

Strategy and contingency

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Strategy is oriented towards the future. It is a declaration of intent, and an indication of the possible means required to fulfil that intent. But once strategy moves beyond the near term, it struggles to define what exactly it intends to do. Part of the problem is generated by the conceptual shift from what current NATO jargon calls ‘military strategy’ to what the United States calls ‘grand strategy’ (and which other states, as the US once did, have come to call ‘national strategy’). The operational plans of military strategy look to the near term, and work with specific situations. Grand strategy, on the other hand, can entertain ambitions and goals which are more visionary and aspirational than pragmatic and immediate. It is as much a way of thinking as a way of doing. By using the same word, strategy, in both sets of circumstances, we create an expectation, each of the other, which neither can properly fulfil. The shift from ‘military strategy’ to ‘grand strategy’ is particularly fraught: it suggests that the latter, like the former, is underpinned by an actionable plan. If strategy is a matter of combining means, ways and ends, what are the ends towards which a state, nation or group is aiming when it cannot be precise about the future context within which its means and ways are being applied? Answering that question is the central conundrum of grand strategy, and being able to do so sensibly is correspondingly more difficult the more extended the definition of the future which grand strategy uses.

Grand strategy and national strategy

National strategies tend to look at least ten years ahead, not least because that is the minimum normal procurement cycle of most defence equipment. The French white paper on defence and national security of 2008 aspired to set out France’s strategy for the next 15 years—or, more accurately, 17, as its reference point was 2025.¹ The Australian defence white paper of 2009 set its sights 20 years ahead, to 2030 and beyond.² The United States’ Joint Forces Command, in *The Joint Operating Environment (JOE)*, approved for release on 18 February 2010, chose a

¹ Nicolas Sarkozy, preface to *Défense et sécurité nationale: le livre blanc* (Paris, 2008), p. 313; English-language summary available at http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/IMGpdf/Livre_blanco_Press_kit_english_version.pdf, accessed 2 Oct. 2011; Présidence de la République, *The French white paper on defence and national security*, p. 2.

² Australian Government, Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century: force 2030* (Canberra, 2009).

period reaching 25 years into the future, which took it to 2035,³ and the New Zealand defence review published later in the same year followed suit.⁴ In Britain the Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre's Strategic Trends Programme looks forward 30 years. So its 2010 report aimed 'to provide a detailed analysis of the future strategic context for defence out to 2040'. Unsurprisingly, since the report said that it would be 'an essential input into policy and concept development',⁵ the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, when giving evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee on 17 November 2010, provided a description of grand strategy which was unequivocally long term: 'The grand strategy, as we would define it, is looking at the world as it is going to be in 2030 or 2040 and deciding what Britain's place in that world is.'⁶

That is exactly what the prevailing orthodoxy, predominantly preached in the United States, says grand strategy is. Paul Kennedy, who along with John Lewis Gaddis and Charles Hill has presided over the grand strategy course at Yale since its inception in 1998, has written: 'The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in *policy*, that is, in the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term (that is, in wartime *and* peacetime) best interests.'⁷

Kennedy penned those words in 1991, as the Cold War ended, a process hastened by the economic penalties suffered by the Soviet Union as it sought to match US defence spending. With the Soviet Union in dissolution, the United States was the dominant and indeed only global power. Only three years before, in *The rise and fall of the great powers*, Kennedy had highlighted the pressure on failing empires to increase defence expenditure beyond their economic resources. However, his final chapter, which he called 'The problem of number one in relative decline', suggested that these were challenges which confronted Washington, not Moscow. In 1991 Americans who took a short-term view of grand strategy could scoff at such pessimism. But a longer-term view of strategy makes him look extraordinarily prescient. Twenty years on, in 2011, the United States has accelerated its own relative decline by military spending which has served to increase its debt, and engaged in wars whose course and outcomes have lowered its prestige rather than enhanced it.

If the wars to which the United States has committed itself over the past decade are part of a grand strategy that is oriented towards some distant future, then grand strategy is in danger of proving to be delusory. The presumption within grand strategy is not just that it is oriented towards such a distant future, but also—at least if it is to have purchase in policy—that it is designed to avert decline, and even that it can make the future better. Emerging states have less need of

³ United States Joint Force Command, *The Joint Operating Environment* [henceforth *JOE*], approved for public release 18 Feb. 2010 (Suffolk, VA), pp. 2, 4, 10.

⁴ New Zealand Government, Ministry of Defence, *Defence white paper 2010* (Wellington, Nov. 2010), p. 4.

⁵ UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Trends Programme: global strategic trends out to 2040* (Shrivenham: Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2010), p. 1.

⁶ House of Commons Defence Committee Session 2010–11, HC600-I, *Appointment of the Chief of the Defence Staff*, minutes of evidence, 17 Nov. 2010, published 27 Jan. 2011.

⁷ Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand strategies in war and peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 5.

grand strategy as they forge their empires than do satiated states anxious to hold on to what they have acquired. It is not at all clear that China, let alone India or Brazil, has a grand strategy.⁸ British strategic thought was almost non-existent while Britain enjoyed the equivalent of its unipolar moment after 1815. It began to flourish from about 1870, as the country confronted relative economic decline, growing international competition and the strains of imperial overstretch.⁹ In 1902 it gave its concerns institutional effect by forming the Committee of Imperial Defence, a subcommittee of the Cabinet. By 1914 it was a status quo power confronted by a newly unified and emerging Germany, which saw the contribution of Pax Britannica to international order as a constraint on its development. London therefore used strategy to manage change, to dissipate its effects and to mitigate risk. The logic of grand strategy forced it into two world wars that it would rather not have fought. On the one hand, the economic consequences of those wars hastened decline rather than forestalled it. On the other, the logic of grand strategy was correct. If Britain had not fought Germany in 1914 and 1939, its credibility as a European actor would have been forfeit, and geopolitically an over-mighty Germany on Europe's north-western seaboard would have left its global status vulnerable. Grand strategic thinking did not avert the dilemmas of decision-making, as Britain was caught both ways.

