

War, an Instrument of Policy

War, or the threat of war, is an instrument of policy characterized by organized, purposeful violence. This violence separates war from other forms of conflict and competition among national, subnational, and supranational groups.¹ War should be organized to achieve political objectives.²

Success in War

Military victory is usually attained by destroying the enemy's capability or will to continue waging war. However, military victory is not necessarily the same as success in war. Success in war is not determined solely by military defeat of the enemy, casualties inflicted, or territory occupied. Success is determined by whether or not political objectives are met.³ Although war's overall political objective is altering the enemy's behavior or policy, specific political objectives and means vary considerably from war to war.

In war, losses by one state do not always result in gains for another. In fact, both sides may easily be losers in regard to political objectives and national interests. This truism is easily seen in our understanding of the outcome of nuclear warfare, but it also holds true for conventional warfare. For example, all the major European belligerents in World War I (the Allies as well as the Central Powers) were losers in that their populations, economies, sociopolitical systems, and empires suffered tremendously.

National Political Objectives

Nation-states usually use war to achieve political objectives after other means to resolve incompatible differences have failed. In theory, the underlying objectives of war should be limited to securing such vital national interests as independence, territorial integrity, and economic well-being. In practice, states go to war for a variety of economic, cultural, and sociopolitical reasons including religion, ideology, nationalism, grandeur, and glory. States also may fight to

fill political or geographic voids. Developed states generally go to war for strategic security reasons; the most common of these motivations is the perception that other states are threatening vital national interests. However, a single-cause approach to explaining a war is usually inadequate, often misleading, and perhaps dangerous.⁴

Discerning political objectives that support national interests is complicated because real or potential enemies may not be easily identifiable and because enemies, threats, and national interests change. If these changes occur slowly, they may be difficult to perceive; if the changes happen quickly, they are often difficult to accept.

The transition from the cold war bipolar world to a multipolar world following the collapse of the Soviet Union necessitated a reappraisal of American political objectives and national security strategy.⁵ In addition, widespread availability of sophisticated, technologically advanced weapon systems has given minor powers new advantages relative to major powers. Major powers are especially vulnerable because they have interests throughout the world. Moreover, they may not be able to apply all their military power against a minor power for fear of widening or escalating the conflict, or they may be reluctant to commit themselves fully because of potential conflict elsewhere with another major power.

Accurate identification and evaluation of national interests and the political objectives that support those interests are vital if war is to serve a rational purpose; that is, national interests and political objectives should be clearly understood so that meaningful, attainable, and measurable military objectives can be derived from them, and the objectives should be worth the cost of war. Additionally, if a state is to pursue a rational policy, it must recognize the limitations of military power. The military instrument is not equally applicable to the pursuit of all national political objectives. Use of military power, even in war, may be inappropriate for some objectives and may even be counterproductive for others.⁶

Political objectives can be categorized as either unlimited or limited. Unlimited political objectives are usually positive, ethically clear-cut, and easily explained (for example, ridding the world of

Hitler). In addition, at least before the advent of nuclear weapons, unlimited political objectives have justified unlimited military objectives and means (for example, the use of all available military power—except chemical weapons—to destroy Nazism).⁷

Limited political objectives are usually complicated in that they assert both positive and negative goals. (In the Korean War, the American positive goal for at least a portion of the war was to maintain an independent, noncommunist South Korea. The negative goal was to keep the war from widening or escalating.) Limited objectives may be morally ambiguous and can be difficult to explain, especially in terms of vital national interests. Limited political objectives usually must be supported by limited military objectives because the cost of unlimited war may be more than the worth of the objective. In addition, the use of the military instrument, let alone its unrestricted employment, is usually counterproductive for the negative component of the political objective. In the case of the Korean conflict, use of the American military instrument was appropriate for the positive goal; military power could protect South Korea. However, the very utility of the military instrument in achieving the positive goal made attainment of the negative goal less likely. In fact, when North Korea's existence was threatened, the Communist Chinese widened the war by intervening.⁸

The differences between limited and unlimited objectives can be crucial in determining popular levels of support for a war, especially in a democracy. For example, Americans generally have supported unlimited political objectives in war. However, limited objectives, such as those in Korea and Vietnam, have been far less popular. The problem for the future lies in the fact that conflicts the United States is most likely to be drawn into are likely to feature limited political objectives.

