



The Origin of Strategy

By: Rich Horwath

The use of strategy has literally changed the map of the world and caused the rise and fall of many a nation and its people. The unique combination of wisdom, science and craft have made strategy creation and its application a universally sought after skill. A look back at where it all began and how it developed from its military origins provides the foundation for a more thorough grasp of what often seems ungraspable.

The Dawn of Strategy

Strategy sprung from the need for people to defeat their enemies. The first treatises that discuss strategy are from the Chinese during the period of 400 – 200 B.C. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, written in 400 B.C. has received critical acclaim as the best work on military strategy, including those that have followed it centuries later. However, unlike the theoretical treatises that followed, the Chinese works took the form of narratives, including poems and prose accounts. An example of this prose form of strategy can be seen in the poem by Lao Tzu, the father of Tao-ism:

Once grasp the great form without a form
and you will roam where you will
with no evil to fear,
calm, peaceful, at ease.
The hub of the wheel runs upon the axle.
In a jar, it is the hole that holds water.
So advantage is had
from whatever there is;
but usefulness rises
from whatever is not.

The term "strategy" is derived indirectly from the Classic and Byzantine (330 A.D.) Greek "strategos," which means "general." While the term is credited to the Greeks, no Greek ever used the word. The Greek equivalent for the modern word "strategy" would have been "strategike episteme" or (general's knowledge) "strategon sophia" (general's wisdom). One of the most famous Latin works in the area of military strategy is written by Frontius and has the Greek title of *Strategemata*. *Strategemata* describes a compilation of strategema, or "strategems," which are literally "tricks of war." The Roman historians also introduced the term "strategia" to refer to territories under control of a strategus, a military commander in ancient Athens and a member of the Council of War. The word retained this narrow, geographic meaning until Count Guibert, a French military thinker, introduced the term "La Strategique" in 1799, in the sense that is understood today. Consequently, neither the military community before Count Guibert nor the business community before H. Igor Ansoff (*Corporate Strategy*, 1965), could see the strategic element in their domains clearly enough to give it a name.

Some of the more important military strategy authors include Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), author of *The Prince*, Adam Heinrich von Buelow (1752-1807), a German writer who was the first to describe strategy in terms of bases and lines of communication, and more recently B.H. Liddell Hart (1895-1970), author of *Strategy*. B.H. Liddell Hart contributed the 'Expanding Torrent' theory which contained two points: 1) A diversionary attack keeps enemy forces' attention localized at the immediate front, and 2) A main attack made up of highly mobile, fast moving troops avoids confrontation with enemy frontline forces and seeks to destroy enemy headquarters, command and control lines of supply.

Perhaps the military figure with the most impact on strategy is Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). Clausewitz was a Prussian General whose work entitled, *On War*, is probably the most famous treatise ever on the subject. Clausewitz focused on two questions: What is war, and what purpose does it serve? The Prussian General viewed war as a duel between two independent minds. Clausewitz' key to strategy was to always be strong, first overall and then at the decisive point. Whereas the Chinese philosophy was the use of minimum force with a greater emphasis on trickery, Clausewitz recommended the use of maximum force whenever possible. Most military thought leaders agree that many years from now, it will be the Chinese and Clausewitz' writings on military strategy that will have stood the test of time.

The Difference Between Strategy & Tactics

The complementary nature of strategy and tactics has defined their intertwined existence. In the military realm, tactics teach the use of armed forces in engagements, while strategy teaches the use of engagements to achieve the objectives of the war. In war, actions become strategic or tactical depending on whether they relate to the form or the significance of the engagement. With tactics, the soldier is forced to quickly apply the tools they have in the heat of battle. With strategy, the commander does not see most of the situation; he must guess and make assumptions, which decreases his confidence. As a result, the commander can become slowed by fear and rendered indecisive in just those moments that call for decisive action.