On this interpretation the use of grand strategy is not to avert decline but to slow down its onset and manage its impact. Britain played its cards as best it could, using strategy to do so. It is perhaps no coincidence that the term 'grand strategy' was developed by two of the best-known British strategic thinkers of the twentieth century, J. F. C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart.¹⁰ Germany, by 1914 the greater economic power, with a stronger army if not navy, played its cards badly, and lost: institutionally it had no central body to make strategy, and it failed intellectually, unable to see how to use its military assets to best advantage or how to harness war (if it made sense to use it at all) to further its national objectives.

When Kennedy defined grand strategy in terms of the long-term future, his aspirations were neutral or even negative: for the United States to preserve what it possessed. Thomas P. M. Barnett, who between 1998 and 2005 taught at the US Naval War College, the body which inspired Yale's teaching on grand strategy, served in the Department of Defense in 2001–2003, and wrote *The Pentagon's new map* when he left it in 2004. His blog defines grand strategy in terms which also stress the long-term future but go further in their ambition, speaking not just of the preservation but also of the enhancement of the nation's strength:

⁸ A point reflected in the comments made by Professor Wang Jisi, the Dean of the School of International Studies at Beijing University, at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute conference on 'Global forces 2011', 11 Aug. 2011, at which this article also received its first airing; see also Wang Jisi, 'China's search for a grand strategy: a rising great power finds its way', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 2, March–April 2011, p. 68.

⁹ I am thinking here of the contributions to public debate of such thinkers and pundits as the Colomb brothers, Charles Dilke, Spenser Wilkinson, Halford Mackinder and Julian Corbett, among others.

¹⁰ J. F. C. Fuller, *The reformation of war* (London: Hutchinson, 1923), ch. 11, 'The meaning of grand strategy'; Basil Liddell Hart, *When Britain goes to war* (London: Faber, 1935), esp. pp. 81–6, and *Thoughts on war* (London: Faber, 1944), ch. 7, 'Grand strategy'.

As far as a world power like America is concerned, a grand strategy involves first imagining some future world order within which the nation's standing, prosperity, and security are significantly enhanced, and then plotting and maintaining a course to that desired end while employing—to the fullest extent possible—all elements of our nation's power toward generating those conditions. Naturally, such grand goals typically take decades to achieve.¹¹

This vision of grand strategy is open to three sets of observations. First, Barnett's definition, while long-term in outlook, is also opportunistic. In practice, the United States, confronted with threats, has come to define its strategy in terms of managing and controlling risk in the pursuit of national interest. General Jim Mattis, as Joint Forces Commander, wrote in the foreword to the *JOE*: 'In our guardian role for our nation, it is natural that we in the military focus more on possible security challenges and threats than we do on emerging opportunities'.¹² The United States is not the only status quo power to define strategy in this way. Chapter 3 of the 2009 Australian defence white paper is entitled 'Managing strategic risk in defence planning'.¹³ The principal innovation in the British National Security Strategy of 2010 was a risk register. Western powers are using strategy to seek effects which mitigate the impact of change in the interests of stability. The cynic might argue that strategy therefore also represents the triumph of hope over experience. A grand strategy which becomes implicitly defensive and inherently reactive contravenes the standard orthodoxies of 'military' strategy, which stress the value of taking the initiative, not least through the offensive. The military approach to strategy exploits risk, rather than setting out to minimize it.

Second, for the United States in particular, such an application of grand strategy confronts it with a logical absurdity. As Barnett's definition makes clear, Americans still see themselves as the democratic and progressive power *par excellence*. This creates a tension between its domestic self-definition and its external status. Its use of strategy today supports an agenda that is conservative, not least because it recognizes that change may not be in the national interests of democratic powers dependent on the workings of the free(ish) market. Unable or unwilling to shoulder the full burden of global responsibilities itself, it looks to allies to do more of that work for it.¹⁴ But America's friends have already had to handle their own decline, and now have less appetite for thinking in terms of grand strategy at all: indeed, they have been told by some Americans that mid-ranking states cannot craft grand strategy, since—in Williamson Murray's words—'grand strategy is a matter involving great states and great states alone'.¹⁵ The British Cabinet Office, when asked in 2010 by the House of Commons Public Administration Committee to define grand strategy, responded by saying that it was no longer 'a term that is in

¹¹ Thomas P. M. Barnett, 'Globlogization', <http://thomaspmbarrett.com/glossary>, accessed 16 Aug. 2011.

¹² US Joint Force Command, *JOE* (2010), preface.

¹³ Australian Government, Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 26.

¹⁴ See most obviously and recently Robert Gates's farewell speech to NATO, 10 June 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/06/10/tran>.

