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Strategic Insight

The Return of Strategy

by [James J. Wirtz](#)

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The Return of Strategy

Today there is a return to strategy in the foreign and defense policies of the United States and its allies. Strategy's return has been prompted by the need to make decisions about when, where and how to use force to deter, disrupt and destroy individuals, groups and states that seek to attack the United States and its overseas interests and to stop the spread of democracy and free markets. Because force is now being considered not just to deter war, but also to wage war, there is a need to revive the fine art of strategy.

Strategy, according to Daniel Moran, is "the calculated application of collective violence for some ulterior purpose."^[1] Although strategy and strategists take prevention and the mitigation of international violence as their primary goal, they do not believe international disarmament or the adoption of a philosophy and policy of nonviolence is a realistic national objective. The goal of strategy and strategic studies is to make force, as the great Prussian philosopher Carl von Clausewitz stated, a rational instrument of politics. The goal of strategy is to devise ways to harness the death and destruction that occurs in war to alter the political calculations of all concerned to achieve national objectives.

Following the end of the Cold War, strategy seemed to many to be a thing of the past. Some observers argued that serious military threats to the United States ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The existence of Cold-War surplus weapons—the nuclear arsenals and conventional force structure maintained by the United States and Russia—was now deemed by many to be the primary threat to peace and the primary target of disarmament efforts. Without the pressure of a looming threat of great

power war, the study of strategy fell out of military, policy and academic fashion. According to Richard Betts, strategy requires the "interdisciplinary joining of military grammar and political logic, in Clausewitz's terms, a marriage that gets lip service in principle but is often subverted in practice by those who identify more with one half of the union than the other. Soldiers often object to politics permeating war because it gives civilians the right to meddle in operations, while many intellectuals object to dignifying war as an instrument of policy or an academic priority."^[2] Indeed, this failure to consider strategic matters in both academic and policy settings has prompted one leading political scientist to lament the passing of strategy and the fact that few social scientists have little if anything to contribute when it comes to strategy, war or politics.^[3]

The Transformation of the Strategic Setting

During the Cold War, the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with its danger of great power war, was the major threat to international peace. And the threat took the form of a full-scale nuclear war that would have devastated much of Asia, Europe and North America. But, the Cold War was stable in two ways. First, the superpowers provided a great deal of international management in their respective spheres of influence. In other words, bipolarity tended to order international relations. Allies clustered around the superpowers. Those aligned to the United States tended to follow policies laid out in Washington out of shared convictions, a lack of alternatives or a fear of being abandoned to local enemies or the competing superpower. Washington used its considerable economic might to shape a "free world" economy that provided significant benefits to those states that took the American side in the Cold War. Moscow tended to enforce its edicts using networks of agents and the threat of force. As the superpowers' military competition became institutionalized, written and unwritten rules of the game emerged that made the competition more predictable, thereby reducing the possibility of accidents and miscalculations that can lead to war.^[4]

Second, stability took the form of an absence of great power war, which was in turn produced by the situation of mutual assured destruction. Neither superpower could mount a nuclear attack that could prevent retaliation from the other superpower. Defense dominance existed in the sense that both superpowers could guarantee that their competitor could not win a nuclear exchange. Under these circumstances, major war was removed as a realistic option in dealing with the opposing superpower.^[5] Proxy wars occurred on the periphery of the competition in places like Vietnam, Africa, Latin America and Afghanistan, but the nuclear standoff decreased the likelihood that these wars would escalate to threaten the truly vital interests of the opposing superpowers.

