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TAMING STRATEGY: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
/
STRATEGIE APPRIVOISÉ: VERS UN CADRE CONCEPTUEL

By/par

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Abstract

Strategy is a term originating in military theory. It is associated with concepts like war, conflict, policy, politics, will and engagements, among others. More recently, and much to the chagrin of military purists, strategy has been pm12 mguTw -19.5iness acommunityto tdescribe lng oerm ogoals

Taming Strategy: Towards a Conceptual Framework

*The word 'strategy' has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities.*¹

Introduction

The quote that opens this paper is by Hew Strachen, an Oxford professor of the history of war. It is a lament for a bygone era before the traditional interpretation of strategy was appropriated “by politicians and diplomats, by academics and think-tank pundits”.² It is a plea for the good old days when a strategy was a strategy – when it was a concept that belonged to generals who understood the value of war and its conduct.

“... [I]f we abandon it,” Strachen warns of the time-honoured definition of strategy, “we surrender the tool that helps us to define war, to shape it and to understand it.”³

Strachen’s quest to recover the lost meaning of strategy is a doomed one, however. It is predicated on a false premise that over the years strategy has lost its way, that it has followed a serpentine path of non-discovery and ‘banality’. The purpose of the present paper is to refute Strachen’s claim that strategy today is a moribund concept. The paper will argue that, though there has been a proliferation of definitions from different communities (e.g., the military and business), this has actually been a healthy development which has led to a more robust concept of strategy. Furthermore, the paper will propose a new conceptual framework for strategy, one that will elucidate some of its

¹ Strachen, Hew. The Lost Meaning of Strategy. *Survival* vol. 47 no. 3. (Autumn 2005). p.34.

² Ibid, p.44.

³ Ibid, p.48.

more enduring and profound properties while also suggesting ways in which strategy can be studied and analysed.

To answer the question ‘what is strategy?’ it will first be necessary to review how military discourse and theory has used the term, and then to briefly sample how it has been used by the business community. The argument will be that the usage has evolved to include any activity or decision that involves national politics, the senior levels of any large business or organization, or even the long term intentions of individuals. As a result, the word strategy has adopted slightly different (but importantly different) meanings – meanings that suggest a maturation, not an obfuscation, of the concept. For instance, it will become evident that strategy is linked to three themes: 1) complexity and uncertainty, 2) ends, means and ways, and 3) change management and risk mitigation. Throughout this paper the distinction between strategy and plans will be highlighted. This distinction will be crucial for establishing ‘strategic relativism’, a novel concept that has roots in social identity theory and from which one can deduce the proposition that all strategies are of only two types: strategies for sustaining identities, or strategies for transforming identities.

The overall thesis is that strategy is neither banal nor moribund. The term may have had its roots in military thought, but it has since evolved into a more inclusive concept rich enough to include the vagaries of military strategy itself. It will quickly become evident that strategy, at its most basic articulation, is a human activity designed to influence and shape other human activity.

What is Strategy?

A word's meaning, its semantics, changes with time. Casual perusal of any dictionary shows that most words have multiple meanings, depending on the context of their use, and their historical development. It is the nature of languages that semantics change or evolve over time⁴. This is certainly the case for the word strategy.

A brief survey of definitions of strategy will be presented with the intention of identifying commonalities and differences in how the term is conceived. By association, this survey will also suggest possible interpretations of the word strategic, including when and if strategy is strategic.

Definitions of Strategy

In his book entitled *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Edward Luttwak devotes a short appendix to definitions of strategy and their origins⁵. The word strategy is derived from the Greek word *strategos*, meaning general. In this sense, strategy is that which is not limited in scope or application. It refers to something that is all encompassing – something general – which by implication means something lacking in detail and precision. Interestingly, this derivation is not the one favoured by Luttwak. He prefers *strategike episteme*, meaning general's knowledge, where the word general

⁴ For instance, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) argue that systems of categories – of which words and their meanings play an integral part – do not have objective existence apart of a person's individual, or a society's collective, experience. Since a person's and a society's experiences change over time, their systems of categories, including the meaning of the words that express these categories, will change also. Interestingly, the way words are spelled also change with time, though changes in spelling evolve much more slowly than changes in meaning.

⁵ Luttwak, Edward N. *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), Appendix 1, p.239-241.

now refers to a military person of rank and seniority. It is consistent with Moltke's definition of strategy as 'the practical adaptation of the means placed at a general's disposal to the attainment of the object in view'⁶. This seeming tension between viewing strategy as a (general) concept vs. viewing it as a strategic designation (e.g. a general) will become important later in the discussion.

Luttwak's emphasis on *strategike episteme* as the proper derivation of strategy is consistent with his interest in military theory, especially as it relates to his thesis that military strategy abounds in 'paradoxical logic'. Human conflict, with its propensity for antonymous sentiments like trust and distrust, clarity and obfuscation, truth and deceit, love and hate, etc., often leads to logic that Luttwak categorizes as paradoxical. His canonical example of 'paradoxical logic' is the expression "If you want peace, prepare for war". "... [W]e are told," Luttwak argues, "that a prepared ability to fight dissuades attack that weakness could invite, thereby averting war"⁷. Yet this proposition, whose truth many held to be self-evident, especially during the Cold War years, is logically contradictory. Luttwak's point is not that the proposition is *wrong* because of its logical inconsistency, but rather that the proposition is *paradoxical* precisely because of its *rightness* in the face of its obvious logical wrongness. Indeed, Luttwak devotes his entire book to the thesis "that *the entire realm of strategy is pervaded by a paradoxical logic of its own* [italics in original]"⁸. Luttwak's thesis is reminiscent of Liddell Hart's statement that "In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home."⁹

Fundamentally, the source of paradoxical logic in strategy comes from the type of human

⁶ Quoted in B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*. (2nd edition, London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p.334.

⁷ Ibid. p.3

⁸ Ibid. p.4

⁹ Liddell Hart, p.25

conflict which results from the dynamic interplay of adversarial wills¹⁰. It is for this reason that Luttwak settles on a definition of strategy that he attributes to the French General André Beaufre in 1963: “the art of the dialectic of wills that use force to resolve their conflict”¹¹.