¹⁵ Williamson Murray, 'Thoughts on grand strategy', in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich and James Lacey, eds, *The shaping of grand strategy: policy, diplomacy, and war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1. Kennedy was of a similar view, saying that only 'great' powers make grand strategy: Kennedy, *Grand strategies*, p. 6, p. 186 n. 18.

widespread usage'.¹⁶ Europeans have less difficulty in imagining the United States' need to manage its own relative decline than do Americans themselves, whatever their political persuasion. But in respect to grand strategy the Americans are more right than the Europeans. The coyness of the latter, and particularly of Britain, with regard to grand strategy is at odds with their rhetoric. The successive editions of the British National Security Strategy have continued to assert London's global ambitions, despite its diminishing resources. It is this relationship which lies at the heart of the dilemma confronting the status quo power: if ambition outstrips resources, the need for grand strategy, and for a coherent grand strategy at that, is all the greater because waste is both unaffordable and unforgivable.¹⁷

Third, establishing too close a relationship between strategy and the very long term does not allow for the unexpected—for the 9/11 attacks in 2001 or 'the Arab Spring' ten years later. Of course, prudent and intelligent men and women, like the authors of *Strategic Trends* or of the *JOE*, anticipate this criticism. The former has a section devoted to what it calls 'strategic shocks'. Mattis continued his foreword to the *JOE* by saying: 'None of us have a sufficiently clear crystal ball to predict fully the changing kaleidoscope of future conflicts that hover over the horizon, even as current fights, possible adversaries' nascent capabilities, and other factors intersect.' The *JOE* began by citing the younger Pitt telling the House of Commons in February 1792 that it could reasonably expect 15 years of peace, just as Britain was about to embark on over 20 years of almost unbroken conflict.¹⁸

The possibility of 'strategic shocks', the unexpected appearing in short order, is part of the stock-in-trade of policies designed to give effect to grand strategy. No defence white paper or its equivalent produced in the western world is deemed to be complete without a reference to the 'uncertainties' (invariably increasing) in a rapidly changing and tautologically 'globalized' world. The driver in much defence policy is that procurement is a long-term process intended to deliver insurance against an uncertain future.¹⁹ It is also accepted that equipment is increasingly likely to be used in roles different from those for which it was first designed.²⁰ Ironically, therefore, one of the pressures in the escalation of equipment costs is the very need to produce equipment flexible enough to cope with the expectation of the unexpected. So the tail wags the dog.

A somewhat different but related example is Britain's possession of nuclear weapons. The standard rationale for the British deterrent used by British governments is that it is not required to deter any immediate or identifiable danger but is a final guarantee of national security against a low-probability but high-level threat. In other words, it rests on a strategy which identifies the means without setting them in any clear relationship to ways and ends: the strategy which underpins

¹⁶ House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *Who does UK national strategy?*, 1st report of session 2010–11, HC435 (London: The Stationery Office, 18 Oct. 2010), p. 8.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Brigadier Richard Iron for this extension of the point about the relationship between good strategy and limited resources, derived from Edward Luttwak, as well as for other comments and insights.

¹⁸ US Joint Force Command, *JOE* (2010), p. 5.

¹⁹ Australian Government, Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century*, p. 15.

²⁰ Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 269, 306.

Britain's possession of nuclear weapons is currently not expressed in a coherent fashion (which is not at all the same thing as saying that it cannot be so expressed). One reason for the incoherence is precisely and paradoxically the place of nuclear weapons in a grand strategy which is trying to be long term in its focus and yet simultaneously ready for the unexpected.

The 'Arab Spring' and the UN-authorized intervention in Libya in March 2011 highlighted this tension. The long-term strategy of the United States, the United Kingdom and NATO did not envisage intervention in Libya in the short term, and Britain specifically had not identified Libya as an area of significance in its strategic review of October 2010. The Labour opposition, and indeed many supporters of the Royal Navy and RAF, all of which supported intervention, claimed that Libya rendered the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) out of date within six months of its completion. Libya required the very air and maritime assets which the SDSR either removed (Nimrod) or mothballed (aircraft carriers). The coalition government's pre-emptive response to this line of attack was contained in the foreword to the National Security Strategy signed by the Prime Minister and his deputy: 'In an age of uncertainty, we need to be able to act quickly and effectively to address new and evolving threats to our security.' So, without a clear vision of a specific threat to the United Kingdom, the SDSR focused on the means to meet a range of threats, which it called 'the adaptable posture'.

Not much was new here. This is what every other national strategy or national defence policy aspires to do. Since the end of the Cold War, 'adaptability' and 'flexibility' have been the watchwords that have accompanied most attempts to produce a long-term strategy in most western countries. In the United Kingdom, the coalition's SDSR of 2010 looked very similar in philosophy to the Labour government's Strategic Defence Review of 1998, which it had set out to replace: both rested on a maritime–air expeditionary capability, and assumed interventions of short duration. However, none of the West's national strategies has looked very adaptive in practice. Confronted with the unexpected, the customary refrain of all governments is to emphasize underlying consistency, just as the British government did in the first half of 2011. The United Kingdom did not conduct a defence review between 1998 and 2010, limiting its response to the 9/11 attacks to a so-called 'new chapter' to the 1998 review. Throughout the years 2003–2007 it fought two wars simultaneously while sticking to a procurement policy designed for European collaboration and 'high-end' capabilities. Long-term strategy became the road block to short-term adaptability.²¹ More serious was the slow evolution of the armed forces of the United States. They rejected peacekeeping and nation-building in the 1990s, and failed to see the change in the character of the war in Iraq in 2003–2004, as the insurgency developed, or in Afghanistan as the tempo of fighting was rekindled after 2006. By 2009 it had become fashionable, at least in British military circles, to commend the United States army for its subsequent shift, manifested in the reception and status accorded to its *Field Manual*

²¹ Richard North, *Ministry of defeat: the British war in Iraq 2003–2009* (London: Continuum, 2009).

