the 'constraints and disincentives' of the international context.[37] Hence, as Gray points out, 'Military force has less utility as an instrument of policy in the 21st century than it did in times past, even recent times past,' but this does not imply that the use of force before the 20th century was without limitations.[38] The constraints and disincentives have evolved within the international context because war has always been costly. The fear of excommunication in the Middle Ages was a disincentive, similar to the situation where it is now illegal by the UN charter to wage aggressive wars. There have always existed reasons not to go to war, but they have not hindered wars in the past, nor is it (im)possible to eliminate wars in the future. The nuclear revolution in that regard represents a new set of constraints and disincentives on the use of force.

Therefore I would argue that *the utility of force is contextual*. This argument rests on three interconnected Clausewitzian points: First, as Clausewitz points out, 'war is a gamble' and therefore the utility of force can only be known in retrospect.[39] Because of this *post facto* nature, the utility of force does not have a 'fixed metric value', nor is it 'some free-floating objective calculable truth.'[40] Thus, 'the utility of force varies with culture and circumstance', making it truly contextual.[41] The context of the use of force is the nature of the war, thus Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity of opposed forces of *violence*, *chance* and *politics*. [42] The 'irrational forces' of emotions, hatred and violence – 'non-rational forces' of probability, friction and chance – and 'rational forces' of policy equally make the utility of force a contextual endeavour.[43] Third, the reciprocal nature of war; the enemy always has a say. 'War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale' fought under asymmetrical conditions to subdue our enemy to do our will. [44] Thus, depending on who is fighting (states, sub-state or non-state actors) and their will to carry on will make the force that one side employs highly contextual.

Let us look at the utility of force as it revealed itself for both sides in the Vietnam War. First we must recognize that the war for the North Vietnamese was 'total,' while for the Americans it was 'limited.'[45] This in turn imposes different *constraints* and *disincentives* within each belligerent's *trinity*. To the North Vietnamese being the 'total' defender meant that political will to wage war was big, while for the Americans waging a limited war far away meant that the political will to do so was smaller. The American strategy revolved around a *clash of strengths*, while the 'civilian suffering-based' and 'casualty generating' strategies that the North Vietnamese used were designed to attack the American trinity.[46] The end result was, that 'over time, the costs of [...] war will inevitably generate widespread opposition at home. The causes of dissent lie beyond the political elite; they lie in the structure of the conflict itself – in the type of war being pursued and in the asymmetric which forms its distinctive character.'[47] In retrospect the conclusion was that the Americans massive use of force had no utility for its political purpose and in contrast the North Vietnamese use of force had great utility despite its ineffectiveness on the battlefield. In hindsight Kissinger concluded, 'we fought a military war; our opponent fought a political one. [...] The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win' [48]

The implication of maintaining that the utility of force is contextual is nothing but one of Clausewitz's original points in *On War*, that 'War is no pastime; it is no more joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts. It is a serious means to a serious end'. [49] And thus he warned against the dangers of making war into something that it is

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not; war is, and will always be, about *death*, *destruction* and *chaos*. Therefore policy makers and governments should think long and hard before they go to war; they do not yet know how great the utility of the force they direct at their political goal will turn out to be.

Conclusion

The development of nuclear weapons has had a big impact not only on strategic thinking about their use, but also on the conventional utility of force. First, the optimist argument that the utility of force is declining was explored. Then, a pessimistic answer was given to this claim; maintaining that force despite its decline in utility certainly will have it in the future. Last, I argued that both perceptions carried some merit, but that they missed the point that was known all along; the utility of force is contextual.

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