Sources of National Power

Military and nonmilitary instruments of power are derived from tangible and intangible sources which are not static or absolute. Tangible sources include geography, economic wealth and infrastructure, technological development, civilian manpower resources, and military

forces and hardware. Intangible sources include culture, ideology, history, national will and morale, governmental efficiency and responsiveness, diplomatic skills, alliances, international prestige, and recent success or failure in politico-military affairs.

These sources of national power are interrelated and interactive. For example, some military technology and essential resources depend on foreign suppliers; demographics determine availability of military manpower of appropriate age; and the power contribution of military hardware/capital stock cannot be measured solely by a comparative order of battle but varies with the nature of the conflict, terrain, and other factors. The sources of national power are dynamic, and they do not necessarily translate into power. Rather, they have the potential to contribute to political, informational, economic, and military instruments of national power.

Use of Instruments of National Power in War

Each of the instruments of national power (political, informational, economic, and military) can contribute to achieving political objectives through their individual but overlapping usages.⁹ Differing situations require differing contributions, but, in general, chances of success are improved by using a mixture of instruments and means.¹⁰

War cannot be abstracted from the environment in which it is fought; it is inextricably tied to the peoples who fight it, and consequently to their cultures, religions, ideologies, economies, and technologies—to the totalities of their societies.¹¹ Thus, the role of military and nonmilitary instruments of power should vary according to the form of war, enemy capabilities, the nature of underlying political objectives, and other factors.

Although the nonmilitary instruments can be employed independently, they are best used in conjunction with one another and the military instrument. The need for such orchestration is especially apparent in insurgent warfare in which the military instrument is usually subordinate to nonmilitary instruments, even at the tactical level of war, but it holds true for all forms of warfare.¹²

The instruments are highly interrelated and thus cannot be viewed in isolation. In modern warfare, for instance, military success or failure depends to a large degree on the national economic, technological, and industrial base and the extent to which that base can be mobilized and applied to the war effort. At the same time, military spending is a significant part of the American economy, and the nation's economic health depends to some degree on diplomatic skill in negotiating favorable trade agreements with foreign governments. To complete the circle, diplomatic success depends on activities that can be backed up by economic and military rewards or sanctions. In other words, treating the various instruments of power in isolation oversimplifies reality.¹³

American Use of the Military Instrument

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the customary American way of war has been to exploit the nation's strength by inundating enemies in a flood of materiel and firepower.¹⁴ This approach, which is perceived as a way to reduce American casualties, may become infeasible should American technological power and economic power decline relative to that of other states. In addition, this way of warfare can be especially inappropriate, even counterproductive, in insurgent warfare in which enemy forces cannot be readily identified or targeted. Using resources in excess of those needed to attain objectives can encumber operations, limit options, and degrade the contributions or potential of other instruments of national power.

In future wars, if the United States does not have overwhelming numerical or materiel superiority, it may not be possible or desirable to use the customary resource-intensive approach, even in conventional warfare. Thus, the United States may have to modify its customary employment of the military instrument in favor of maneuver warfare or the indirect approach.¹⁵

Conclusion

War, to the extent that it is a rational instrument of policy, cannot be thought of as an end in itself. Rather, war—which is pursued by the political, informational, and economic, as well as the military

instrument—should serve political objectives. War's success is measured by how it has served these objectives. War's successful conclusion depends not only on overcoming the enemy's ability to resist but also on overcoming his will to resist. Success in war, therefore, is based on more than the physical resources that can be brought to bear on the battlefield.

Notes

1. Although subnational and supranational groups use war as an instrument of policy, this essay concentrates on nation-states, especially the United States.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 86–88.

3. *Ibid.*, 80–81, 86–89, and 90–99.

4. War does not necessarily have a rational explanation or cause; this is especially true of wars with cultural “causes.” See Michael E. Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 7–22; see also Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Brighton, England: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1983); and Jerome D. Frank, *Sanity and Survival: Psychological Aspects of War and Peace* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 91–113.