3-24 on counter-insurgency, published in December 2006.²² This reinvigoration of the mythic aura of American military excellence needs to come with a health warning. If the US army had taken as long to change in the Second World War, the war would have been almost over by the time it had done so. The desire to copper-bottom adaptability for long-term insurance against the anticipation of the unexpected handicaps the flexibility to meet the reality of the unexpected in the short term.

At the same time the acceptance that the unexpected will happen seems to drive a coach and horses through the delivery of the grand strategy in the long term. So should we cynically conclude that, if grand strategy is oriented to the long term but nonetheless has only limited predictive value, it is in fact without value? Should we put strategy alongside economics as a pseudo-science, bounded by theory and incapable of validation through experiment? If we do those things, we find ourselves in a position where strategy effectively abandons responsibility when confronted with a 'strategic shock'.

To understand the problem, we need to unpack strategy a bit more, and bring it back to its roots in war itself: to move from grand strategy, which Paul Kennedy's definition stresses is political, to strategy in its original and military sense. When Sir David Richards defined grand strategy, nobody presumed that deciding Britain's place in the world three or four decades hence was the sole responsibility of the professional head of the armed forces. But equally, precisely because strategy is a specifically military competence, and implies the use of military means, nobody disputes that his views on the subject are important or well informed. That presumption of authority derives from the armed forces' grasp of traditional definitions of strategy, of 'military strategy' rather than of grand strategy. Strategy as it was understood by nineteenth-century generals was not vulnerable to any of the three observations entered in relation to current US definitions of grand strategy. It was not reactive, but proactive; it was about changing the status quo, not preserving it; and because it was applied in war, it flourished specifically in the realm of uncertainty.

Clausewitz and Jomini: strategy and planning

The strategic thinker who best captured this approach to strategy was Clausewitz. He would not have understood the United Kingdom's National Security Strategy as strategy; he would not have called strategy what Kennedy or Barnett call strategy. For him, strategy was the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war.²³ In other words, strategy was consequentialist for Clausewitz: one thing followed another, and outcomes and events shaped the next step. Strategy drew

²² United States Army/United States Marine Corps, Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), book III, ch. 1, p. 177. See also the definition of strategy given by Clausewitz in 1812, 'the combination of individual engagements to attain the goal of the campaign or war': Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of war*, trans. and ed. Hans Gatzke (London: Bodley Head, 1943), p. 38.

on what had happened in order to decide what to do next. As he put it: 'Only great tactical successes can lead to strategic ones.'²⁴

It is worth remembering, as current exponents of grand strategy rarely do, that these were very important facets in the exercise of grand strategy in the Second World War. Churchill and his chiefs of staff were certainly conscious that what they were doing was grand strategy, even if they omitted the epithet 'grand'.²⁵ One, but not the only, element in their thinking consisted of what to do each day in the light of that day's events, of the situation on the ground and of real-time intelligence. They made a clear distinction between public statements and private grief. They did not become victims of their own story of success, but squared up to defeat (of which Britain had its fair share between 1939 and 1942, not least in Libya) and used long-term strategy to overcome it. Grand strategy was then as much reactive as prudential; as much an exercise in flexibility and adaptability in the short term as a narrative projected into the future. It is this aspect of strategy which current strategic thinking seems to have lost. This is the sort of strategy which shaped events in Libya, or reacted to them. Those who say there was no strategy in Libya miss the point. There was strategy: the question is whether it was good or bad. The narrative of success, of making progress, which has characterized not only public statements but private discussions in the wars fought since 9/11, can become the enemy of good strategy. It can also make the strategy hard to divine or define: when British Ministry of Defence press releases focus solely on tactical events without strategic context, much comment has by default to be speculative.

As well as strategy more traditionally and narrowly defined, Clausewitz helps us to think about the understanding of grand strategy, even if he did not call it that. He did not see war just in terms of confusion, chaos and chance. The most important book of *On war*, at least on this point, is not book I but book VIII.²⁶ The latter, not the former, contains Clausewitz's mature thoughts on the relationship between strategy and policy, the domain within which grand strategy sits, rather than the domain around which the majority of *On war* is focused, namely that between strategy and tactics. Book VIII is called 'War plans'. In other words, like grand strategy today, its intention is purposive and prudential. It considers how Prussia might engage in a European war if France once again were to upset the balance of power, as the revolutions of 1830 suggested it might. We know about the intellectual origins of this book. In December 1827 Carl von Roeder asked Clausewitz for his comments on two operational problems. Clausewitz replied: 'Every major war plan grows out of so many *individual* circumstances,

²⁴ Clausewitz, *On war*, book IV, ch. 3, p. 228.

²⁵ See Alanbrooke's diary entry for 23 Jan. 1943, in Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War diaries 1939–1945*, ed. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), p. 367. Alanbrooke defined strategy most often when addressing what he perceived to be the Americans' inadequacies in that regard: see *War diaries*, entry for 7 Aug. 1943, p. 440. Grand strategy was defined by J. F. C. Fuller before the war, and his idea was taken up and promoted by Basil Liddell Hart; so it had entered British currency before 1939.

