# Have Western Powers Lost the Art of Strategy?

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**Misunderstanding Clausewitz**

To lose something, one must once have possessed it. Strategy is a concept western powers have struggled to define throughout history, and never truly owned. The 2003 Iraq War represented a particularly challenging period in this struggle for understanding. Hew Strachan sees strategy as where policy and operations intersect, as 'an attempt to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force to a particular case' (Strachan 2013 pp. 12). This implies each war is unique. Strachan explains that Clausewitz's maxim 'war is an extension of politics by other means' is only one side of a dialectic – the ideal. The reality is that 'war shapes and changes policy' (Strachan 2013 pp.55). By relying on strategy as a linear concept, wherein force makes concrete our political aims, we risk neglecting an eternal aspect of war – what Clausewitz calls friction. Clausewitz's writing is replete with Newtonian concepts – friction, force, centre of gravity – and just as the laws of physics are unmoving, friction will always be part of war. It is friction in its various forms that makes each war unique and demanding of a specially-tailored strategy.

Understanding this fundamentally frictional nature of war is a precondition to formulating effective strategy: Clausewitz writes, 'The first duty [. . .] of the art of war is to keep policy from demanding things that go against the

nature of war' (Paret 2007 pp.369); for Strachan, strategy 'has to deal in the first instance not with policy, but with the nature of war' (Strachan 2013 pp.12). Clausewitz's view of the nature of war as a Trinity of passion, chance and reason has come under attack from van Creveld, who wrote 'the Clausewitzian universe is rapidly becoming out of date and can no longer provide us with a proper framework for understanding war' (van Creveld 1991, pp. 57-58). Van Creveld suggested that the new era of primarily intra-state wars does not follow the Trinitarian pattern. Stone counters that Clausewitz's Trinity is not so frozen in time – the Trinity was Clausewitz's subordination of theory to historical reality, a reality in which the pursuit of war as a continuation of politics, through the use of absolute force, was not practiced by all, nor was it always effective, due to the presence of friction (Stone 2007, pp. 285).

In 1979 Michael Howard wrote that we depend 'on the technological dimension of strategy to the detriment of its operational requirements, while we ignore its societal implications altogether [. . .] Social factors will determine whether the outcome of these [. . .] operations is accepted as decisive' (Howard 1979). This helps explain the difficulties encountered in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. It is the enemy who decides when your force is decisive. On both the political and the operational level, certain western powers fell into the trap of believing they could enact Clausewitz's ideal and impose linear strategy on Iraq. Through technology, they believed they could remove the human, interactive nature of war. In reality, the militaries involved were more equipped for a conventional war than for nuanced war amongst a passionate population – the use of force was not allocated to a particular political case but instead copied and pasted from the past. Thus the errors did not arise out of thin air, but were the result of a long strategic legacy, and 'mis-learned' lessons. This discussion aims to show the danger of such linear thinking by mapping out how, in the case of Iraq, simplistic politics led to simplistic use of force.

**'Ideologically Driven Belligerence'**

The Paris attacks of 13th November 2015 elicited rhetorical speeches from various political figures: David Cameron had previously said Daesh represents an 'existential threat' (Mardell 2015); the Chief of German Intelligence at the time said we need to treat this as a 'terrorist world war' (BBC News 2 2015). After 9/11 neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz wrote we were engaged in 'a world war against another totalitarian aggressor' adding 'the stakes are at least as great as they were in the world wars' (Podhoretz 2004). It may be words like these are not always meant literally, but the tendency to see threats as 'existential' (begging the question – 'to the existence of what?' Certainly not national sovereignty as was the case in Europe against Hitler) can have profound consequences for strategy.