Most military definitions of strategy are traceable to the influential work of Carl von Clausewitz. In his seminal work *On War* Clausewitz defines strategy as “the use of engagements for the object of the war”¹². On the surface, Beaufre’s definition seems quite different from Clausewitz’s. Clausewitz uses the term ‘war’ as the object of strategy, whereas Beaufre (and by implication Luttwak) use the more generic term ‘conflict’. Clausewitz emphasizes ‘engagements’ while Beaufre expresses a ‘dialectic of wills’. Yet Clausewitz’s definition of strategy needs to be interpreted within the larger context of his work. For instance Clausewitz was well aware of the value of dialectics, especially as a pedagogical tool. Bassford has argued that Clausewitz’s often-cited definition of war as the “continuation of politics by other means” was not meant to be a statement of fact. It was meant to be one half (the antithesis) of a dialectic argument the other half of which (the thesis) proposed that war was nothing but a duel on a larger scale. As Bassford states:

His synthesis, which resolves the deficiencies of these two bold statements, says that war is neither “nothing but” an act of brute force nor “merely” a rational act of politics or policy. This synthesis lies in his “fascinating trinity” [wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit]: a dynamic, inherently

¹⁰ The assumption being that non-adversarial conflict involving humans – such as conflict arising from natural disasters or poor communication – would not lead to paradoxical logic.

¹¹ Ibid. p.241

¹² Carl von Clausewitz, eds./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976. (Book Two, Chapter 1), p.128.

unstable interaction of the forces of violent emotion, chance, and rational calculation.¹³

Clausewitz was well aware of the importance of the ‘dialectic of wills’ as a central component of war and strategy. For instance, in Book 2 of *On War* he states: “The essential difference is that war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts...In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts”¹⁴. Implicit in Clausewitz’s definition of strategy, therefore, is that it involves opposing wills, that war can be brutal, that it is the extension of politics, and that it can be emotionally charged, subject to chance, and rationally pursued.

Later definitions of strategy build upon Clausewitz’s by emphasizing the pursuit of particular ends or objectives, particularly those of policy. In 1967, Liddell Hart defined strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the end of policy”¹⁵, and in 2002, Colin Gray defined it as “the use made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy”¹⁶. For both authors, strategy is the linking of particular means, in this case military force, to particular ends, which are always political. Beaufre’s notion of a ‘dialectic of wills’ or Clausewitz’s ‘animate object that reacts’ is now interpreted in a much more focused and high level fashion by Liddell Hart and Gray. It is not sufficient for strategy to be associated with just any wilful conflict; Liddell Hart and Gray advocate that it must always be in the service of the policies of the state.

In answering the question “What is military strategy?” Col Arthur Lykke Jr. (Retired), a professor of military strategy at the US Army War College, endorses the

¹³ Christopher Bassford, “Clausewitz and His Works”, <http://www....>; internet; accessed 17 March 2007. This is a rewritten version (2002) of Chapter 2 found in his book “*Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America*”, 1815-1945. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Clausewitz, Book 2, Chapter 3, p.149

¹⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, p.335.

¹⁶ Gray, Colin, S. *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History*. (Portland: Frank Cass, 2002), p.3

definition approved by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff: “The art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force.”¹⁷ Lamenting that the term strategy has been used “altogether too loosely,” Col Lykke goes on to stipulate that strategy can be described almost arithmetically:

Strategy equals *ends* (objectives towards which one strives) plus *ways* (courses of action) plus *means* (instruments by which some end can be achieved). This general concept can be used as a basis for the formulation of any type [of] strategy – military, political, economic and so forth, depending upon the element of national power employed [italics in original].¹⁸

Ironically, Col Lykke’s attempt to focus, refine and restrict the concept of strategy itself introduces a new aspect of strategy that was only implicitly suggested before: that is, there can be multiple types of strategy (e.g., military strategy, economic strategy, political strategy, etc). Nevertheless, Col Lykke is consistent with previous authors in that strategy should be reserved for national level interests, including military means for achieving those interests. This is consistent also with the field of Strategic Studies, which is concerned with “*understanding and explaining the military dimension of international relations* [italics in original].”¹⁹

So far in this admittedly brief overview of definitions of strategy, the concept has taken on a remarkably rich set of descriptors, ranging from the original Greek term meaning general, to a dialectical conflict of wills, to chance and necessity, to military art and science, to politics and policy, and finally to national means, ways and ends.

¹⁷ Quoted in Colonel Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., US Army, Retired. *Defining Military Strategy*. *Military Review* 77, no. 1 (January—February 1997), p.183.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.183.

¹⁹ Ken Booth and Eric Herring. *Keyguide to Information Sources in Strategic Studies*. (New York: Mansell Publishing, 1994), p.21

Indeed, the list can be continued. Often to the chagrin of some military authors and academics²⁰, strategy has taken on meanings that go beyond their original military purpose. This has certainly been the case for the management community who have embraced the concept by emphasizing the long term, dynamic thinking that senior leaders must engage in so that their organisations remain relevant, competitive and forward looking. Although the literature on strategy for the business and corporate communities is too large to cover in the present paper, a careful sampling from one of its most influential authors will contribute significantly to the discussion.

Beyond the fact that some management authors have adopted a dubious military attitude towards business strategy²¹, authors like Henry Mintzberg have concentrated on elucidating the important distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning – with the latter often incorrectly associated with strategy. Indeed, Mintzberg has been instrumental in championing the importance of *strategizing* – i.e., the act of generating strategy – over the strategic product itself²². Good strategy comes from good strategizing, and good strategizing comes from the ability to think strategically within the context of the type of organisation you have. Mintzberg describes five types of organizations: the Machine Organization, the Entrepreneurial Organization, the Professional Organization, the Adhocracy Organization, and the Diversified Organization. Each type of organization needs to pursue a different type of approach to developing its strategy. Each has a different management structure, different staff

²⁰ See for instance, Hew Strachan, *The Lost Meaning of Strategy*. *Survival* vol. 47 no. 3, Autumn 2005, p.33-54; and Richard K. Betts, *The Trouble with Strategy: Bridging Policy and Operations*. *JFQ*, Autumn/Winter 2001-02, p.23-30.

²¹ For instance see Barrie G. James, *Business Wargames* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984), and Al J. Ries and Jack Trout, *Marketing Warfare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

²² Much of this discussion is derived from Henry Mintzberg's seminal book *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning: Reconceiving Roles for Planning, Plans and Planners*. (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994).

expectations, a different culture, different resources, different challenges, a different future, etc. Furthermore, in very large organizations like militaries and government bureaucracies, more than one of these types of organizations (or even all of them) can co-exist at the same time²³. A one-size-fits-all approach to strategizing, therefore, is doomed to failure. Mintzberg's emphasis on strategic thinking versus strategic planning is his way of stressing the flexible nature of strategy.

Mintzberg is a vocal critic of any attempt to codify or formalize the strategic process. The future is too uncertain and the world is too complex. To quote Betts who voices similar concerns but from a political perspective: "Formulaic strategy... is effectively antipolitical. It aims to nail things down and close options, while politics – especially in a democracy – strives to keep options open and avoid constraints."²⁴

Taking a linear, programmatic approach to strategy making, especially in human affairs, reduces a complex issue to merely a complicated one.