²⁶ Peter Paret has argued that only book I of *On war* can be taken as a final statement by Clausewitz, principally because he dates an undated prefatory note to 1830, rather than 1827. I disagree: see Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's 'On war': a biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), pp 70–73.

which determine its features, that it is impossible to devise a hypothetical case with such specificity that it could be taken as real.²⁷ As General Victor d'Urbal, writing after another major European war and from the perspective of a different nation, put it in 1922: 'One does not prepare for war in general, but for a specific war, waged in order to obtain a given result, in a defined theatre of operations, against a given adversary, who deploys or is able to deploy in a given time period, given means.'²⁸ Book VIII took a real plan and set it in a specific set of circumstances. So the conclusion of *On war*, the most important book on strategy ever written, is a plan—an attempt to put order on chaos, to give direction to war—or at least a campaign within a war.²⁹

This stress on planning is not a feature of Clausewitz's writing which many contemporary commentators highlight; instead it has become fashionable to follow Clausewitz's attention to friction and to what Alan Beyerchen calls 'the non-linear nature of war'.³⁰ Planning is generally linked to the second of the two strategic thinkers whose interpretations were forged by the Napoleonic wars, Antoine-Henri Jomini. Jomini was certainly the more influential figure in his own day, and arguably he has remained particularly so in the United States—for three reasons.³¹ First, long breaks between wars (at least until 1941) have made the United States more dependent on theory than on concrete cases in their approach to the study of war. Second, Clausewitz wrote on the back of the devastating defeat at Jena in 1806, whereas Jomini wrote in the expectation of victory—as he served with Napoleon until 1813, and then switched to the allied side as Napoleon lost. These facets of Jomini's background conform with the self-image of the US armed forces, confident not only of their invincibility but also of the value of a rational and managerial approach to war. This is the third attraction of Jomini for Americans. His thinking about strategy is about how to wage war; it is prospective and purposeful. Clausewitz's is about how to think about war; it is more descriptive and analytical.³² Jomini declared that his aim was to formulate rules hitherto held in the heads of great commanders. For him, strategy was less a theory which linked tactics to policy by the exploitation of the outcome of battle and more a self-contained and separate entity. Jomini saw strategy as a science, subject to a set of maxims or principles, and so he thought that much could be done to settle outcomes in advance. For him, theory found its expression in a theory of decisive strategic manoeuvre, set by the army's line of march and related to its

²⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *Two letters on strategy*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Carlisle, Penn.: US Army War College, Nov. 1984), p. 10.

²⁸ Général d'Urbal, 'L'armée qu'il nous faut', *Revue militaire générale* 11: 4, April 1922, pp. 241–7; I am grateful to Michael Finch for this reference.

²⁹ Terence Holmes, 'Planning versus chaos in Clausewitz's *On war*', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30: 1, 2007, pp. 129–51.

³⁰ Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian friction and future war*, McNair Paper 52 (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1996); Alan Beyerchen, 'Clausewitz, nonlinearity and the unpredictability of war', *International Security* 17: 3, Winter 1992–3, pp. 59–90; Alan Beyerchen, 'Clausewitz and the non-linear nature of war: systems of organized complexity', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds, *Clausewitz in the twenty-first century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³¹ Bruno Colson, *La Culture stratégique américaine: l'influence de Jomini* (Paris: Economica, 1993), esp p. 293 for the first of these reasons.

³² This is the central argument of Jean-Jacques Langendorf, *Faire la guerre: Antoine-Henri Jomini*, 2 vols (Geneva: Georg, 2001, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 289–91, 328–9.

base of operations and its ability to control the enemy's line of communications. One principle dominated all the others: the application of superior forces on the decisive point. The effect of his military history was to read the sequence of events in reverse so as to show the guiding effect of these principles as they led back to the original plan of campaign.³³

So, following this logic, if the plan was right, it would lead to victory; even if the battle itself took place in the realm of chance and contingency, at least it was set in a strategic narrative. This was how strategy was taught at most military academies in the nineteenth century. As Jomini had put it, the soldier had to begin his professional education not with tactics, not from the bottom up, but with strategy, with the business of the general, as this was scientific and subject to rules.³⁴ It was expressed in the stylized maps of campaigns contained in Jomini's best-known work of theory, *Précis de l'art de la guerre* (1838).³⁵ You need a map to read Jomini; you don't need a map to read Clausewitz. Jomini's maps suggest that strategy can master geography and terrain, and he went so far as to propose that the general should choose the theatre of war according to its operational potential, not according to its political priority or even military necessity.

The war plans of European armies in 1914 were Jominian. They were not grand strategy as we would now understand it, since there was no allowance for economic mobilization or political direction, and not much for coordination between allies and theatres of war. These were operational plans for single campaigns, designed to achieve decisive success through manoeuvre according to certain principles; like Jomini, they largely ignored the impact of tactics and the contingent effects of battle. From today's perspective they were campaign plans, not war plans (but then, significantly, so were the plans for Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011).

Despite the outcome of the campaigns in 1914, planning has remained an integral part of our understanding of strategy. It was how strategy found expression in peacetime; it provided an occupation for general staffs, not only before 1914 but also between 1919 and 1939. Moltke the elder famously said no plan survives the first contact with the enemy,³⁶ but that did not mean that he did not plan in peacetime.³⁷ And the tools which he and the Prussian general staff developed, like war games, staff rides and tactical exercises without troops, encouraged all staffs not only to prepare for mobilization and initial deployment but also to try to envisage what they might do after their first contact: in other words, to plan the war right through to a victorious *dénouement*.