Just as the term "strategy" originated with the Greeks, so too did the term "tactics." The original meaning of "tactics" is "order"—literally the "ordering of formations on the battlefield." However, the current use of "strategic" and "tactical" stems from World War II. "Strategic" is associated with long-range aircraft and missiles while "tactical" has referred to shorter-range aircraft and missiles. Interestingly, there is no discussion of warships being either strategic or tactical. The current terminology comes from the rhetoric of proponents of air power in a two-step process of transportation. First, bomber aircraft that were used against industrial targets were called "strategic," to convey their ability to win wars on their own. This was opposed to mere tactical bombing in support of ground forces. The term "strategic" then became associated with the completely incidental quality of long range, which bombers might need to attack industrial targets in some geographic areas. In turn, that caused 'tactical' to acquire the meaning of short range.

War & Strategy

Strategy originated from the necessity of peoples to defeat their enemies. Without enemies, the need for strategy is non-existent. Keniche Ohmae, acclaimed Japanese business strategist and author of *The Mind of the Strategist*, has said that the sole purpose of strategy is to enable a company to gain, as efficiently as possible, a sustainable edge over its competitors. When no competition exists, there is no need to strategize.

The current U.S. military definition of strategy as defined by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff is as follows: The art and science of developing and using political, economic, psychological and military forces as necessary during peace and war, to afford the maximum support to policies in order to increase the probabilities and favorable consequences of victory and to lessen the chances of defeat. As the definition and military history's greatest leaders and their teachings have shown, there is no single strategy that will lead to victory over an opponent. It is this collision of intellectually driven, science-based and artistically crafted vision that has drawn so many military students to strategy's battlefields of study. Tolstoy's premise in *War and Peace* is that man attains his greatest freedom in battle. If this is so, then that freedom is preceded and interceded by the creation of strategy. The embrace of this freedom only can be taken by those bold enough to move forward without certainty, as the unexpected offers the most fertile setting to engage one's intellect.

Despite the receptivity to the unknown, military strategists have developed their keys to military success. Clausewitz advocated six principles of strategic effectiveness:

1. Advantage of terrain
2. Surprise
3. Attack from several sides
4. Aid to theatre of war by means of fortifications
5. Assistance of the people
6. Use of great moral forces

Of these six, Clausewitz believed that surprise is the basis of all operations, because without it, superiority at the decisive point is impossible. The purpose of surprise in combat is to reduce the risk of exposure to the enemy's strength. However, by taking an angle of surprise and deviating from the expected, one inherently increases the chance of failure because they are doing something out of the ordinary. Each paradoxical choice made for the sake of surprise must be paid for by some loss of strength. To this end, surprise is really the suspension, if only momentarily, of the entire reason of strategy.

One form of the military use of surprise is in the conduct of guerrilla warfare. The term "guerrilla" comes from the Spanish and means "little war." The term generally refers to combat of small units that do not seek to hold territory and describes a tactic that can be employed by anyone, including large, powerful armies. The first complete theory of guerrilla warfare was written by Lawrence of Arabia in his 1926 work, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He advocates that guerrillas should operate like a cloud of gas,

being inactive and invisible the majority of the time and relying on dispersion and mobility. Although guerrilla warfare can be employed by armies of any size, it is most commonly a relational-maneuver response to superior military strength. One of the weaknesses a guerrilla movement seeks to exploit is the self-restraint of regular forces bound by the rules and regulations of an official government.

Five levels of military strategy have been developed for understanding the aspects of warfare that need to be addressed by a commander and his forces. The five levels are:

1. Technical: weapon interaction
2. Tactical: forces directly opposed fight one another; nature of terrain is pivotal
3. Operational: struggle of minds; combat encounters
4. Theater: relates military strength to territorial space; the satellite view
5. Grand: confluence of interactions that flow up and down the levels of strategy to determine outcomes

These five levels give military personnel a common framework of understanding in discussing their objectives and means of attainment. While it's important to develop plans to be effective at each level, a realization that successful military strategy depends on the coalescing of thought and activity at each level is the true key to military victory. For instance, one may have advantage at the technical level of strategy (i.e. superior weapons) but may be inferior at the operational level (having leaders with the decision-making ability to use those weapons at the right time and place), causing loss of the battle. The Viet Nam War provides just such an example. While American forces had superior weapons, it was their losses at the higher levels of strategy (tactical, theater) that ultimately caused their withdrawal.