5. States in the conservative stage of national development tend to favor the status quo and, consequently, resort to war only when they perceive that their vital interests are being threatened. Since World War II, American vital interests and national security policy have been defined primarily in terms of the Soviet threat. However, it is invalid to assume that all conflicts are ultimately based on superpower rivalry—although the superpowers, if they see that it is in their interests, could exploit a conflict no matter what its origin.

6. For limitations on war, see Michael E. Howard, “Temperamenta Belli: Can War Be Controlled?” in *Restraints on War: Studies in the Limitations of Armed Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Howard (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1979), 1–15.

7. For characteristics of political objectives, see Col Dennis M. Drew and Dr Donald M. Snow, *The Eagle's Talons: The American Experience at War* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, December 1988), 12–15.

8. *Ibid.* In addition, this work addresses the relationships among political and military objectives, strategies, and outcomes of all the major conflicts in American history. For a short discussion of the negative political goal in Korea and for detailed discussion of the Vietnam War and its objectives, see Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press,

1989). For a more detailed discussion of the instruments of national power, vital national interests, strategy, military and political objectives, and their relationships, see Col Dennis M. Drew and Dr Donald M. Snow, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, August 1988).

9. The instrument of national power can be categorized in a variety of ways under different titles. Division into the four instruments listed here is widespread, but the reader should be aware that other names for the same instruments and other definitions of the instruments are commonly used. For example, the following listing of instruments and usage combines the political and informational instruments. (The point is that all the instruments are closely related and overlap in nature and usage.) Political-informational: education, diplomatic recognition, international law, diplomatic note, international conference, United Nations (UN) resolution, mediation, arms control, human rights, alliances, crisis management, statement of principles, subsidies to private agencies, cultural exchanges, public diplomacy, covert aid/actions. Economic: trade policy statements, general agreements, financial assistance/aid, economic/trade restrictions, development assistance, science/technology cooperation, sanctions, embargoes. Military: surveillance, security assistance, military alliances/organizations, demonstrations, peacekeeping, arms control, deterrence, quarantine/blockade, civic action, cooperative programs, combined training exercises, port visits, intelligence support, subject matter expert exchange, engineer construction, infrastructure development, medical, threatened or actual use of military force.

10. K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), chaps. 5 through 11; and Edward N. Luttwak, "The Economic Instrument of Statecraft," *On the Meaning of Victory: Essays on Strategy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 142–54. Although instruments of national power should be integrated and coordinated, they sometimes work at odds; economic strength eventually may be sapped by unrestrained military spending, or military strength may be diluted by overextension to support too widespread economic obligations. See David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 215–20; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), especially 347–437; Edward M. Earle, "Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, Friedrich List: The Economic Foundations of Military Power," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 217–61; Michael L. Brown, "The Economic Dimensions of Strategy," *Parameters*, Summer 1986, 36–44; Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Overcommitted: United States National Interests in the 1980s* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1985), 1–30; and

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. "The Misleading Metaphor of Decline," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1980, 86–94.

11. This approach is the basis of Michael E. Howard, *War in European History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), and of Richard A. Preston and Sydney F. Wise, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and Its Interrelationships with Western Society*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), especially 8–11; see also John G. Stoessinger, *The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time*, 8th ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), 13–27.

12. Holsti, chapter 10.

13. Drew and Snow, *Making Strategy*, 39.

14. The thesis of Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), is that the strategy of annihilation (as opposed to the strategy of limitation) became the characteristic American way of war. The objective became to destroy the enemy's armed forces by application of mass and concentration.

15. The purpose of maneuver is to exploit one's strengths, minimize one's weaknesses, exploit enemy weaknesses, and avoid enemy strengths. Contrary to warfare that seeks to destroy the enemy's physical substance, maneuver warfare incapacitates by systematically disrupting the enemy's command structure, mode of warfare, combat array, etc. Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1987), 93. Maneuver—which lowers the cost of military operations, but increases the risk—demands an increased reliance on the art of war. Liddell Hart maintained that successful strategy depends on weakening the enemy's resistance before attempting to overcome him, drawing the enemy out of his defenses, and pursuing the unexpected path or the path of least resistance. Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1967), 347–50. Liddell Hart's indirect approach is connected with Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), vii.