³³ Ami-Jacques Rapin, *Jomini et la stratégie: une approche historique de l'œuvre* (Lausanne: Payot, 2002), pp. 23–4, 33–5, 73–4, 91, 98, 102, 215–38.

³⁴ Rapin, *Jomini et la stratégie*, p. 102.

³⁵ The best English version is Baron de Jomini, *The art of war*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1862).

³⁶ Peter G. Tsouras, ed., *The Greenhill dictionary of military quotations* (London: Greenhill, 2000), pp. 363–4, gives several references; but see also Daniel Hughes, *Moltke on the art of war: selected writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995).

³⁷ Terence Zuber, *The Moltke myth: Prussian war planning 1857–1871* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008); Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian war planning* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1991).

After 1945, the possession of nuclear weapons increased this tendency. In one sense the United States' successive Single Integrated Operational Plans were Jominian.³⁸ Thanks in part to the impact of Michael Howard and Peter Paret's new translation of *On war*, which came out in 1976, the Cold War can be seen too easily as the moment when Clausewitz finally became the dominant text on strategy, at least in the Anglo-American tradition. Clausewitz's ideal of absolute war was elided with twentieth-century definitions of total war, and both concepts were given immediacy by the memory of the Second World War and by the threat of even greater and more instantaneous destruction through the unrestricted release of nuclear weapons. The fears of nuclear holocaust were contained by the utilitarianism of the Clausewitzian nostrum, that war is an instrument of policy. Although Clausewitz's focus was to explain how war was conducted, nuclear deterrence saw the relationship in terms of how war was to be prevented: a shift from course to cause. The corollary of this focus on the 'Clausewitzian dictum' was to be found in two publications which appeared in 1957, nearly two decades before the publication of the Howard and Paret translation of Clausewitz, both of them robust evidence of the burgeoning health of American strategic studies after the Second World War. First, Samuel Huntington conscripted Clausewitz in support of his theory of civil-military relations, and adduced him as evidence for the subordination of military professionals to civilian control.³⁹ Second, and simultaneously, Robert Osgood developed his thinking on limited war, taking Clausewitz as the founder of the idea that war could be fought for more restricted objectives than 'annihilation'. This interpretation of *On war* depended on Clausewitz's introductory note of 10 July 1827, in which he argued that wars could be of two kinds, wars of annihilation and wars for more limited (and geographical) objectives—an approach to strategy which had been developed amid much controversy in pre-1914 Germany by the military historian Hans Delbrück.⁴⁰

Both Huntington's attention to the growth of military professionalism, a phenomenon to which Jomini contributed much more than Clausewitz, and Osgood's to limited war suggest that the Cold War should be seen at least as much as Jomini's era as Clausewitz's. The possibility that war can be limited is a theme which runs through the *Précis de l'art de la guerre*, where it gets much more attention than it does in *On war*. Clausewitz seemed to doubt whether man could really turn the clock back now that Napoleon had given reality to 'absolute war'; Jomini developed ways in which that aspiration might become reality. He presumed that

³⁸ See Colin Gray, *National security dilemmas: challenges and opportunities* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009), pp. 57, 64, 277; for an early flavour of the SIOPs, see Aaron Friedberg, 'A history of the US strategic "doctrine" 1945 to 1980', in Amos Perlmutter and John Gooch, eds, *Strategy and the social sciences* (London: Frank Cass, 1981); Peter Pringle and William Arkin, *SIOP: the secret US plan for nuclear war* (New York: Norton, 1983); David Alan Rosenberg, 'The origins of overkill: nuclear weapons and American security, 1945-1960', *International Security* 7: 4, 1983, pp. 3-71.

³⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The soldier and the state: the theory and politics of civil-military relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), pp. 31, 55-8, 68, 73, 307, 372, 388.

⁴⁰ Robert Osgood, *Limited war: the challenge to American strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 20-21, 53-55, 123, 176; Osgood, *Limited war revisited* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977), p. 2. See also Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück und der 'Strategiestreit'. Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1995).

rationality could be applied to war precisely because he saw strategy as a science governed by unchanging principles. Reasons for criticizing this approach to strategy are not dissimilar from one of the standard objections applied to nuclear deterrence: that it presumes rationality in engaging with threats that are irrational and disproportionate. In ascribing rationality to both parties, deterrence theory too easily treats the enemy not as an independent actor, likely to adopt courses of action that diverge from the expectations of the United States and its allies, but as a party which adopts strategies that conform to them. Just as the United States was criticized for this sort of mirror-imaging, so was Jomini. Both were taken to task for failing to appreciate sufficiently that the enemy was a reactive entity, whose aim was to frustrate the other side's plans, not to fall in with them.

Nuclear planning, precisely because it aspired never to be put to the test of reality, placed even more weight than Jominian strategy on plotting the links between its initial premises and its desired outcome. Both therefore endowed operational decisions with political significance, without at the same time engaging with policy. This is not to repeat the *canard* that Jomini neglected the role of policy in war. The opposite was true: indeed, he even told his pupil, the Tsarevich and future Alexander I of Russia, to read his book, *Vie politique et militaire de Napoléon*, as it formed 'the most complete guide to grand strategy'.⁴¹ But he did see the functions of policy as standing outside the functions of strategy. Similarly, the mechanics of deterrence, counter-force and counter-city targeting, first and second strikes, were vested with increasingly self-referential meaning that could seem to ignore the really salient political fact, namely that nuclear war would tear up all previous assumptions.

