

Clausewitz, National Security Strategy, and Military Strategy

This course is about national security, primarily narrowly defined, and process of developing national security strategy, how a state goes about trying to provide national security.

Unfortunately, much of what you will read will be about military strategy and military operations. Military strategy is not national security strategy. Even a thinker as astute as Lawrence Freedman has the concept wrong. “The definition of Liddell Hart’s remains the best, and unless the context indicates otherwise, it is the one adopted for this study.”¹ Liddell Hart defines strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy.”² What Liddell Hart is talking about is not strategy, but military strategy; and you will discover what Freedman is actually talking about is national security strategy, not military strategy. The fundamental difference between the two is that military strategy is focused on the instrument of force to achieve the aims of policy, while national security strategy should rely on all instruments of power to achieve those goals. If properly chosen, the goals of the two strategies should be congruent, with military strategy subordinate to the national security strategy.

Freedman also argues that including all instruments of power would mean the study of strategy ceases to be distinct from the broad study of international relations and “the sense that we are dealing with ‘functional and purposive violence’ is lost.”³

My counter is that: First, we are dealing with a level of study between military strategy and international relations and that level is circumscribed by the definition of national security narrowly defined.

Second, in regards specifically to the instruments of power, if one were talking about military strategy, the focus on violence is reasonable. However, our subject is national security strategy. Although the goal is the protection of the state and its interests against the use of force and violence by foreign states and organizations, the necessary means to achieve that goal often are non-violent in nature -- diplomatic, psychological, economic, or even Joseph Nye’s soft power. “Military means” are not enough.

Much of the academic and practical aspects of the issue is found in von Clausewitz, the early 19th century German military thinker, whose book, On War, is the bible for most military strategists and thus has become the bible for many who write about national security.

In his introduction to his translation of On War, O.J. Matthis Jolles says:

Ever since the success of the Prussian armies in the wars of 1866 and 1870-71, and especially in the long years of almost unbearable tension preceding the First World War, voices were raised in England, warning of the danger of Germany’s military preparations and the militaristic spirit that stood behind her feverish armaments. In vain experts tried to explain to the public that full understanding of Prussian

¹Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, xvii.

²Hart, Strategy: the Indirect Approach, 334.

³Freedman, xvii.

militarism was essential for the maintenance of peace in Europe and this could only be gained by studying 'the most important military work ever written' – Clausewitz' *On War*.

Famous military leaders and writers in Germany in those days, like Moltke, von der Goltz, von Blume, Meckel, and many others, declared themselves to be pupils of Clausewitz and said that Germany owed to him her successes on the battlefield. . . . When asked by the English Major Stewart L. Murray, who was preparing a book on Clausewitz, to state his opinion as to the importance of that great philosopher of war, Meckel answered: "I like, every other German officer, have, consciously or unconsciously, instructed in the spirit of Clausewitz. I maintain that everyone who nowadays [1913] makes or teaches war in a modern sense bases himself upon Clausewitz, even if he is not conscious of it."⁴

Unfortunately, in their enthusiasm for Clausewitz, these men forgot the extraordinary diplomatic efforts of Otto von Bismarck that provided the political context for the Prussian wars and the alliance basis for years of stability that followed.

Perhaps the problem is how the followers of Clausewitz, rightly or wrongly, have interpreted a critical section of his book.

24. War is a Mere Continuation of Policy by Other Means

We see, therefore, that war is not merely a political act but a real political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means. What now still remains peculiar to war relates merely to the peculiar character of the means it uses. The art of war in general and the commander in each particular case can demand that the tendencies and designs of policy shall be not incompatible with these means, and the claim is certainly no trifling one. But however powerfully it may react on political designs in particular cases, still it must always be regarded as only a modification of them; for the political design is the object, while war is the means, and the means can never be thought of apart from the object.

25. Diversity in the Nature of War

The greater and the more powerful the motives for war, the more they affect the whole existence of the nations involved, and the more violent the tension that precedes war, so more closely will war conform to its abstract conception. The more it will be concerned with the destruction of the enemy, the more closely the military aim and the political object coincide, and the more purely military, and the less political, war seems to be. But the weaker the motives and tensions, the less will the natural tendency of the military element,

⁴ Jolles, O. J. Matthijs, trans. Introduction. *On War*. By Karl von Clausewitz. Washington, D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1943. xxi.

the tendency of violence, coincide with the directives of policy; the more, therefore, must war be diverted from its natural tendency, the greater is the differential between the political object and the aim of ideal war, and the more does war seem to become political.⁵

After reading the above convoluted reasoning, one might wish to forgive those who believe themselves to be followers of von Clausewitz for their misunderstandings. I would suggest one should not forgive them of their failure to see his shortcomings.

To his credit, he tries to make the use of force, war, an instrument of the political design, which is the object of the endeavor. In our words, the use of force, war, an instrument to achieve the national interests, the goals of the state. In section 25, he muddles this necessary relationship with his discussion of “the natural tendency of the military element, the tendency of violence.”

The use of force has no purpose other than as a means to achieve the national interest. Yes, the military instrument can place a not “trifling” demand on policy because of the nature of the military instrument. The military commander must ensure that his political leaders are aware of the tradeoffs of military effectiveness against the goals of national security. But, as Clausewitz tries to stress: “it [the military commander’s requirements] must always be regarded as only a modification of them [the designs of policy]; for the political design is the object, while war is the means, and the means can never be thought of apart from the object.” This last comment that the means can never be thought of apart from the object weakens the relationship. It implies a balancing whereby the means achieve an equality with the ends. This cannot be. One must consider the effectiveness of the instrument, but the goal must remain paramount. The national interest sets the course. As we will begin to understand better as the course develops, the national interest, the political object, the goal is not immutable.

Where von Clausewitz appears absolutely clear is where he is absolutely wrong -- “war is not merely a political act but a real political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means. What now still remains peculiar to war relates merely to the peculiar character of the means it uses.” He attempts to put war as an instrument in the service of the political goal, but he, without question, believes that there is only the means of war and its violence.

Liddell Hart and Freedman are prisoners of this thought. I do not want you to be such prisoners. Our focus is on strategy as a statement of or an approach to what is to be done and how. What are our security interests and how can we attain them? A national security strategy should be a coherent, comprehensive approach to the application of a state’s resources and instruments of power toward the achievement of the state’s national security interests. If the strategy is traditionally focused, then the primary instrument will be political-military power. Not only must the military instrument share pride of place with the diplomatic, the two together are only the primary, not the sole, instruments of power. Obviously, that power is based on a domestic bedrock and a wide variety of national resources. Therefore, a strategy should evolve from an analysis of the environment, interests, resources, capabilities, and available choices.

⁵ von Clausewitz, Karl. *On War*. Trans. O. J. Matthijs Jolles. Washington, D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1943. Pp. 16-17.

Unfortunately, no state has a coherent, comprehensive national security strategy. We will see this in Murray, in Gaddis, and in Freedman. The closest a state can usually get is **an approach** to its national security. The ever-changing environment, the demands of other interests, the breadth of the issues, and the competitive nature of complex policy/decision-making processes guarantee that the best a state can do is to approximate a coherent, comprehensive strategy