

# THE EVOLUTION OF STRATEGY: THINKING WAR FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

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*Beatrice Heuser*

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Bibliography and Index

*The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* is another welcome addition to the field of War Studies with its particular focus on strategy. The publication adds to a growing body of literature that explores new historical sources to anchor the theoretical departure of the work further, and attends to the emergent dilemmas of the future role(s) of the armed forces. At a time when critical stances about the utility of armed forces seem to have entered a growth period, *The Evolution of Strategy* contributes several well-argued perspectives to acknowledge and comment on questions related to the utility of armed coercion in contemporary times.

The discussion commences with a relatively comprehensive outline of the methodology of the book, compares different viewpoints on what strategy entails, and draws on narratives embedded in both historical as well as more contemporary views and practices. Included are views on why the literature pertaining to strategy is so important, for example, how such literature influences the conduct of war, how writers interpret implicit meaning, and how more generalised understandings become possible when researchers manage to unravel the historical context. The

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second part of the book gives a well-discussed overview of the concept of strategy, and again emphasises the breadth of opinions that have emerged over time. Of note is the criticism that the conceptual clarity and subsequent

understanding of strategy has become conflated with a host of contenders from other disciplines and practices, all claiming strategy as relevant to their fields of business. Such wide claims in fact persistently erode the original meaning and understanding of strategy within the politico-military environment, although Heuser argues that it is quite impossible to force the word strategy into “one universally accepted definition valid through the ages.” (Heuser, 2010: 27). Thus her quite elaborate, but well-argued insights on how the term evolved over time to keep in step with its political, cultural and economic environment.

The search for long-term constants continues, and Heuser dedicates part of the discussion to this quest and the ongoing (and perhaps never-ending) pursuit of and competition between those seeking a clinical answer and the proponents of strategy being an art influenced by religious and ethical stances that resist clinical predictability and demarcation. This enduring legacy between set and more malleable elements and catalysts for making strategy is sustained by the ongoing quest for searching out the truth about strategy, and in *The Evolution of Strategy*, the quest continues.

The theme of the ethics of war runs throughout the different chapters, and rightly so. The author consistently raises the contentious issue of ethics amid developments stretching from historical stances on ethics in war, through the Napoleonic era to that of World Wars I and II, maritime strategy, air-power strategies, the nuclear dilemmas of the Cold War, to contemporary times. Whether implicitly through acceptance of doctrines with a questionable ethical grounding, or during active warfare, ethics remains part of the focus of the discussions. As of late, strategy, war, armed forces and victory have become subject to rather convincing declaratory stances embedded in ethics, but such stances are often ignored in the irregular and unpredictable war environments that have ensued during the last two decades.

One interesting emphasis in the discussion is that good strategy is as much a function of peace as its proper execution during war, and particularly so as several of the components comprising the make-up of strategy take shape during times of peace. Some remarks go so far as to argue that strategy in fact has everything to do with putting in place the ends, ways and means of strategy being more a function of peacetime than of war. This is a sobering emphasis in a field so often dominated by the conduct of armed conflict, without much reference to the interwar periods that very often determine the conduct of war.

Maritime and aerial warfare are particularly well discussed. The two sections offer different perspectives on how thought on landward, maritime and aerial warfare in fact influenced one another since early times, through the acrimonious inter-service debates, optimism and envisaged grandeur of each to the rather stark realities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The author stretches the debate beyond the nuclear era to highlight the dilemmas that air power and maritime strategists now face. This latter emphasis connects to the final part of the publication where the difficulties of employing armed forces for political purposes in some cogent way receive the bulk of the attention.

Two good perspectives are positioned towards the end of the publication in Part 7: the meaning of victory and understanding bureaucratic politics. Both discussions influence decision-making that ultimately affects and in fact tailors choices about strategic pathways. The author sets the debate amid events after World War II, a perspective that forces one to rethink the current debate, which tends to frame the meaning of victory as a more contemporary post-Cold War matter. As the achievement of victory became more and more entangled in a myriad of ethical, personal or even group cultures that determine what is acceptable practice, the dilemma for the armed forces became one of what to prepare for and how to conduct operations. The victory dilemma reached its zenith in the early twenty-first century with Western governments slashing back their armed forces and being increasingly uncertain about where and how to employ them. Military victory became upsetting in some cases; in others a non-descript entity, as destruction and loss of life became a controversy rather than a measure of success.

Regarding the influence of bureaucratic politics, Heuser highlights the erosive influence of bureaucratic processes and decisions upon important decisions, and strategy is no exception – good strategy often becomes mediocre strategy in order to satisfy the spectrum of interested parties through which decisions are ultimately filtered. The quest for perfecting strategy by understanding and executing it in some spectacular way became toned down over time as something barely resembling the Napoleonic era, World War I and II.

Overall, the narrative maintains an essentially coherent structure, for the discussions presented in each chapter support the thematic and chronological lines. The seven parts cover the theoretical and the ethical domains and takes the reader up to the end of the Cold War. The themes towards the end of the book attempt to cover the increasing opaqueness of the war-strategy environments of the early twenty-first century. Although the uncertainty already commenced after the Second

World War, Heuser emphasises the escalation in uncertainty since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it is stimulating to see the accent upon contemporary thought and the future in Part 7.

On the negative side, it appears that much of the discussion is informed by Western and European thought in particular. In this regard, much of the work tends to portray a “status quo” profile, but in all fairness, the author never intended to seek out the contributions of military thinkers from Asia and the Far East in particular. Some remarks about the influences of Sun Tzu, Mao, Giap and Che Guevara do feature, but the bulk of the discussion is from the European and US schools of thought. It is perhaps a case of acknowledging the non-Western contributions by placing them in the overall discussion where they contributed most.

In conclusion, Heuser covers an extended period of time which, in a sense, takes one from the ancient to the modern to the contemporary. On this journey, the meaning of victory becomes a focus. In particular, the author shows how victory and defeat either became problematic or no longer relevant in the light of the increasing dissatisfaction with or incomprehensibility of going to war when its outcome hardly serves any purpose. As a policy instrument, war has become so warped and incompatible with the ends it seeks that Heuser’s critical stance towards the latter part of the work is inevitable. Thus, from the belief of victory paving the way for a better peace and the inherent polemics displayed by proponents and opponents of this stance, the contemporary debate views the quest for victory as holding little advantage in its traditional sense as the roles of armed forces are stretched ever wider. This leaves the question whether we have made significant progress in using armed coercion over the extensive period covered in this publication.

*The Evolution of Strategy* must be read by scholars as well as soldiers. It is a book that requires the reader to think and rethink the use of armed coercion as an instrument of policy. As such, the publication is a must for those officers attending senior military staff courses, for it not only contributes the historical side of strategy, but also requires the reader to rethink the employment of armed forces. Thus, there is a challenge tied up in the narrative that first deals with how armed coercion has changed over time, and then confronts the reader with the changed meaning of victory. The book thus moves the reader from the comfort of a historical narrative to one asking the reader, and the soldier in particular, to agree or disagree about the ends of strategy.

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