The distinction between 'complex' and 'complicated' is an important one and deserves explanation. Something is complicated when it is made up of (very) many components connected in intricate ways all of which interact in a stable, linear fashion. As such, complicated systems are capable of displaying exquisitely sophisticated behaviours and capable of performing amazing actions – e.g., an aircraft carrier – but as a whole they can behave only in ordered, predictable ways. In short, they function simply as the sum of their parts. Complex systems on the other hand, have parts that interact both linearly and non-linearly, producing behaviours that are, in principle, unpredictable

²³ Mintzberg also mentions two further types of organizations: the Political Organization, and the Ideological Organization.

²⁴ Richard K. Betts, *The Trouble with Strategy: Bridging Policy and Operations*. *JFQ*, Autumn/Winter 2001-02, p.24

and emergent. Complex systems, such as biological organisms, display properties that are greater than the sums of their parts.²⁵ In fact, each human represents the highest form of complex biological system known. Furthermore, when groups of humans band together to form groups, organizations and societies, the complexities compound themselves. And these complexities become even greater as organizations and societies function within nation states. It is important to emphasize that complex systems are not merely larger more intricate versions of complicated ones. They are a *qualitatively* distinct class of system and they cannot, in any way, be *reduced* to complicated systems.

Therefore, artificially reducing the act of strategizing (which is a complex activity) to one of formalized planning (which is merely a complicated one) risks applying linear solutions to non-linear problems. This is the basis of Mintzberg's warning about strategic planning.

Returning to definitions of strategy, perhaps the best treatment of strategic theory is found in the excellent monograph entitled *The Little Book on Big Strategy* by Harry Yarger, professor of National Security Policy at the U.S. Army War College²⁶. Yarger's definition of strategy is longer than those discussed previously, but it is worth quoting in its entirety:

The art and science of developing and using the political, economic, social-psychological, and military power of the state to create strategic effects that protect or advance national interests in the environment in accordance with policy guidance. Strategy seeks a synergy and symmetry of objectives, concepts and resources to increase the probabilities and

²⁵ This is a very simplified description of the difference between complicated and complex systems. For a more thorough treatment see James Moffat, *Complexity Theory and Network Centric Warfare*. (Washington, DC: DoD Command and Control Research Program, September, 2003), and Stuart Kauffman *At Home in the Universe: The Search for Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity*. (New York: Viking, 1995).

²⁶ Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (The Letort Papers, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2006).

favourable consequences of policy success and to lessen the chances of policy failure.²⁷

Echoes of the earlier definitions of strategy discussed thus far are evident in Yarger's definition. Yarger also endorses the position that complexity theory is relevant for describing the strategic environment. Complexity "alerts the strategist to the existence of multicausal situations, unintended consequences, circumstances ripe for change, the roles of feedback and self-fulfilling expectations, and other abnormalities discounted, or even disparaged, by the rational planning model."²⁸ The point is that strategy, once articulated, inevitably influences the future it tries to anticipate. This then has secondary and tertiary consequences that could not have been anticipated when the original strategy was developed, which then requires that the strategy be altered or reconsidered. Anticipated and unanticipated causes and effects unfold in time, hopefully more or less in the direction that was originally intended in the strategy, but not necessarily so. Yarger is as adamant as Mintzberg about the very limited role planning has in strategy. Though planning is necessary for turning aspects of strategy into action, planning involves completely different skills.

Planning is essentially linear and deterministic, focusing heavily on first-order cause and effect...[It] works because the lower the level, the more limited the scope and complexity, and the shorter the timeline...*Planning is not strategy.* [italics in original]²⁹

Yarger methodically develops his theory of strategy by specifying 15 assumptions and premises for strategy (see Table 1), which provide an important checklist for anyone interested in doing or studying strategy.

²⁷ Ibid, p.65-66

²⁸ Ibid, p.22.

²⁹ Ibid, p.49.

Table 1: Yarger's 15 Assumptions and Premises of Strategy.³⁰

1. Strategy is proactive and anticipatory but not predictive.
2. Strategy is subordinate to policy.
3. Strategy is subordinate to the nature of the environment (i.e., must choose or pursue appropriate ends, ways and means)
4. Strategy maintains a holistic perspective (i.e., comprehends first-, second- and third-order effects of levels above and below the strategist's own level).
5. Strategy, once articulated, threatens the status quo.
6. Strategy focuses on a preferred end-state among possible end-states in a dynamic environment.
7. Strategy is an inherently human enterprise. The role of belief systems and cultural expectations is important.
8. Friction is an inherent part of strategy.
9. Strategy focuses on root purposes and causes making it adaptable and flexible.
10. Strategy is hierarchical (e.g., strategy is subordinate to policy, whereas lower level strategy and planning are subordinate to higher levels).
11. Strategy must be integrated into history (i.e., it exists and changes in time).
12. Strategy is cumulative.
13. Efficiency is subordinate to effectiveness in strategy.
14. The ends, ways, means of strategy must be in balance, qualitatively and quantitatively.
15. Risk is inherent to all strategy.

Yarger rounds out his theoretical perspective by arguing that good strategy must be validated against three criteria: it must be suitable to the ends, it must be feasible to attain with the resources available (or planned), and it must be acceptable to those most affected by it. It is crucial, for instance, that the fundamental values of the strategists are not compromised in the hot pursuit of the strategy. Nor must all resources be consumed in the process, unless a parallel strategy has been conceived and implemented to renew them. Strategizing must not be at the expense of sustainability.

Finally, before leaving this discussion on definitions of strategy it is worth presenting one more. This definition was penned by an author who has spanned both the management and the military fields. John R. Boyd, originator of the famous OODA loop,

³⁰ The table is a précis of the text located on pages 66-68 of Yarger's monograph.

retired Colonel from the U.S. Air Force, architect of the original Gulf War mission, was a renowned strategic thinker whose work influenced both the military and the business communities. His definition, which closes this section, embodies many of the characteristics of strategy mentioned by previous authors, yet does not restrict the concept to any single domain (e.g., military, political, organizational, etc). It is a definition almost poetic in its construction and it deserves careful reading. For Boyd strategy is:

A mental tapestry of changing intentions for harmonizing and focusing our efforts as a basis for realizing some aim or purpose in an unfolding and often unforeseen world of many bewildering events and many contending interests.³¹

Putting It All Together

One can be excused for thinking that strategy wishes to be all things to all people, and as a result satisfies no one. As a concept, strategy seems to be as complex as the complexity it attempts to embrace. Is it too complex? Are the definitions too vague, broad and diffuse to be of use? This section will argue that strategy, despite its seeming ubiquity, has a unique logic, is rationally based, and can be used in a manner that can guide discourse. Strategy and the strategic are concepts both understandable and achievable. The key is to recognize that strategy has three central themes, each one of which informs the other and, when taken together, provide a complete description that can then be applied to multiple domains. These themes are: 1) the general problem space

³¹ Though John Boyd's work is often cited, little of it was actually written down. This quote is from a PowerPoint slide deck by Boyd entitled "The Strategic Game of ? and ?", http://www.d-n-i.net/boyd/strategic_game.ppt; Internet; accessed 14 February, 2007. For an excellent biography of Boyd see Col Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd*. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

for strategy as defined by complexity and uncertainty; 2) how the triumvirate of ends, means and ways fits within this problem space; and 3) how any strategy located within this problem space creates risks that must be managed and mitigated. Each theme will be discussed separately.