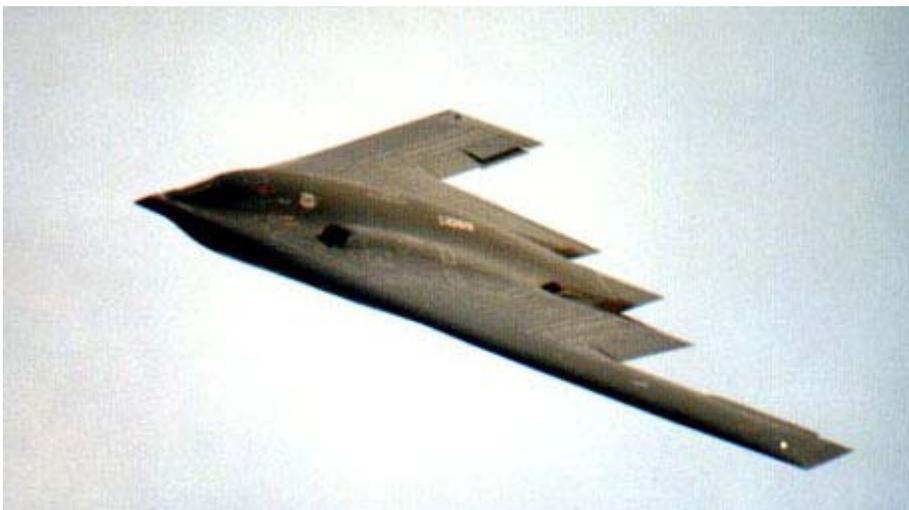
The different strategic demands created by the need to guarantee nuclear retaliation and the need to deal with relatively small conventional military conflicts led to rather unique military organizations. The United States, and the Soviet Union for that matter, actually created distinct military organizations to conduct deterrent and war fighting operations.^[6] U.S. conventional and paramilitary forces stationed outside Western Europe and South Korea, for example, were intended to respond to and contain the small wars and disturbances that were occurring throughout the developing world. These forces actually saw combat in places like Nicaragua, Vietnam, Grenada and Afghanistan. By contrast, strategic deterrent forces—the bulk of U.S. conventional forces, nuclear armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles, and long-range bombers—were never actually employed in combat. Strategic nuclear deterrent forces were deployed throughout the Cold War with only one mission in mind: to guarantee the destruction of the opposing superpower under any circumstances.

Today, the situation has changed drastically. Great power war, or the possibility of a massive nuclear exchange, no longer preoccupies policymakers, officers and publics around the world. Instead, the primary threats facing the United States, its allies and its friends are terrorism, ethnic violence and a few small states that seek to use force to intimidate their neighbors or to enslave their own populations. Even the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. Although Russia and the United States cut back their nuclear arsenals and made major strides toward eliminating their offensive chemical and biological weapons capability, nonproliferation efforts during the 1990s failed to stop the gradual spread of weapons of mass destruction and associated delivery systems.

Today, there is a distinct possibility that nuclear, chemical, biological or radiological weapons might fall into the hands of terrorists. Many fear that these weapons might be used in relatively small-scale attacks on some distant battlefield or against the cities and military bases of America's friends and allies.

This changing threat environment has prompted policymakers to reconsider deterrence as the cornerstone of defense policies.^[7] Terrorists, for example, are difficult to deter because they seek war and destruction; threatening them with war and destruction in retaliation for some unwanted act produces no deterrent effect. Additionally, unlike the Soviet Union, the danger of retaliation posed by states that have recently obtained WMD is relatively low, raising the possibility that military force could disarm opponents before they can strike. These developments mean the preventive motivation for war—the belief that war against a particular adversary is inevitable—is on the rise. Once policymakers decide conflict is inevitable, they must make one of the most difficult and horrific diplomatic decisions in international relations. Leaders have to make military and political judgments about the level of risk the nation is prepared to accept and decide whether it is better to fight now while the costs are relatively low, or wait and possibly confront a more dangerous adversary.

