



Introduction: Military Strategy: What is the Use of It?

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COLLECTION:
MILITARY STRATEGY -
WHAT IS THE USE OF
IT?

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ABSTRACT

This special issue seeks to highlight the utility of military strategy for students and for practitioners, civilian and military alike. It seeks to dispel three myths: first, that military strategy is irrelevant for small states because they exist in an anarchic system in which “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides, ca. 400 B.C.E/ 1982, p. 351); second, that the “science” of causal theory is irrelevant to the “art” of strategic practice on account of the complex and inherently unpredictable nature of war; and, third, that military strategy is relevant only at the strategic level and should therefore not be taught to junior officers.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue illustrate that military strategy is of “use,” and that the practical execution of the common Ends, Ways, and Means model will benefit from making explicit the assumption and causal hypotheses that inevitably underpin strategy. In this way, the underlying logic becomes easier to subject to critical scrutiny – both logical and empirical. The contributions demonstrate that it is a mistake to conceptualize military strategy as either theory/science or practice/art. It is more fruitful to view them as complementary. Indeed, the principal message conveyed by this special issue is that theory, science, and method serve as indispensable tools for enhancing the analytical quality of strategic practice/art.

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The Danish parliamentarian Viggo Hørup (1841–1902) was renowned for repeatedly challenging Danish defence spending with the question “What is the use of it?” This is also an appropriate way to begin this introduction: it is quite common to encounter the same attitude towards military strategy in Denmark today. Usually, this questioning has two sources. The first is the widespread perception that small states don’t do “real” pro-active strategy because they lack the material power to influence world events. In this perspective, small states can either keep their heads down by hiding (seeking to stay out of trouble in international politics) or by sheltering (doing as they are told by their great power protectors – in the case of the Denmark, the United States; see [Wivel, 2021](#)). The second source of scepticism stems from the perception that that soldiers should act, not pause and think, and that only the Chief of Defence and his advisors in the Defence Command get to practice military strategy in Denmark. It is hence a waste of time to teach soldiers and junior officers military strategy as the vast majority will have no chance to practice it.

This perception is not unique to Denmark. Military educators also encounter such scepticism at U.S. war colleges and military academies ([Cavanaugh, 2014](#)). But even if they will not be formulating strategy, soldiers and junior officers will be part of its execution. Consequently, they should understand what military strategy is and how it affects their peace and wartime duties. This is crucial, as military strategy provides the link between the goals formulated by the political leadership and the military operations carried out to attain them. Richard Betts said it best:

Strategy is the essential ingredient for making war either politically effective or morally tenable. It is the link between military means and political ends, the scheme for how to make one produce the other. Without strategy, there is no rationale for how force will achieve purposes worth the price in blood and treasure. Without strategy, power is a loose cannon and war is mindless. Mindless killing can only be criminal. ([Betts, 2000, p. 5](#))

Since military strategy provides military activities in peace and war with meaning and legitimacy, understanding the strategy to which their service contributes will enable all members of the armed forces to make better sense of their day-to-day duties, be these administrative, logistical, or operational, and will help to improve their job satisfaction, morale, and effectiveness. A soldier sent on a mission on behalf of his or her country needs to understand *why* – why it is necessary and right to run the risks involved. Similarly, a soldier working in human resources needs to understand why effective recruitment and retention is critical in order to enable the members of the military to fulfil the tasks assigned to them by their political leaders. Arguably, recruitment and retention is the single most important challenge currently facing the Danish Armed Forces. This makes military strategy relevant for everyone, whether civilian and military, involved in the operation and employment of the armed forces.

DEFINING MILITARY STRATEGY

The purpose of (military) strategy is the creation of a better future. Actors formulate and execute military strategy to neutralize threats and to seize opportunities in their strategic environment with the goal of protecting and advancing their interests and values. NATO’s deployment of four battle groups in the Baltic countries and Poland in 2017 (enhanced Forward Presence – eFP) illustrates the logic. It was a reaction to an external strategic shock: Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its use of force in eastern Ukraine in 2014. NATO consequently formulated a new end, deterrence of a conventional military Russian attack on the Baltic countries and Poland, and selected a way (deterrence by punishment in the form of a tripwire force) and the means (5,000 personnel) deemed likely to achieve it with acceptable costs and risks ([Jakobsen, 2022](#)).

Military strategy-making is commonly understood as the process of balancing political ends and military means ([Liddell Hart, 1961, p. 336](#)). Lykke (1989) added ways and risk to the model; others have since added assumptions ([Hammes, 2010](#); [Lombardi, 2011](#); [Marine Corps War College, 2021](#)). The resulting Assumptions, Ends, Ways, Means, Risk (AEWMR) model forms the

starting point for most Western military strategy thinking and practice today (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019; NATO, 2017; UK, 2014).