Theme One: The General (*strategos*) Problem Space

Notwithstanding Luttwak's dissatisfaction with the original Greek interpretation of strategy (i.e., *strategos* meaning general), the word general is in fact an excellent translation. Strategy is about taking a whole (general) approach to achieving complex, long term ends. It is about dealing with orders of complexity over which a nation, an organization or even an individual has little or no control. It is about anticipating and shaping the future into one that is more favourable. It is, therefore, about dealing with complexity and uncertainty.

If complexity and uncertainty are treated as two dimensions of a plane, then a general (*strategos*) problem space can be defined within which all strategy types can reside. Figure 1 illustrates such a space. The Y axis represents successive levels of complexity based on successive aggregates of human social interactions. The scale begins at the level of the 'individual' because the individual human represents the lowest known unit of sentient complexity. That is, each individual human, due to his or her conscious ability to self-reflect, to create and to anticipate the future, introduces non-linear patterns of cause and effect that, in principle, yield complexity. The next level on the scale – the group – represents a social unit made up of aggregates of individuals. A group of humans will be more complex than any single human. As a result, a group will

exhibit behaviours that are more difficult to anticipate, shape or influence. Similarly for the next level on the complexity scale: the organization. Organizations are aggregates of groups (or teams or sections) and likewise display behaviours not predictable from either the behaviours of groups or of individuals. Nations are more complex than organizations, groups or individuals, and exhibit emergent behaviours unique to that level of complexity.

Each successive level of aggregation on the Y axis is more complex than the level below it. Similarly, each successive level of aggregation impacts much larger numbers of individuals than the level below it. Single decisions made at higher aggregate levels of complexity will have commensurately larger effects. It is for this reason that the national level is most often considered the strategic level, where ‘strategic’ here means that level which affects large numbers of organizations, groups and individuals who identify themselves as part of the same social unit (i.e., nation).

Not all possible types of social aggregates are displayed on the Y axis of Figure 1. For illustrative purposes, however, the categories displayed are sufficient to describe this dimension of complexity³².

The X axis in Figure 1 represents the degree of uncertainty associated with the future. Even for simple non-linear systems, chaos theory states that miniscule changes can produce, in time, large uncertainties – a phenomenon usually referred to as the ‘butterfly’ effect or sensitivity to initial conditions. This is one of the defining

³² This scale is an abstraction of the one developed by James Miller in his book *Living Systems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). Miller describes eight hierarchical levels that are nested: cell, organ, organism, group, organization, community, society, and supranational system

characteristics of complex systems.³³ When dealing complex humans, and with complex societies of humans, these chaotic effects compound to produce huge uncertainties over time.

It should be noted that these two dimensions are similar in intent, though not in detail, to those espoused by Luttwak. “Strategy, then,” he writes, “has two dimensions: the vertical dimension of the different levels that interact with one another; and the horizontal dimension of the dynamic logic that unfolds concurrently within each level.”³⁴ Luttwak, however, was interested only in the military levels of tactics, operations and strategy, rather than the broader treatment pursued in the present paper.

At this point in the discussion it is important to distinguish between strategic behaviour from planning behaviour in the general (*strategos*) problem space. For example, individuals may have enough control over their daily, weekly and monthly affairs to allow them to make detailed (linear) plans for achieving specific objectives. As was already mentioned, plans are detailed patterns of activity, linearly spaced in time that make certain assumptions about environmental stability and which use resources that either currently exist or are easily available (i.e., resources over which one has control). On the other hand, should these individuals have objectives that are many years or even decades into the future, fewer assumptions about long-term stability can be made (e.g., in their work place, in their health, etc). Furthermore, these long term objectives will require resources over which the individual may, at the moment, have little or no control and must acquire.

³³ For an excellent and very readable overview of Chaos Theory see James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987).

³⁴ Luttwak, Edward N. *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) p.70.

A similar distinction between plans and strategies exist at the organizational level. Plans (not strategies) are appropriate for objectives that lie within an organization's control (i.e., for which policies and resources already exist), but strategies (not plans) are necessary to deal with factors that lie outside its control (e.g., the vagaries of national and international markets). In general, for any given level on the Y axis – i.e., individual, organizational, national, etc. – that which lies below it is more in its control than that which lies above it.³⁵

Finally, since higher levels on the Y axis involve greater complexity than lower levels, and since higher complexity also implies greater uncertainty due to non-linear interactions, the likelihood of being able to generate plans for the near future become increasingly difficult. It will be necessary to develop strategies even for objectives that lie only multiple years (rather than decades) into the future. Therefore, units higher on the complexity dimension will require the use of strategies to anticipate/shape events sooner into the future than units lower on the complexity dimension. This suggests that the problem space can be divided diagonally into two triangular regions the uppermost of which represents the area where strategic thinking should take place, while the lowermost region represents the area where more traditional linear planning behaviour should happen (see Figure 2).

The relative sizes of the triangular regions will depend upon the amount of environmental and social stability that exists at any moment in the world. Extreme belligerence, social unrest, war, environmental disaster or other forms of conflict will have the effect of reducing the triangular region where simple planning will be sufficient

³⁵ This of course is not the case for fragile and failing states, or organizations that face internal strife, or individuals with serious survival issues. In these cases, internal stability becomes the main focus of strategy.

to achieve specific ends, and increasing the region of space for which strategies are more appropriate.