Rhetoric is fundamentally a manipulation of public perception, and after 9/11 this was taken to extremes. Political discourse in the US, UK and Australia was concentrated in the hands of small groups with their own agendas. Alan Doig explains the 'behind the scenes' politics in the US before the invasion of Iraq: Quoting Richard Clarke's own account of events, Doig reveals ''Bush's one-time terrorism advisor, Richard Clarke, has claimed that the Bush administration entered office 'with Iraq on its agenda' . . . Bush told Rumsfeld and the military to examine the military options. Already, according to [Treasury Secretary] O'Neill, the focus was on the hows of ending Saddam's regime rather than the whys'' (Doig 2007 pp.27). Furthermore Bush asked Clarke to 'find a link between Saddam and the 9/11 attacks' despite Clarke's assurances that all intelligence pointed towards Al Qaeda acting independently of Saddam. It seems in the case of the Bush administration, politics was becoming an extension of a desire to go to war. Public discourse was, through selective releasing of intelligence, channeled towards this bellicose aim. US military power was to be used to fulfill a policy of eradicating evil in the form of dangerous states. This policy would require the complete destruction of the enemy's resistance: 'containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies' (Bush 2002, Graduation Speech at West Point June 1st). By starting strategy-making from this point, Bush was setting himself up for a fall, as his limitless aims called for decisive and rapid military and political victory that would not be possible due to the political situation in Iraq.

This behaviour represents an extreme but is not an isolated incident in US foreign policy. Bismarck once said 'If our ordained authorities regard the war as necessary and have declared it, it will be carried on with all our fighting edge . . . But there will not be behind it the same vim and fire as in a war in which we are attacked' (Speech of February 6th, 1888). Patrick Porter suggests much of US current foreign policy can be attributed to a history of shock attacks: Pearl Harbour shocked the US into the realization that the oceans were no longer a 'barrier' to but a 'carrier' of

potential threats; Korea may not have been an attack on US land but demonstrated how easily a local conflict could become internationalized; 9/11 represented the last of these major incidents, where an enemy thought to be thousands of miles away was able to leap the Atlantic and attack not the military but innocent civilians. According to Porter, Bush's desire to go to war fits, ironically, within the Wilsonian liberal tradition: 'The liberal tradition contains the seeds of ideologically driven belligerence' (Porter 2015, pp.34-35). Indeed Bush said, 'From the fourteen points to the four freedoms to the [Reagan] speech at Westminster, America has put its power at the service of principle' (Speech in Whitehall, November 2003). Power at the service of 'principle' is a minefield for making strategic choices – how much power is warranted for 'principles' of 'good and evil'? Too much power risks turning one into the bully rather than the liberator. Opinion is divided on this, however what is clear is that 9/11 caused Bush to promote policies that exhibited historic traits where US military force and mass spending (Iraq and Afghanistan are said to have cost between $4 and $6 trillion: Londono, 2013) were geared towards a moral crusade.

**Clausewitz and the RMA**

The quick success of the 1991 Gulf War is partly to blame for the failure of strategy in Iraq. The overwhelming military success of the Gulf War was attributed by some to superior technology: GPS systems allowed for navigation in the desert; precision-guided weapons could take out enemy convoys and create chaos on the ground, forcing Iraqi soldiers to surrender. The effective, rapid and casualty-light operations (of course not forgetting the 146 American soldiers who lost their lives) became widely discussed as a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The Office of Net Assessment (ONA) believed the RMA would 'fundamentally' change the 'character and conduct of conflict [. . .] by producing a dramatic increase [. . .] in the combat potential and military effectiveness of armed forces' (Krepinevich 1994 pp.30). Admiral Bill Owens believed that, if we could make the 'right choices faster' than the enemy and be more 'agile' then 'we will be able to win in any kind of military confrontation' (Owens 2000 pp.118) and lift the fog of war. David Betz calls this 'one of the more egregiously hubristic statements of military futurism in recent memory' (Betz 2015 pp.57). The RMA supported the view of strategy as a linear relationship between policy and operations.