The AEWMR model conceptualizes military strategy-making as a process that links all levels of strategy, from the political or grand strategic to the tactical (see Figure 1). This process has three phases: diagnosis, formulation, and execution. The diagnosis of the strategic environment assesses threats and opportunities. This assessment serves as a basis for formulating the future ends (goals) to be achieved and for selecting the ways (persuasion, inducement, coercion, or brute force, for example) and means (commonly materiel, men, and money) best suited to achieve them. In the final step of the formulation process, the relevant combinations of ways and means are subject to a risk assessment in an attempt to ensure that their execution will not require unacceptable risks and resources. In the execution phase, the chosen ways and means are implemented; evaluation of the results and enemy reactions will cause a need for strategy adjustments – or, in the case of failure, formulation of a new strategy. Interaction with the enemy makes the strategy process adversarial, dynamic, iterative, and essentially unpredictable (Angstrom & Widen, 2015). It was in order to capture the element of chance and unpredictability in military strategy-making and war that Clausewitz (1989) formulated his concept of “friction,” also known as the “fog of war.”

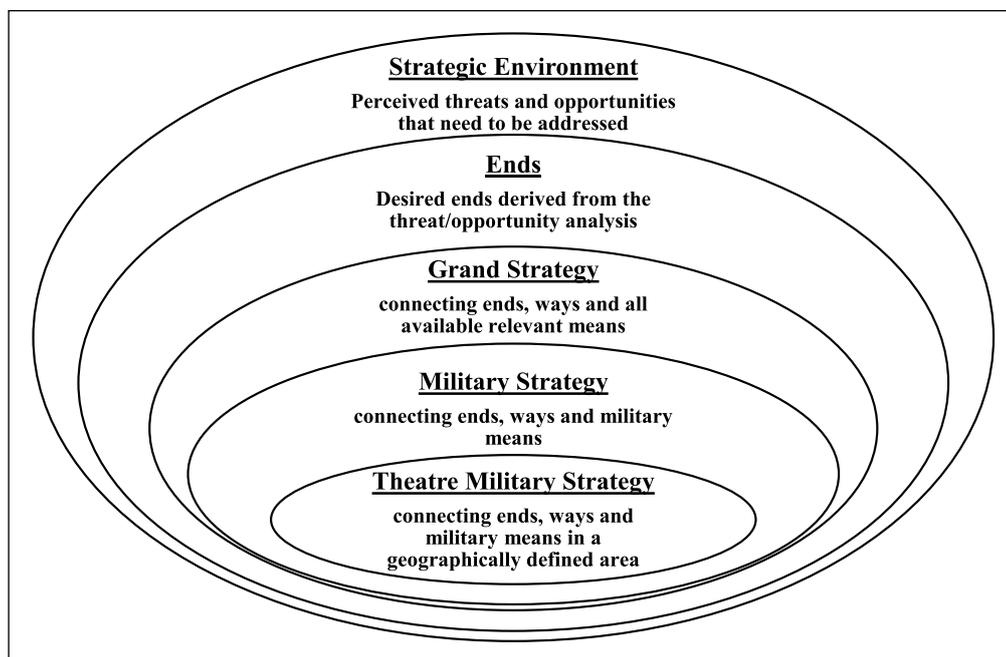


Figure 1 Military Strategy Levels and Components (inspired by Yarger, 2012, p. 48).

We also use this AEWMR understanding of military strategy as our point of departure in this special issue. The strategy tying it together has, as its end, the demonstration of the theoretical and practical utility of military strategy to students and practitioners, both civilian and military; the way employed to achieve this end is conceptual and empirical analysis showing the reader how to conceptualize, operationalize, and employ military strategy in analyses of real world cases; the means employed are the five articles introduced in the order they appear immediately below.

Peter Viggo Jakobsen (2022) opens the special issue with a conceptual article arguing that the AEWMR model needs to be supplemented with causal hypotheses in the form of theories of threat and success in order to help students and civilian and military practitioners analyse, formulate, and assess military strategies with greater analytical clarity and rigour than is generally the case today. The article consequently provides students and practitioners with a simple and easy-to-use practical guide that will allow them to identify the assumptions and causal hypotheses underpinning any military strategy, and to validate that strategy logically and empirically. The article uses NATO’s deployment of the enhanced Forward Presence force in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent use of force in eastern Ukraine in 2014 to illustrate the utility of the proposed analytical tools. Jakobsen’s contribution is based on the assumption that greater analytical clarity and rigour is a prerequisite for better military strategy. It expects conceptually clear, logically consistent, and empirically validated military strategies to stand a better chance of success than vague, inconsistent, and poorly

validated ones. Use of the analytical tools proposed are not, of course, any guarantee of a successful outcome. Politics, biases, and flawed intelligence may still result in the adoption of flawed assumptions and the formulation of ill-suited strategies. Nor can the use of these tools prevent military strategy from failing in the execution phase because of clever enemy responses or unforeseen developments.