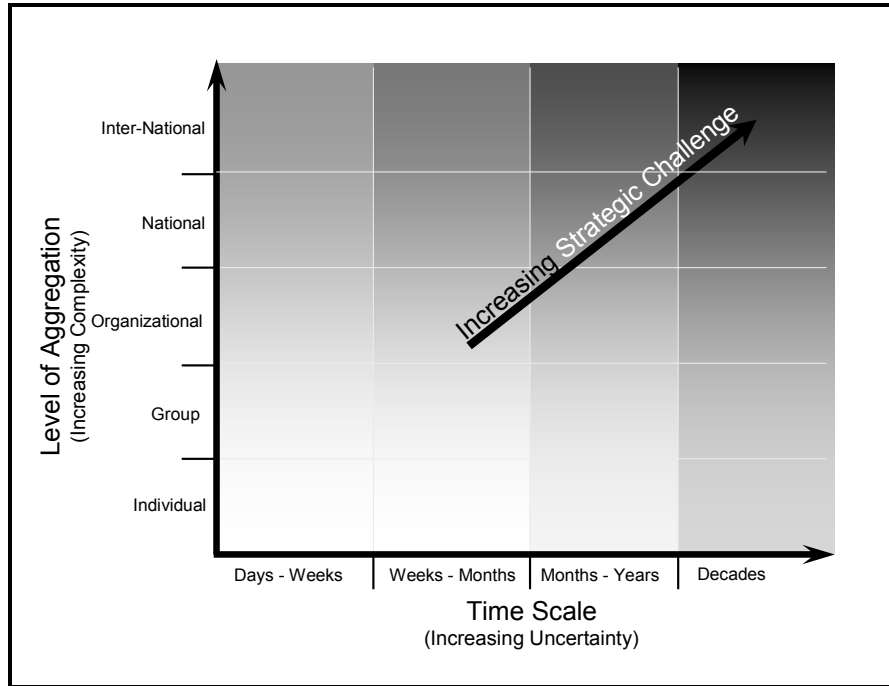


Figure 1: General (*Strategos*) Problem Space: Darker regions represent areas of greater strategic challenge.

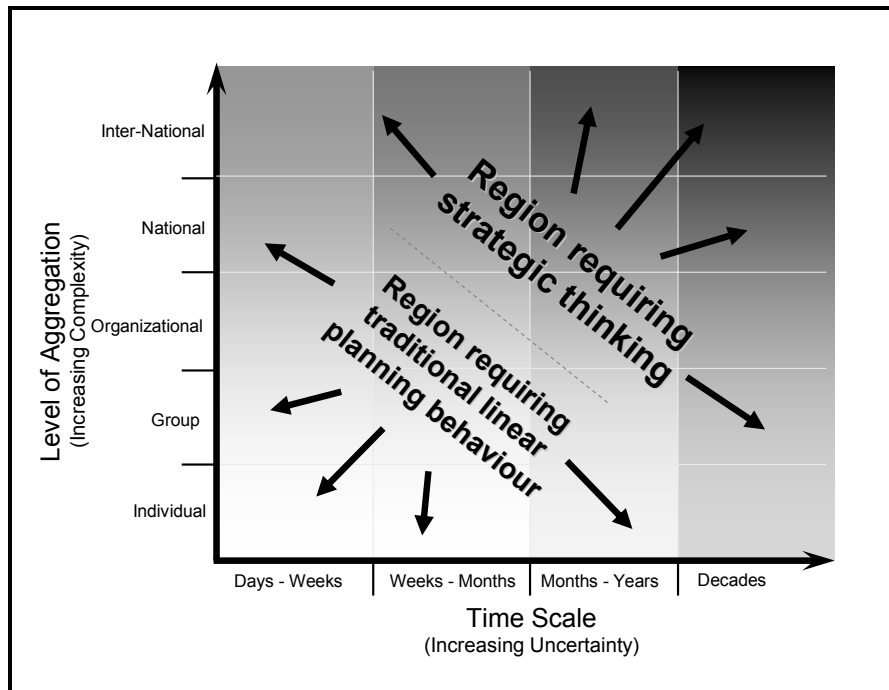


Figure 2: Regions of general problem space with greater or lesser necessity for engaging in strategic versus planning behaviour.

Theme Two: Ends, Means and Ways

Theme One established the *stategos* problem space within which strategy or planning must happen. Theme One did not address the content of a strategy or plan. Both strategies and plans consist of ends, means and ways. What distinguishes the two are the level of specificity of the ends and the level of control over means and ways.

Ends are objectives that specify what needs to be accomplished. Strategic ends are anchored in long term interests – interests of the individual, of organizations or of nations. Strategic ends must be carefully chosen because “Objectives are the true focus of strategy formulation and, if not properly selected and formulated, a proposed strategy is fundamentally flawed and cannot be effective.”³⁶ Strategic ends bound the general problem space by targeting those aspects of the environment that are more complex (i.e., lie further up the Y axis) and more futures oriented (i.e., further along the X axis), but nevertheless are directly relevant to achieving coveted interests. Ends, as the name implies, are points of terminus that are identifiable, preferably quantifiable, and always provide a beacon towards which effort and power is directed.

Unlike strategic ends, planning ends are more focused, they involve regions of the general problem space that are less complex, and they are more short-term oriented. Ideally, planning objectives should be derived from strategic objectives. They should be subsets of strategic ends which, ultimately, can be implemented using linear procedures.³⁷

³⁶ Yarger, 2006, p.49.

³⁷ Unfortunately in the real world, planning ends are often established in a strategic vacuum, which result in objectives that often are too broad and unfocused to be implemented in a linear fashion.

Ends are the most important member of the ends-means-ways triumvirate. Without ends, strategies and plans are directionless; they are purposeless. Without ends, means and ways are wasted.

Means are the resources necessary to achieve ends. They may need to be acquired, developed, transformed, restructured, trained, etc, but they need to exist and, moreover, they need to exist in sufficient quantities. Means can be both tangible and intangible. “Examples of tangible resources include forces, people, equipment, money, and facilities...Intangible resources include things like national will, international goodwill, courage, intellect, or even fanaticism.”³⁸ Tangible resources are quantifiable, whereas intangible resources are less so. Strategy must identify and take into account both types of resources, with the intangible resources often the main focus of effort. Plans on the other hand, deal with tangible resources almost exclusively. Intangible resources, to the extent that they are even considered in plans, are assumed to exist at some fixed level or capacity, and if they do change during the course of a plan, they are assumed to change in a linear predictable fashion.

Ways are ‘how’ resources (means) will be used to achieve objectives. They specify actions to be taken or general guiding principles for actions. For instance, ‘containment’, ‘deterrence’, ‘hostile takeover’, ‘consensus’, ‘economic sanctions’, ‘information dominance’, and ‘soft power’ are concepts that describe categories of strategic actions. These categories presume a whole host of sub-categories of actions, which may or may not be specific enough to use in (linear) plans, but they do restrict the range of possible actions to be taken for attaining strategic objectives. Strategic ‘ways’ must change dynamically in time to suit the changing nature of the problem space.

³⁸ Yarger, 2006, p.60.