Changes in U.S. military structure and policy reflect this renewed attention to the issues of preventive war, preemption and war fighting. The Cold War division between deterrent and war fighting forces is beginning to fade. On the one hand, forces that were designed to be part of the strategic nuclear deterrent, e.g., the B-2 bomber, now see action as part of conventional and even counter-terrorist attacks in the skies above Afghanistan. On the other hand, the December 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) unveiled a new strategic triad, consisting of nuclear weapons, non-nuclear precision-strike capabilities, and passive and active defenses. The Bush administration's new strategic triad is intended to integrate defenses (i.e., missile defense), nuclear weapons and "non-nuclear strike forces"^[8] into a seamless web of capabilities to dissuade potential competitors from mounting a military challenge to the United States,^[9] to deter adversaries and to fight and win wars if deterrence fails. The NPR notes that the strike elements "...can provide greater flexibility in the design and conduct of military campaigns to defeat opponents decisively. Non-nuclear strike capabilities may be particularly useful to limit collateral damage and conflict escalation. The NPR emphasizes technology as a substitute for nuclear forces that are withdrawn from service. Global real-time command and control and reconnaissance capabilities will take on greater importance in the new strategic triad."^[10]



The B-2 was the ultimate nuclear bomber, but now it has been pressed into service in the war on terrorism. Clever strategy can help bring other "conventional" U.S. weapons to bear in the war against al-Qaeda.

The ethical challenges created by the return to strategy are different from the challenges created by Cold War strategies of containment and deterrence. Today, elected officials and soldiers must now consider

the actual use of force, not just the morality of threatening violence to prevent violence from occurring. They now have to decide issues of when, where and how to employ force while recognizing that their decisions will have immediate and operational consequences. At the same time, they are likely to face restive publics who demand protection from terrorists. Ultimately, the real challenge faced by military professionals everywhere is to win the war against terrorism on civilization's terms by stopping or destroying terrorists before they can cause states to react in ways that undermine the democratic and ethical principles that govern society.

Conclusion

To achieve these objectives, professional soldiers, civilian strategists and elected officials now have to contemplate how best to use force to achieve political objectives. They do so in a world in which America's most likely opponents have demonstrated their willingness to engage in suicidal operations to destroy civilian and military targets within the United States. They also do so at a time when the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons has equipped several unstable or aggressive regimes with the capability to inflict mass casualties on the United States, its forces overseas and its allies.

Strategists now face a series of daunting challenges, not the least of which is to bring to bear forces that were built for interstate war to destroy a global network of fanatics. They must implement strategies intended to deter and to even preempt attacks against the United States without causing alarm about U.S. defense policies among allied governments and publics. They must act quickly and decisively without generating the impression that America acts unilaterally; the greatest ally Washington has in the war on terrorism is the perception that al-Qaeda is at war against civilization, not just the United States. They must find a way to integrate an expanding web of international institutions - organizations and regimes largely created under American auspices - into U.S. defense policy. Ideological blinders cannot be allowed to cloud the assessment of the important role these institutions can play in achieving U.S. security objectives. They also must find a better way to harness America's "soft power," the widespread appeal of American ideals and popular culture, in the global battle against terrorism. It is time to begin to think strategically and creatively about how to bring force to bear to shape the emerging strategic environment to better foster and protect America's overseas interests.

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7. Keith B. Payne and C. Dale Walton, "Deterrence in the Post-Cold War World," in Baylis, Wirtz, Cohen and Gray, [*Strategy in the Contemporary World*](#), pp. 161-182.

8. News Transcript from the United States Department of Defense, Briefing by J.D. Crouch, Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Policy, Wednesday, January 9, 2002, p. 6.

9. The concept of dissuasion is a new term in U.S. doctrine. It apparently suggests that U.S. military forces will be so technologically and operationally superior, that potential competitors will abandon efforts to challenge the United States. Efforts at dissuasion, however, might simply channel the military strategies and capabilities of potential competitors away from U.S. strengths to attack U.S. vulnerabilities, i.e., to adopt asymmetric strategies.

10. The NPR can be found at the globalsecurity.org website as cited pp. 12-13.