Not everyone was so optimistic: Betz also draws attention to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard who was less convinced. In his essay '*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*', Baudrillard argues the Gulf War was not a war, as the outcome was decided before the first plane left base. Rather it was a stage-managed event for the world to see. (Baudrillard 1995 pp. 74). Furthermore he notes the 'mathematical and punctual efficiency, which is another way of not recognising the enemy as such, just as lobotomy is a way of not recognising madness as such' (Ibid., pp.43). The Gulf War is the perfect example of what Secretary of State Schultz called 'fun wars' in the 1980's – meaning wars in which the enemy presents himself to bear the full brunt of one's force, without offering any resistance: Saddam's forces were badly trained and his strategy inept; politically, the US had almost unanimous political backing both domestically and internationally. This was hardly a Clausewitzian duel between two strategic actors, and thus subsequent attempts to derive strategic lessons from the Gulf were based on a rare ideal rather than the reality of war.

We cannot deny that technology has vastly improved the accuracy and power of our weapons: 'Today, 70 to 80 percent of guided munitions fall within 10 metres of their targets, even at night, with overcast skies, or in moderate winds. This is a remarkable improvement compared to WWII, when only about 18 percent of US bombs fell within 1,000 feet of their targets, and only 20 percent of British bombs dropped at night fell within 5 miles of theirs' (Pape 2004 pp.116-117). Mathematics plays an essential role in the development of warfare, but cannot be relied on to carry out all political aims, due to the constant relevance of passion and chance. Freedman notes the 'tendency to seize on new technologies as a means of turning war against its own nature' (Freedman 2006, pp.42): when George Bush said the following, he was asking of the military something that went against the nature of war: 'These past two months [referring to Afghanistan in 2001] have shown that an innovative doctrine and high-tech weaponry can shape and dominate an unconventional conflict. The brave men and women of our military are rewriting the rules of war with new technologies . . .' (Bush Speech see Betz 57). It was seen by some as a mathematical, technological certainty that the initial success in Afghanistan could be superimposed onto Iraq.

However the key difference between 1991 and 2003 was in 2003 the Iraqi state was dismantled by Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and subsequently collapsed. In 1991 the objective was to evict Saddam

from Kuwait and the war had a definitive beginning and end. In 2003, despite Bush calling an end to operations, the battle continued. The enemy, the evolving Sunni and Shia insurgent groups in Iraq, did not consider the war to be over, despite the US's use of superior technology. As observed above, the enemy in 1991 truly had not had a choice: 'The Iraqis played to America's strengths by putting their faith entirely on defensive battles in the desert or along the coast, a strategy that was destined to fail even if the Iraqi troops fought bravely' (Mueller 1995, pp.97). But the insurgents who emerged out of 2003 were not fighting for a tyrant: they were fighting against what they perceived to be the tyrant of the US, and to carve out their slice of power in the new political vacuum. Writing in 2007, Toby Dodge suggested 'The origins of the Iraqi civil war lie in the complete collapse of both the administrative and coercive capacity of the state . . . It is the United States' inability to reconstruct them that lies at the heart of the Iraq problem.' The result was that 'Previously 'fuzzy' or secondary identity traits become politicized and 'enumerated.' Survival, or a degree of predictability for yourself and your family, becomes obtainable through the increasingly militant deployment of ethnic or sectarian identity. There is nothing inevitable about the unfolding of this process; the primary cause is the collapse of the state.' Dodge concludes that 'This clearly is a defeat of historic proportions for US foreign policy' (Dodge 2007, pp.87-89).

The inability of western powers to appreciate fully the political complexities in Iraq made it much easier to believe that military power could be used to carry out their political objectives, and made it harder to predict and adapt to the character of the war that emerged. This made it impossible to devise an appropriate military strategy for what would become a war against insurgents. This was not 1991, and as LTC M. Wade Markel wrote, 'The United States is fighting the Global War on Terrorism with a mindset shaped by the Cold War. That mindset helped create today's joint force that possesses nearly irresistible powers in conventional wars against nation-states. Unfortunately, the wars the United States must fight today in Afghanistan and Iraq are not of this variety' (Foster 2005 pp.8). Behind the United States there was a strategic culture that focused primarily on conventional power as a means of decisively defeating the enemy. Freedman is in line with Markel when he writes of the classic model of war:

'It focused on how regular forces were pitted against each other . . . kept noncombatants out of the frame and assumed that the fate of nations would be determined by the result of the fighting . . . And the classic model has survived to this day, we see it in our attempts to achieve the decisive victory through new technologies, and in counter-insurgency, the model encourages the elimination of the enemy as a fighting force, as opposed to tackling the sources of its popular support' (Freedman 2015).