Whereas ‘ends’ and ‘means’ are static concepts, describable by nouns and noun phrases (e.g., end-states, personnel, budgets, etc), ‘ways’ is an action oriented concept that requires verbs and verb clauses. It is the mechanism by which resources are used to achieve objectives. Without ‘ways’ little would change or get accomplished.

In the ends-means-ways triumvirate ‘ways’ is the most easily confused between strategies and plans. Mintzberg is quite emphatic about the distinction between strategic behaviour and planning behaviour, devoting an entire book to clarifying the difference.³⁹ Strategic behaviour, whether in the establishment of ends, the identification and use of resources, or the articulation of actions, demands creativity, insight, flexibility, and compromise during both the formulation stage and the implementation stage of strategy. Planning behaviour on the other hand, because it happens in less complex and uncertain regions of the problem space, has fewer demands on creativity, insight, flexibility and compromise. This is the case during the formulation phase of a plan, but it is especially the case during the implementation phase. Plans exist to reduce the need for creativity, insight, flexibility and compromise; they exist to reduce complexity and decrease uncertainty.⁴⁰ Strategies have the opposite effect; they may temporarily increase complexity and uncertainty. Table 2 summarizes the differences between strategies and plans for ends, means and ways.

³⁹ See Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning: Reconceiving Roles for Planning, Plans and Planners*. (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ The intention is not to belittle the act of planning, which often requires much creativity and insight on the part of the planner, but rather to emphasize that strategic thinking is a much more difficult activity. In fact, almost by definition, it may be impossible for individuals operating at lower levels on the complexity dimension to understand the cognitive environment and the cognitive demands of those individuals operating at higher levels – unless, of course, they themselves had once operated at those levels.

Table 2: Difference between Strategies and Plans

	Strategies	Plans
Ends	Long term, dynamic objectives based on broad coveted interests that require complex (non-linear) factors to be taken in consideration (e.g., geo-political environment).	Short term objectives ideally derived from strategic objectives. They are (linearly) achievable subsets of strategic objectives. Typically static in nature.
Means	Tangible and intangible resources with which to achieve strategic ends. Strategy always includes methods to sustain resources for future use.	Tangible resources only, with intangible resources assumed to exist at some constant level. Plans rarely include methods to sustain resources beyond the current ends.
Ways	General concepts and guiding principles with which to apply or develop resources (means) for achieving strategic ends. Ways are expected to change through time and adapt dynamically to a changing complex environment.	Specific known actions, often well rehearsed, that unfold in time in a linear fashion. Are expected to change little during the course of the plan, and should produce predictable results.

Finally, the relationship among ends, means and ways is different for strategies than for plans. In plans, objectives determine the resources required, which in turn guides the manner in which these resources are used. In essence, ends drive means which then drives ways. This is a relatively straightforward linear process that can be quite efficient (see Figure 3B). For strategies, however, the relationship is more interdependent and non-linear (see Figure 3A). Though ends play a dominant role in the triumvirate, each can influence and change the other depending on circumstances and exigencies in the environment.

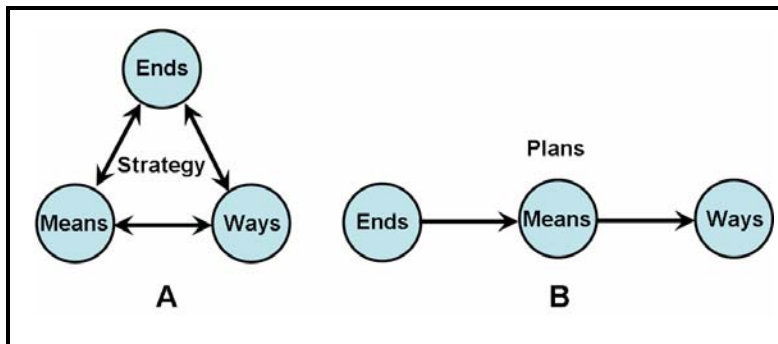


Figure 3: Ends, Means & Ways Relationship for Strategies (A) and Plans (B)

The distinction between strategies and plans is meant to be a qualitatively accurate and useful one. It is meant to be more than a convenience for discussion, unlike the view of Liddell Hart who makes the following comment on the distinction between strategy and tactics: “The two categories, although convenient for discussion, can never be truly divided into separate compartments because each not only influences but merges into the other.”⁴¹ Such arguments, in the end, are self defeating because they beg the question of why two concepts should be used to describe a phenomenon instead of one. If strategy is only a more sophisticated form of tactics, or if tactics is only a simplified version of strategy, then why not eliminate one of the concepts and create a more comprehensive theory of the other? Semantics categories exist to elucidate qualitative (not merely quantitative) differences in concepts and phenomena. The distinction between strategy and plans proposed in this paper is one such qualitative difference, and it is key to developing a legitimate conceptual framework for strategy.

Theme Three: Consequence Management and Risk Mitigation

Theme one described the *strategos* problem space within which strategies and plans exist. In general, a combination of high complexity and/or high uncertainty is necessary for strategy formulation, though exceptions do exist (to be discussed later). Regions of the problem space involving less complexity and less uncertainty are best handled using planning processes.

Theme two addressed the content of strategies and plans. Both plans and strategies contain ends, means and ways. However, strategies require a more holistic,

⁴¹ Liddell Hart, p.335.

flexible and divergent-thinking approach to problem formulation, whereas plans require a more specific, linear and convergent-thinking approach to problem solving. Furthermore, the ends, means and ways of strategy are interdependent. They influence each as the strategy unfolds. The ends, means, ways of plans are limited to linear dependencies.

Theme three addresses a peculiarity unique to strategies. Although both plans and strategies deal with changes in the external environment – where these changes could be wilful (e.g., the actions of an enemy) or non-wilful (e.g., the weather) – only strategies must take into account changes in the environment stemming from the existence of the strategy itself. It is this self-referential nature of strategies that makes them so complex. It is also what makes them risky.

Recall that strategies attempt to influence and shape factors over which they have little or no control, whereas plans use means and ways over which control exists. Strategies therefore, by their very nature, induce instabilities in the world. Since they attempt to influence factors that, in principle, are not in their control, they disrupt the status quo. Hopefully this disruption will be short-lived and the results worth the effort, but there are no guarantees – it is, after all, a complex process. Importantly, the disruptions will be both internal and external. For example, a military may have had a history of being only a defensive force and may wish to transform itself into one with a strong offensive capability. The ends, means and ways to achieve such a strategy will likely disrupt such internal military factors as its organizational structure, its organizational culture, its recognition and reward systems, its budgets, its allies, etc. The military's social and organizational stability will be disrupted, creating resistance to change and cultural dissatisfaction.