Military strategy and military doctrine: calculation and chance

Operational thinking finds its intellectual focus in doctrine. Today, by virtue of its use of predominantly (if not exclusively) conventional means, doctrine is seen as largely a professional military matter. But during the Cold War it had sufficient political impact to be seen in strategic terms. The origins of this causal chain lay in the apparently revolutionary and irreversible effects of one set of weapons on international relations, but the consequences were interpreted more broadly, using historical analogies to support its arguments. In 1984 Barry Posen published a pioneering work, *The sources of military doctrine*, a study of France, Britain and Germany between the two world wars. Its underlying assumption was that 'military doctrines are critical components of national security policy or grand strategy'. Posen summarized his argument as follows: 'A grand strategy is a chain of political and military ends and means. Military doctrine is a key component of grand strategy. Military doctrines are important because they affect the quality of life in the international and political system and the security of the states that hold them.'⁴² *The sources of military doctrine* ended with policy-relevant conclusions

⁴¹ Rapin, *Jomini et la stratégie*, p. 92.

⁴² Barry R. Posen, *The sources of military doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the world wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 13, 33.

for the United States, NATO and the Soviet Union, particularly with regard to nuclear weapons and the inherent danger that they would be used offensively.

Posen was not alone in his approach. Jack Snyder's *The ideology of the offensive*, a study of war plans in 1914 also published in 1984, and Elizabeth Kier's *Imagining war*, which again focused on the interwar period and appeared in 1997, similarly pursued the argument that the preference in 'military strategy' for the offensive could have destabilizing consequences at the strategic level, even when (in Snyder's words) 'military technology . . . favoured the defender and provided no first-strike advantage'.⁴³ Kier began: 'Choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines affect both the likelihood that wars will break out and the outcome of wars that have already begun.' Kier differed from Posen and Snyder in seeing the choice between offence and defence as being exercised through the domestic balance of power rather than the international one, through 'the interaction between constraints set in the domestic political arena and a military's organizational culture'. Her work was therefore shaped by the growing enthusiasm of the academic strategic studies community for strategic culture, a fashion set in train by Snyder himself in 1977. But her conclusions did not obviate the overall point that national styles in the conduct of operations had determining effects on the policies which the governments of those nations then adopted.⁴⁴

Two consequences followed for strategy as it was understood by the end of the Cold War. First, Jomini's understanding of strategy, which was located at what we would now call the operational level of war, was applied in the context of what was by then commonly referred to as 'grand strategy'. Second, strategy became located above all in the business of planning, and, moreover, in plans which were never tested by reality or—despite the enthusiasm for war games—by approximations of reality as demanding as those encountered by some armies before 1914 or 1939. The conflation of NATO's military strategy with grand strategy, and today's belief that strategy has a long-term and predictive quality, are both, above all, products of the Cold War. During the Cold War, grand strategy and military strategy were united by a clear enemy and an explicit geographical focus, and so provided a form of continuity that ran for more than 40 years. The Cold War created the expectation that grand strategy had predictive, stabilizing and long-term qualities. Strategic studies in the sense which Kennedy or Barnett understood them grew out of that experience. And although operational experience and real war had little corrective effect, the potential operational applications of the use of nuclear weapons underpinned the whole edifice. So 'military strategy' was assumed to have similar qualities and even effects to those of grand strategy. Nuclear planning lay at the heart of strategy in the Cold War. The possibility that planning could deliver effective strategy followed.

Harry Yarger has challenged these assumptions, arguing that strategy is not planning, and that we have confused the two: 'Planning makes strategy actionable.

⁴³ Jack Snyder, *The ideology of the offensive: military decision making and the disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 10.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining war: French and British military doctrine between the wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 3, 5.

Planning takes a gray world and makes it black and white. Planning is essentially linear and deterministic.’ Yarger follows the logic of the Cold War legacy in locating planning in the realm of operations: ‘In modern war, winning battles is a planning objective; winning wars is a strategic objective’.⁴⁵ But there has been another influence which has elevated planning within strategy, and that has been the export of strategy to business schools, its reinterpretation for a non-military, non-lethal context, and then its reimportation back into the military environment whence it originally came. Business theory, says Steven Jermy, ‘assumes that strategic planning will deliver strategy mechanistically’, dividing the creation of strategy from its execution, and reckoning that “analysis will provide synthesis”’. Jermy has pointed out that a strategic-planning process is not the same as a strategy-making process.⁴⁶ In war, the creation and execution of strategy are locked into an iterative relationship, which rests on an inherently dynamic and changing situation and which has to respond to the counters of the enemy.

The ability to produce operational plans is what distinguishes military men from their civilian counterparts, and even defence ministries from other government departments. But such plans are not the same as the sort of planning implicit in Thomas Barnett’s view of grand strategy. They are located in real time and focused on specific geographical theatres, neither of which is true of national strategies looking 25 or 30 years into the future. Major-General Jim Molan, an Australian officer who served as deputy chief of staff for strategic operations in Multi-National Force Iraq (a corps command) in 2004–2005, ‘owned every operation that either had an agreed plan, was currently running as an operation, or would start in the near future’. His description of life at the interface between planning and execution captures the difference between the ‘military’ understanding of strategy in relation to planning and the presumption that long-term planning is possible in grand strategy:

Original plans were prepared in a separate division, but when a plan was ready for execution, it would be passed to me. Getting the timing of this right was critical because if the plan was passed too late or in an incomplete state, I did not have the manpower to do anything more than minor adjustments on the run. This created many raised voices, not because I was right and others were wrong, but because the link between what has to be done in the future and those that have to do it is a point of maximum stress in any modern headquarters.