**The Fog Persists**

We have spoken of US strategy and how it leaks from the past into the present, but considering insurgent strategic culture can help illuminate any deficiencies in western attempts to counter it. A popular maxim used during the RMA period was Sun Tzu's: 'know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster' (Griffith 1963 pp.50). The idea of 'knowledge is power' was central in RMA thinking. Mao Tse-Tung read Sun Tzu in depth and during his Long March of 1934, after several failed urban insurrections, Mao reflected on what had gone wrong in Communist strategy. He quotes the same maxim, however practices it differently. Knowledge for Mao did not mean simply the ability to see more of the battlefield. This information is of limited use as war is a fundamentally human activity. Mao would use this concept to form a better relationship with the peasants, understand their grievances and build a strong human foundation. Through this he could develop better human intelligence and a good understanding of the environment, thus lowering his burden of friction and allowing him to prolong the war to the detriment of the nationalists.

John A. Gentry writes: 'Sensors cannot identify human motives, measure human emotions, quantify the coherence of human organizations, or assess the importance of the data they gather' (Gentry 2002 pp.91). Mao had a constant influx of data, but it was *human* data. His sensors were the eyes and ears of his followers. Through the human network he developed he was able to devise a strategy, which, through subversion and substitution, undermined the superior strength of the Kuomintang. Crucially, he encouraged his guerrillas not to fight on the enemy's terms: 'defeat is the invariable outcome where native forces fight with inferior weapons against modernized forces on the latter's terms' (Toft, 2001 pp. 104). In 1991 the Iraqis had presented themselves as sitting ducks – this was not the case with the insurgents. Bush's belief that the US was 're-defining war on it's own terms' (Toronto Star 2003) is undermined

when pitted against the strategic culture of insurgency, whose very aim is to undermine the enemy's superior force. To refer back to Strachan, Bush's war in Iraq did not take Iraq as a 'particular case' but tried to impose an inherited strategic mould onto a conflict it did not fit, against an enemy who refused to carry bull's-eyes on their backs.

How do the above-discussed factors culminate into a flawed strategy? Attempts at decisive force can be both undermined and counterproductive, especially when fighting an insurgency. 'Guerrilla operations are the muck, the quicksand in which military machinery bogs down in futility' (Katzenbach and Hanrahan 1995 pp.329): Toft shows that between 1800 and 1998, conventional actors won 70.8% of asymmetric conflicts, and irregular 29.2%, relative to one another. This is a significant margin. However Toft then shows how misleading statistics can be – by dividing this time into fifty year periods, he shows victories by weak actors actually increase over time, and between 1950 and 1998, weak actors win 55% of asymmetric conflicts. This suggests, despite the increased use of technology by major powers over the last two hundred years, weak actors have found ways of winning, be it psychologically or physically. Indeed by 1998 during the RMA boom, weak actors had the numbers edge (Toft 2001 pp.97). This implies a strategic gap in the use of this technology, an inability to bring it to bear against weak actors.

Force can be undermined politically. The Tet Offensive of 1968, although a military success for the US, was also a political disaster, proving to the home population that this war was far from over, as had been promised. In 1991, if Saddam had been successful in coaxing Israel into entering the war by firing Scud missiles at them, he could have undermined the US-led coalition which included many Arab states. Force can also be undermined physically through highly effective improvised techniques. In Somalia locals saw the US troops not as liberators but invaders, and US helicopters were downed by improvised anti-air systems (Bowden describes Somalis who would lie in holes in the ground, plant RPG's and wait for Americans to fly over – Bowden 1999 pp. 111). Stone points out that through deception and concealment Serbia's military was able to avoid mass casualties despite a 78-day NATO bombing campaign. Gaddafi is also alleged to have used human shields to complicate NATO air operations, and the use of 'improvised explosive devices' (IEDs) by the Taliban caused the majority of US deaths in Afghanistan in 2010, killing 268 servicemen (Stone 2012 pp. 113-115).

