

2016

## The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective

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### Recommended Citation

Walling, Karl and Strachan, Hew (2016) "The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 2 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss2/10>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### STRATEGY AS A BATTLEGROUND

*The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*, by Hew Strachan. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013. 322 pages. \$66.70 (paperback \$26.99; Kindle \$17.20).

About halfway through his account of the direction of war, the distinguished Oxford military historian Hew Strachan makes a seemingly minor point about Bernard Brodie, one of the pioneers of limited-war theory during the Cold War. “Brodie had studied Socratic philosophy and had been trained as a historian. These were in some sense the traditional disciplines of strategic thought,” but in the early nuclear age they “were now in retreat” (p. 187). Some might doubt that a Socratic approach combined with historical inquiry is a foundation of strategic thought, or at least of Brodie’s, but in truth Strachan thereby described his own approach to strategic theory and practice as well as anyone possibly could. Strachan, however, is not in retreat. He has taken the initiative and is very much on the offensive—against just about everyone’s sacred cow.

Following Clausewitz directly and perhaps Socrates’s greatest student, Plato, indirectly, Strachan has a dialectical approach to thinking about strategy, which is fundamentally a conversation, the sort any war college could only welcome. It occurs at many levels, and often the

interlocutors speak at cross-purposes. Most fundamentally it is a conversation between theory and practice, one insisting on clarity and therefore abstraction, the other on concrete experience.

As the conversation develops, Strachan brings in new interlocutors. Virtually all the great and many minor strategic theorists and practitioners of the modern era have something to say in this dialogue: Clausewitz, of course, but also Jomini, Mahan, Corbett, Douhet, Billy Mitchell, Brodie, Herman Kahn, Mao Zedong; Generals Powell, Clark, Petraeus, and McChrystal; Admirals Morgan and Mullen; and many, many others. While they converse with each other, all also are engaged in a conversation with practice, i.e., what works and what does not.

That conversation is rooted in a deeper one about the relation of the past (continuity and change) to the present and the foreseeable future (contingency), meaning Strachan harnesses his vast understanding of the past to help us think about the future direction of strategy and war. His dialogue is always about at least these three big questions: What is strategy?

Who should direct it? And where and how should it be made (p. 215)?

Those looking for a clear answer to the first question are likely to be disappointed. Strachan observes that Clausewitz's "*On War* contains many references to the need for principles and system, but never delivers them in a way designed to be learnt by the parrots of military crammers and spoon-fed examinees" (p. 203). Neither does Strachan. Like Socrates, he is an interrogator. He asks what other people, such as the British prime minister and the American president and their military and other subordinates, mean by *policy*, *grand strategy*, *military strategy*, and *operations*. Like Socrates again, he is pretty sure either they do not know or their views are one-sided, if not misguided, and at best limited in utility to a particular moment in time. He frustrates his readers as much as Socrates does in Plato's dialogues because he never quite defines strategy himself. It exists somewhere between war's political purpose and operations that purport to achieve it (p. 220).

As a middle ground between political purpose and military action, strategy also becomes a battleground between those who make policy and those who design and execute operations to achieve it. Strachan's focus is often on the disappearance of strategy in this conflict. Sometimes it is subsumed by policy, which is what he insists happened during the Cold War, when the purpose of strategy was to ensure that major-power, i.e., nuclear, war did not occur, so the use of violence to achieve political objectives among major powers against each other became unthinkable. This also happened after the Cold War, when strategy as a means to achieve political purposes was nearly extinct (with many,

in Europe especially, welcoming its demise), and operations came to occupy the middle ground. This was especially true in the United States, though in such a narrow way that Strachan ascribes fleeting successes in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 and 2003 to the triumph, i.e., failure, of merely operational thinking. So, in many ways his book becomes a discussion of civil-military relations, with a powerful critique of the pioneer of the field, Samuel Huntington.

Like Socrates, Strachan is willing to question taboos. He argues that, in both England and the United States, the danger of a military leader on a white horse coming to power at the expense of freedom was vastly exaggerated. Liberal principles had taken such deep root in the people that a military coup d'état was simply inconceivable. What private in the U.S. or British military would obey an order from a general to arrest the president or prime minister? So Huntington's principle of strict separation between the roles of statesmen and generals was not merely unnecessary but in many ways counterproductive. "The principal purpose of effective civil-military relations is national security: its output is strategy. Democracies tend to forget that" (p. 76). Following Clausewitz, whom he uses to criticize rather than support Huntington, Strachan insists that war is interactive, the realm of chance, friction, contingency, and unexpected actions from the adversary. And war has its own grammar, often leading to escalation. War, in other words, has its own nature, which politics defies at its own risk. A good Clausewitzian might, indeed must, try to impose the political logic of war on all this, but once the dogs of war are unleashed, they tend to make havoc—that is, they follow their own

direction. As often as not, then, policy and strategy are directed by war; they do not direct it. Responding to that reality requires a dialogue between soldiers and politicians—not the subordination of one element to the other, but rather their “harmonization” (p. 78). For any kind of rationality to be imposed, politics must therefore listen to strategy, which must listen to war, both in its enduring nature and in its changing character. All this suggests a far more prominent role in the conversation for generals and admirals than current norms, often violated in practice, tend to permit.

As a student of the American founders and the American political tradition, this reviewer is not sure Strachan is right to challenge the Anglo-American taboos as much as he does. As a professor of strategy, however, I am certain Strachan has captured something vital for understanding the direction of any war. It arises from Clausewitz’s discussion of war as more than a true chameleon changing its colors from war to war. War does have a nature. It is embodied especially in Clausewitz’s trinity: the relation among reason, passion, and creativity that exists in any war. But that relation changes from war to war. Sometimes one element is more important than another, which gives an entirely different direction to a conflict than the one preceding or succeeding it. Sometimes the elements quarrel among themselves. Each attempts to give direction to war, and the changing historical direction of war is very much the result of the conversation among the parts and the interaction of their whole with others. No wonder, then, that Strachan does not give us the clear and final answers we crave. War will not allow them; neither will he. We therefore will have to figure the answers

out for ourselves. A fine way to start is by reading this subtle and erudite book.

KARL WALLING



*Authority, Ascendancy, and Supremacy: China, Russia, and the United States’ Pursuit of Relevancy and Power*, by Gregory O. Hall. New York: Routledge, 2015. 188 pages. \$145 (paperback \$42.95).

Gregory O. Hall, a professor of political science at Morehouse College, has taken an acknowledged fact of contemporary international relations—the dominance of the United States, Russia, and China within the international system—and developed a compelling academic model supporting this.

Hall argues that the Tripolar Conflict, Cooperation, and Competition (TC3) Framework model reflects the reality of the international system since at least the early 2000s. From Central Asia to the Middle East and Northeast Asia, Hall demonstrates that the United States, China, and Russia are locked in a complex web of interrelationships that increasingly determines the outcome of pressing regional, and even global, issues. As the traditional economic and military advantages of the United States decline relative to those of some rising powers, the international system will be even more defined by the interactions of these three dominant global powers.

Hall cogently traces the gradual transition of the global system following the “unipolar” moment that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. While the United States remains first among equals in numerous metrics of national power, the comparative diminution of its own influence and the rise of other power centers