The Paradox of Military Strategy

There are very few areas where the use of paradox is as valuable as it is in military strategy. A bad road is good. A rocky shore is a safe place to land. A nighttime attack presents the best opportunity for victory. Paradoxes abound in the realm of military strategy. Very often, the much sought after element of surprise is shrouded in paradox. A bad road that is difficult to traverse may be the best choice because the enemy least expects an attack from that avenue. A rocky shore is a safe place to land troops because the enemy will have the fewest number of troops available to defend it. A nighttime attack may be the riskiest for the attacker but the cover of darkness allows the enemy to be taken by surprise.

Another example of paradox can be found in the relationship between the success of new, high-technology weapons and their eventual failure. Most enemies will put the majority of their resources behind ways to protect against the opposition's weapons that pose the greatest threat at that time. Therefore, less advanced or successful weapons may remain useful when the more advanced weapons have been countered and rendered ineffective by the enemy. The world's superpowers spent billions of dollars researching and developing nuclear weapons that could wipe out civilization many times over. However, due to the other superpowers devoting resources to counter these weapons and the

inherent danger of creating an endgame situation with no winners, recent military encounters have seen the use of less advanced weapons to fight wars.

Embracing Uncertainty

The development of strategy requires the courage to accept uncertainty. As the French have said, strategy is the art of conducting war not by means of coup d'oeil (glance or look) from behind a horse's ears, but in an office on a map. Strategists must accept that they will not have all of the information and not see the spectrum of events, yet be committed to creating and implementing the strategy. The uncertainty that exists is not only a product of not having complete information and being able to predict future events, it also is a product of the events generated by a dynamic and thinking opponent. The design of strategy with the relevant competitors in mind and their undetermined actions is what requires a strategist's embrace of uncertainty. This acceptance of moving forward into the unknown has been described as "negative capability," or the capability of being in uncertainty, mystery or doubt without the element of fact-seeking desperation.

The inherent uncertainty embedded in strategy is one of the primary reasons that so many military and business leaders have clung to the tangible world of tactics and operations. Tactics and operations offer a safety blanket to those whose actions indicate a "don't lose" mentality. Military history is littered with examples of leaders who could not accept the uncertainty of strategy and wound up settling for defeat at the hands of certain tactics.

One such example is from the American Civil War. In 1862, Union General George McClellan was charged with taking the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. Opposing this effort was Confederate General John Magruder. Despite outnumbering Confederate troops 67,000 to 13,000, General McClellan moved the Union troops timidly forward. General Magruder painted logs black to appear as additional guns and splintered his troops to give the impression of a much larger force. Despite an obvious advantage in numbers and the importance of attacking quickly to prevent the Confederacy from bringing in additional troops, McClellan's fear of uncertainty got the best of him. He waited to attack and by the end of April, the Confederacy had 57,000 troops at Williamsburg. McClellan's unwillingness to embrace the inherent uncertainty of strategy provided his opponent with the critical time necessary to add troops and fortify its position, costing the Union Army an undetermined number of additional lives.

Conclusion

Strategy's military roots have had a decided impact on the adoption and adaptation of the concept in the business arena. Dating back to the Chinese poems and narratives in the period of 400 – 200 B.C., strategy has been an important determinant of the shaping of the world's political, sociological and commercial landscape. The origin of strategy and its ensuing evolution can be found in the classic writings and more demonstrably seen in military history's battles and wars. The distinction between strategy and tactics, the comprehension of the paradoxes of strategy and the inherent uncertainty of strategy all add to the military's unmistakable impact on the development of the concept of strategy.

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