Similarly, external factors will have to be influenced and changed to achieve strategic objectives. For instance, the military may need to lobby its nation to remove fiscal restrictions; it may have to conduct media campaigns to convince tax payers of the importance of its strategic goal; it may need to solicit assistance from other militaries, etc. In essence, it will need to shape and influence other entities over which it has little or no control – entities which are at the same or higher levels of complexity. Each disruption must be managed for the risk it engenders. Each risk must be assessed against the original strategic objectives. Strategies, therefore, always imply change management and risk mitigation.

Grand Strategy and Military Strategy

Given the discussion of strategy theory outlined above, including its three central themes, it is now possible to explore their implications. Two such implications will be presented. The first illustrates how the concept of grand strategy fits comfortably within the theoretical framework of strategy as presented. The second illustrates how military strategy is a variant of grand strategy even though it occupies its own unique region of the problem space. Also, the definitions of military strategy seen earlier will be revisited briefly to demonstrate that they are consistent with the framework.

Grand Strategy

The upper right-hand corner of the *stategos* problem space (in Figures 1 & 2) represents that region where the greatest strategic challenge lies. It is the region where

maximum complexity exists due to the vast non-linear interactions that result from aggregates of humans living in large societies of nation states. It is also the region of maximum uncertainty because these interactions are projected decades into the future. Arguably, it is in this region of the problem space where organizations like the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the European Union, etc, should lie. They represent aggregates of nation states with interests sufficiently in common to devote considerable time and resources to achieving common long term objectives. Strategies at this level of complexity would certainly qualify as being ‘grand’.⁴² Ironically, the term grand strategy is not used in this context. It is reserved for the long term strategies of individual nation states – nation states which occupy the next *lower* level of complexity.

Grand strategy is a nation’s attempt to anticipate, influence or shape future outcomes (often involving other nations) consistent with its own national interests. The means a nation uses to achieve its grand strategy may include the exercise of political, economic and military power. In the words of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, grand strategy is, “The art and science of developing and using the political, economic and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives”⁴³. It should be emphasized that these national objectives do not originate in a vacuum. They are an expression of societal needs. So grand strategy links government means to social ends. Furthermore, grand strategy should articulate how it should shape or influence factors over which it has little or no direct control (e.g., the cooperation of other nations). In other words, it requires that a nation

⁴² Presently there is no higher level of complexity in the world. Should the human race colonise other planets or meet other sentient life forms, then new levels of aggregate complexity become possible, a theme that has long been a source of speculation among science fiction writers.

⁴³ Quoted in Colonel Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., US Army, Retired. *Defining Military Strategy*. *Military Review* 77, no. 1 (January—February 1997), p.183.

attempt to influence a region of the problem space more complex than the region the nation itself occupies (i.e., it must influence a region of space lying higher on the Y axis). Also, it must try to influence this portion of space over a time scale that makes the outcome extremely uncertain. Lastly, during the process of realizing its grand strategy, a nation may need to implement policies that are unpopular to other nations or even to its own people, which will require sub-strategies that themselves may have second or third order consequences, which in turn necessitate sub-sub-strategies, etc. Sooner or later the sub-strategies must lead to linear plans, which then must be coordinated and activated.

It is worth reiterating that plans, even complicated ones, are not strategies. Yarger, Boyd and Mintzberg are quite adamant on this point. The mere fact that a nation articulates an objective, even if this objective is arrived at through complicated discussion and consensus, does not make it ‘strategic’, let alone a grand strategy. After all, presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, etc, including their advisors and staff, are only human. They are as capable of thinking and behaving tactically (linearly and in too much detail) as the next person⁴⁴. Though the positions these individuals occupy are ‘strategic’, and though the problems they face deserve strategic level solutions, too often the approaches they adopt are myopic, concentrate only on variables within their control, or are short term. Strategy, especially grand strategy, is about attempting to control (or influence) the uncontrollable; it is about shaping and anticipating an uncertain future; it is about pursuing ambitious long-term ends with resources that may or may not yet exist; it is about using methods that must be adapted and changed over time. Strategy is not accomplished simply by virtue of the level a person occupies, even if it is a strategic

⁴⁴ Indeed it could be argued that tactical thinking, since it is much easier to do, is much more likely than strategic thinking unless significant energy is expended to counter this tendency.

level; rather it is accomplished by virtue of the attitude a person adopts to the problem. This point will be critical for the ‘strategic relativism’ thesis made later.

Military Strategy

As was seen, grand strategy exists at the level of nation states. In theory, some form of grand strategy should be possible at the next higher level – at the international level – but it would be a unique form of grand strategy, one devoted entirely to a single objective: unification. The international level represents the highest level of aggregate complexity in Figures 1 & 2.⁴⁵ Without a higher level of complexity against which an organization like the United Nations can define itself, creating a unique unified identity is its greatest and most important challenge, which in many ways has yet to be attained.

Fortunately (or unfortunately) militaries do not occupy the topmost level of complexity. They exist solidly at the organizational level, with identities established comfortably within their individual nations who themselves have identities well established within the context of the international community. Except during times of transformation, when much strategic effort is expended in redefining themselves, militaries develop and implement strategies according to the definitions reviewed earlier in this paper. They apply the art and science of military power (Yarger, Lykke and Liddell-Hart), in a dialectic of wills (Beaufre and Clausewitz) to resolve war and conflict (Clausewitz, Beaufre and Luttwak) in line with national policy (Liddell Hart and Gray). Strategy addresses and contributes to complexity (Yarger and Gray), and it deals with uncertainty by anticipating or shaping the future (Yarger and Boyd). Like all strategy,

⁴⁵ Again, this is the case only until other intelligent life forms are found, or until humans populate other planets.

military strategy accomplishes this using interdependent ends, means and ways – e.g., military strategy links military means to achieve political ends using ways either already under its control or by developing new ones. The definitions of strategy described by these authors fit within the strategy framework described.

Finally, it should be stressed that military strategy does not spring into existence by itself. It needs talented champions. In keeping with the Greek word *strategos*, general and flag officers should concern themselves with the general, not specific, aspects of their professions and their positions. Their task as leaders is not just to manage the forces under their command; their task is also one of long term strategic stewardship. Achieving political ends via military means is, of course, the primary responsibility of senior military leaders. However, sustaining the long term viability of the military itself is equally important – otherwise future missions will be in jeopardy. Military strategy necessarily implicates military structure, culture, equipment, logistics, etc. Change management and risk mitigation come with the territory.

Of course, emphasizing the general over the specific is not limited only to general and flag officers. As was described for grand strategy, the same holds true for the political leaders of a nation. Using all of one's assets, be they military, political or economic, to attain an objective without due consideration for how these assets can be sustained, risks undermining the long term viability of the nation itself.