In describing his approach to ‘strategic operations’, with its need to respond to contingency, Molan used terms reminiscent of Clausewitz’s consequentialist definition of strategy: ‘One thing happens because other things have happened: military planning must retain an infinite flexibility.’⁴⁷

Clausewitz captured Molan’s point in book I of *On war*: ‘Since all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance working everywhere, the

⁴⁵ Harry Yarger, *Strategic theory for the 21st century: the little book for big strategy* (Carlisle, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Feb. 2006), pp 4, 54.

⁴⁶ Steven Jermy, *Strategy for action: using force wisely in the 21st century* (London: Knightstone, 2011), pp. 118–19.

⁴⁷ Jim Molan, *Running the war in Iraq: an Australian general, 300,000 troops, the bloodiest conflict of our time* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2008; pb edn 2009), pp. 136, 170.

commander continually finds that things are not as he expected. This is bound to influence his plans, or at least the assumptions underlying them. If this influence is sufficiently powerful to cause a change in his plans, he must usually work out new ones.⁴⁸ Planning may not be strategy, but we certainly need an awareness of strategy in order to be able to plan. Plans should embrace chance, chaos and the 'unexpected', in the knowledge that they will not remove any of these things from war but will allow for their effects and minimize their part in it. Clausewitz's doubts about the value of intelligence, which are frequently used to feed the 'chaotic' interpretation of *On war*, make a similar point: information derives its value precisely from its self-contradicting qualities, as they enable the general to differentiate what may be true from what may not be true by a process of comparison.⁴⁹ Clausewitz seems to have influenced Mao Zedong on this point:

Because of the uncertainty peculiar to war, it is much more difficult to prosecute war according to plan than the case is with other activities. Yet, since preparedness ensures success and unpreparedness spells failure, there can be no victory in war without advance planning and preparations ... We are comparatively certain about our own situation. We are very uncertain about the enemy's, but there too there are signs for us to read, clues to follow and sequences of phenomena to ponder. These form what we call a degree of *relative certainty*, which provides an objective basis for planning in war.⁵⁰

Napoleon is reported to have said, 'The science of war consists of effectively calculating all the chances first and then working out exactly, mathematically, the part which luck will play. It is on this point that you must not be wrong, and a decimal point more or less can change everything.'⁵¹

Finally, if strategy is oriented towards the future, and yet planning is not strategy, what is the role of strategy? This is where we come back to Clausewitz's evocation of war as a total phenomenon in which friction competes with planning. In 2004 Gary Hart defined grand strategy as 'a coherent framework of purpose and direction in which random, and not so random, events can be interpreted, given meaning, and then responded to as required'.⁵² Hart's definition, unlike Kennedy's or Barnett's, recognized that strategy may be proactive but cannot be prescriptive. This is where it differs from policy, to which it offers options, not a straitjacket. Indeed, without political buy-in, it has no purchase: significantly, Hart served on the bipartisan commission set up to look at US homeland security in 1998, which warned of the possibility of a terrorist attack, but whose recommendations were not heeded before 9/11. Strategy occupies the space between a desired outcome, presumably shaped by the national interest, and contingency, and it directs the outcome of a battle or other major event to fit with the objectives of policy as

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On war*, book I, ch. 3, p. 102.

⁴⁹ Arndt Niebisch, 'Military intelligence: on Carl von Clausewitz's hermeneutics of disturbance and probability', in Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson, eds, *Enlightened war: German theories and cultures of warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 266–7.

⁵⁰ Mao quoted in Michael I. Handel, *Masters of war: classical strategic thought*, 3rd edn (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 246.

⁵¹ Quoted by Jean-Paul Charnay, *Critique de la stratégie* (Paris: L'Herne 1990), p. 235.

⁵² Gary Hart, *The fourth power: grand strategy for the United States in the 21st century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 33.

best it can. It also recognizes that strategy may itself have to bend in response to events. Essential here is the need for flexibility and adaptability; the need for real-time and short-term awareness, as well as long-term perspectives, and the need to balance the opportunity costs of both.

A long-term view of strategy is of course precisely what keeps powers in a war despite setbacks, mounting casualties and even defeats. In that sense it is the counter-narrative: the one that says that it is precisely because of losses that the fight must be continued rather than ended. Strategy has also to integrate short-term shocks and the interactive effects of enemy action. To return to Churchill and Alanbrooke: they looked to the long term in their planning, but they moderated their views in the light of daily news and real-time intelligence; and by the same token they adapted and changed long-term objectives in the light of short-term considerations. They accepted both that war was chaotic and confused, and that the best way to master it was through planning. Strategy was the sum of both, not just the latter. As Yarger has put it: 'Strategy provides a coherent blueprint to bridge the gap between the realities of today and a desired future.'⁵³

If we see grand strategy so much in terms of ends, we neglect the ways and means, and so reverse-engineer from potential outcomes back to today. At the operational level that way of thinking produced effects-based operations, now discredited and largely abandoned. Until we wake up to the same fallacy within strategy we shall continue to see events in more 'unexpected', 'revolutionary' and 'destabilizing' terms than we should. We shall also not get the value from strategy that we can and need.

⁵³ Yarger, *Strategic theory for the 21st century*, p. 5.