Force can also be counterproductive. Gentry notes that in late 2001 'errant US munitions killed allied troops and many Afghan civilians, and twice struck well-marked Kabul facilities of the International Committee of the Red Cross' (Gentry 2001 pp.90). Events like this serve to alienate not only the local population but also that at home, and internationally. One of the more damning accounts given of the use of US force in Iraq was by Brigadier Nigel Alwyn Foster. Foster notes in the US army's early operations the 'pre-disposition to offensive operations, and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head on . . . they saw the military destruction of the enemy as a strategic goal in its own right' (Foster 2005 pp.3 . . . pp.5). Foster calls on Nagl and Cohen for support: Nagl writes of the US in Vietnam that they also prized the 'absolute defeat of the enemy on the field of battle' (Foster 2005 pp. 8); Cohen believes the main aspects of US strategic culture are '[t]he preference for massing a large number of men and machines and the predilection for direct and violent assault' (Foster 2005 pp.9). Foster also notes the 'sense of moral righteousness' that 'could serve to distort collective military judgement' (Foster 2005 pp.6). Foster, then, supports our notion that political and military cultures were imposed on Iraq in a less than nuanced way, and that the former can deeply affect the latter.

Operations in Fallujah in 2004 show how counterproductive force can be. After the brutal and globally-witnessed murder of four US contractors by Sunni insurgents, many in the US fell into the same pattern of inflamed rhetoric leading to an excessive military response, not realizing this might be exactly the reaction hoped for by the insurgents. Carr draws attention to the chasm between Bush's proclamation that 'Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious . . . this separates us from the enemy we fight' (Carr 2008, pp.22) and the amount of civilians killed in Fallujah. Carr's aim is to blur the paradigm of civilization versus barbarism espoused by many in the West. But regardless of one's moral stance on civilian casualties, more importantly for this discussion is that the US reaction allowed the insurgents to present *the West* as the barbaric force, and to transform Fallujah 'into a rallying cry that will continue to resonate throughout the Islamic world for years to come' (Carr 2008, pp. 34). For this reason Fallujah was a strategic failure. An insurgency cannot be defeated merely on a military level. In instances like this the 'ideologically driven belligerence' of western liberalism that Porter suggests can become a major recruiting agent for insurgent groups. These factors should inform decision-making and influence the severity of the force used.

## Conclusion

After the decision in UK Parliament to launch airstrikes in Syria, David Betz described the action as 'unfathomably strategically retrograde', adding 'there is no plausible aim declared' and most importantly, '[w]e will come to regret as a society turning our wars into plot devices of domestic political theatre' (Norton-Taylor 2015). Hopefully this discussion has illuminated how important it is not to view policy and operations in a linear fashion, but to see them as constantly interacting and interdependent entities. The tendency towards inflamed rhetoric of existential threats and total destruction, towards war as an extension of the desire to save political face, and towards technological fixes still exists in our attitudes towards Iraq and Syria. In the case of Daesh we face a group that operates both territorially and in the virtual sphere, and our conduct over Syria may have consequences, as we saw in Paris, that reach far beyond the region we bomb. It is important not to assume we can read linearly from left to right, in a story of 'good versus evil' that has a beginning, middle and an end – in doing so we risk forgetting that the strategy of an insurgent group is to reverse the superiority of the enemy and thus hijack, distort, spread and prolong the narrative, robbing the counter-insurgent of his tidy denouement. Reifying the opposition as 'evil' can lead to policies that deeply impact the effectiveness of strategy, as there can be a failure to see the opposition as a living, thinking strategic being. Demonization becomes another tool, just like technology or lobotomy, for removing the human element of war. This is done to the peril of strategy. However the fundamental lesson for future strategists is that each war must be assessed as politically and militarily unique. Failure in Iraq goes to show that our strategic histories can risk becoming hereditary diseases rather than proud legacies.

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