Jan Werner Mathiasen's (2022) contribution is both conceptual and empirical. He uses the Ends, Way, Means strategy model as his starting point to refute the argument that "small states don't do strategy," arguing, rather, that they have more strategic autonomy at the theatre and tactical levels than is generally assumed. Mathiasen develops three innovative conceptual models for analyzing small state military deployments. As small states lack the capacity to shape the overall ends and ways in the multi-national military operations to which they contribute, they design their force contributions in order to pursue specific national ends at theatre level. Depending on the strategic situation, they prioritize either ends, ways, or means and configure their military contributions accordingly. Mathiasen illustrates the utility of his analytical models by demonstrating how Danish military contributions have differed markedly depending on whether they were primarily driven by ends (ending piracy of the Horn of Africa), ways (comprehensive approach employed in the Helmand province in Afghanistan), or available means (F-16s in Libya). These case studies present the three cases in a light different to that received from the existing research.

Mikkel Storm Jensen (2022) makes an important empirical contribution by demonstrating how Denmark's strategic use of its offensive cyber capabilities may be based on flawed assumptions that both overestimate their potential for generating prestige in the eyes of NATO and the United States and underestimate the risk of entrapment in conflicts between the United States, Russia, and China. Drawing on Jakobsen's (2022) concept of theory of success and Snyder's (1984) abandonment-entrapment theory, Jensen demonstrates that Denmark's traditional expectation of prestige and protection from the United States is significantly less of a given with the acquisition of offensive cyber capabilities to NATO's arsenal compared to the recent acquisition of 27 F-35s. The United States may show a lack of awareness or indifference, due to difficulties of coordinating offensive cyber means; it may even show annoyance if Denmark is perceived to be withholding support for U.S. operations due to concerns over entrapment or an unwillingness to reveal classified means (for example). Furthermore, the continued failure of the United States to deter state-initiated cyber-attacks below the threshold of armed conflict, particularly from China and Russia, poses a threat of entrapment in the cyber aspects of the ongoing great power conflict. The article concludes that offensive cyber capabilities demonstrably do not fit the historical Danish theory of success, and that their strategic value should be assessed differently to those of conventional military means.

Troels Burchall Henningsen (2022) also makes an important empirical contribution using theory of success to show how Denmark formulated and executed strategies enabling it to achieve important policy objectives in the United Nations Security Council between 2005 and 2006. In addition to analysing the general Danish influence strategy, the article also analyses how Denmark developed and executed issue-specific strategies in three instances: the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission, the direction of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and the referral of war crimes in Darfur to the International Criminal Court. The article draws on newly released archival records in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to throw new light on the Danish process of strategy formulation and execution. Like Mathiasen (2022), Henningsen demonstrates that small states can make a difference on the international scene if they formulate strategy proactively and seize the opportunities that present themselves in their strategic environment. The article also draws important lessons from Danish successes in the Security Council that might be applicable to Denmark's campaign for election to the Security Council in 2025–2026.

The issue's final contribution focuses on NATO and the strategic challenges that the alliance must overcome in a strategic environment characterized by four simultaneous threats: Russian revisionism, China's rise, the related problem of coping with threats in the cyber domain, and persistent challenges emanating from NATO's southern flank. Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (2022), who served on the NATO Secretary General's High Level Reflection Group on NATO 2030, applies insights from the literature on organizational ambidexterity to provide a fresh perspective

on how NATO could adapt to strategic simultaneity. The organizational ambidexterity literature focuses on the challenge corporations must meet in striking a balance between exploiting existing markets and technologies and exploring new ones. In essence, strategic simultaneity demands that NATO do the same. NATO must cope with well-known and less-known threats and strike the right balance between effectiveness in handling known problems and innovation in coping with new ones. The article extracts three key categories from the strategic ambidexterity research: unified senior leadership; distinct organizational sub-cultures; and innovation and the ability to bring new ideas “to market.” It applies them to NATO and argues that in order to become more ambidextrous, NATO’s major countries must unite around a vision that places simultaneity at the center. This calls for a balanced investment in tackling the four threats described above; it must maintain Allied Command Transformation (ACT) as a distinct organizational unit while building much stronger bridges between ACT and the other commands, and use NATO Centers of Excellence and NATO’s external partnerships in a more targeted way as sources of innovation and new ideas.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue illustrate that military strategy is of “use” and that practical application of the common Ends, Ways, Means model will benefit from making explicit the assumptions and causal hypotheses that underpin it so that the underlying logic becomes easier to subject to critical scrutiny – both logical and empirical. The contributions demonstrate that it is a mistake to conceptualize military strategy as either theory/science or practice/art. It is more fruitful to view them as complementary. Indeed, the principal message conveyed by this special issue is that theory, science, and method serve as indispensable tools for enhancing the analytical quality of strategic practice/art.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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