Strategic Relativism, Identity and Strategy Types

This paper will conclude with a speculative discussion of how two new theoretical constructs arise naturally from the strategy framework outlined above. The two

constructs allow non-military organizations, including groups and individuals, to formulate and pursue strategies of their own. The first construct is called ‘strategic relativism’ and the second ‘identity’. Taken together, both constructs will lead to the surprising assertion that all strategies are reducible to only two types: strategies for sustaining identities and strategies for transforming identities.

Strategic Relativism

At the risk of upsetting strategy purists who believe that strategy exists only for military and national purposes, the strategy framework presented in this paper suggests that strategy is a general concept with more general applicability. Strategy is an attitude and an approach that can manifest itself at any aggregate level of complexity. Individuals, groups, organizations, and nations, as well as any aggregate level in between, can develop a legitimate strategy. It requires only that the three themes of strategy formulation be met. There must be complexity and uncertainty; there must be interdependent ends, means and ways; and there must be change management and risk mitigation. Strategy, therefore, is not restricted to the higher levels of an organization or a nation. Any sentient identity on the Y axes of Figures 1 & 2 can formulate strategy. Indeed, one of the reasons the world is as complex as it is may be because there is a continuous clash of strategies among identities both within and between levels.

This suggests that no strategy can be understood in isolation. Strategies must be interpreted in terms of where they lay in the general problem space, they must be understood in terms of the identities who formulate them, and they must be understood in terms of the higher social ends they are trying to achieve. In short, strategies do not exist

in a vacuum. Strategies exist relative to other strategies and must always be understood in relative terms.

Strategic relativism is the proposition that all strategies, at whatever level of complexity and over whatever time frame, coexist with other strategies. Strategies inevitably interact with each other in a mutually reinforcing fashion, in a mutually adversarial fashion or in some complicated mixture of both. Consider the following example. An ambitious officer cadet has developed a personal career strategy for attaining the rank of colonel by age forty. The cadet's strategy involves ends, means and ways for influencing factors both within and beyond her immediate control (e.g., career counsellors, job opportunities, financial considerations, relationships, etc.). Furthermore, she is resolved to adapt and to change her strategy along the way to suit changing circumstances. These 'changing circumstances' arise as a direct result of the cadet's strategy interacting with itself (e.g., the physical and mental fitness she will need to excel may come at the expense of healthy social interaction). Other 'changing circumstances' arise indirectly as her strategy interacts with other strategies existing at the same or different levels. For instance, the cadet will need to accommodate the career strategies of her fellow officer cadets, the nature of which may take on a collaborative or a competitive complexion. But beyond that, the cadet's strategy will exist within the larger framework of her military's organizational strategy (e.g., transformation) that will facilitate, or inhibit, her attempts to attain her personal strategy. On top of that, the military's own strategy operates within a nation's grand strategy, which in turn interacts with the strategies of other nations, other militaries, other individuals, etc. Conversely, a nation's grand strategy will also impact its military's strategy, which in turn will affect

the cadet's personal strategy. All strategies, therefore, exist as nodes of ends, means and ways within a vast network of interconnecting strategic intentions.

Strategic relativism is a concept that espouses three tenets. First, strategy can exist at any level of complexity. It is not confined to higher levels only, though higher levels are where strategy and strategic thinking are expected to occur. Second, a strategy's greatest source of future uncertainty lies in how it interacts with other strategies over time – i.e., other strategies that exist at the same level of complexity or at different levels (higher or lower). Third, the grounding structure for strategic relativism is identity, a concept that anchors strategy to Clausewitz's, Beaufre's and Boyd's notions of dialectic wills and intentions. The first two tenets have been described already. The third needs explication.

Identity

Strategies do not create themselves. Nor do they serve themselves. Strategies belong to, and are responsive to, particular individuals, groups, organizations or nations. In short, strategies are always associated with specific *identities* who have a vested interest in seeing them successfully completed.

Individuals, organizations and nations exist in the world. They exist as self-contained units of sentient complexity that have stable identities over time. Each level of complexity in Figures 1 & 2 represents a stable category of identity types (i.e., individual identities, group identities, organizational identities, national identities, etc)⁴⁶. In the example above, the officer cadet is an individual with a unique identity who aspires to be a senior military officer by the age of forty. Similarly, the military of which the cadet is a

⁴⁶ It is important to re-emphasize that there are more categories of complexity than portrayed in Figures 1&2. However, those displayed will be sufficient for discussion.

member has its own unique organizational identity with its own history, traditions, ethos and strategic objectives (e.g., transformation). Even nations have identities that espouse collective values and interests, which then get translated into grand strategies.

Strategies are creations that reflect the long term intentions and values of particular identities. They are willed into existence by identities and must be interpreted in terms of those identities.

Identities, be they individual, group, organizational or national, manifest themselves through behaviours, values and intentions. Each of us has an individual identity based on what we value, what we wish for and how we behave. Our identities are stable through time – or rather, they are stable enough through time to interact in a coherent manner with others. In fact, as individuals, we take pride in our enduring identities because they allow us to distinguish ourselves from others. Strategies are an expression of our unique identities.

Besides having individual identities, most of us also have multiple social identities, identities we share in common with like minded individuals.⁴⁷ As John Searle argues in his book *The Construction of Social Reality* humans display not only singular intentionality but also collective intentionality. “The crucial element in collective intentionality is a sense of doing (wanting, believing, etc.) something together.”⁴⁸ The officer cadet, for example, not only has her own individual identity, she identifies also with her military organization, including other military members. She behaves in a

⁴⁷ This discussion of identity is based on two theoretical perspectives. The first is social construction theory originally proposed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966). The second is social identity theory as proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. “The Social Identity Theory of Inter-Group Behavior”. In S. Worchel & L. W. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986).

⁴⁸ John R. Searle. *The Construction of Social Reality*. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p.24-25.

manner consistent with its values and ethics, she embraces a body of knowledge unique to that organization, and she (strategically) aspires to a senior position within that organization. Furthermore, this officer cadet will also identify with the nation of her citizenry, offering loyalty and pride of service to her country. Each individual, therefore, has multiple identities that are the sources of will from which strategies are crafted, at whatever level of complexity.⁴⁹

This assertion about each of us having multiple social identities is important for the following reason. Recall that the second tenet of strategic relativism posits that a strategy's greatest source of future uncertainty lies in how it interacts with other strategies. If each individual is capable of having multiple identities, then it follows that each individual is capable of having (or endorsing) multiple strategies, resulting in yet further complexity. Strategies, therefore, interact and compete not only *between* identities, but they can also interact and compete *within* a single identity, making the whole process even more non-linear and convoluted. In the officer cadet example, she not only has to deal with the competing strategies of her subordinates, her colleagues and her superiors, she will also have to deal with competing strategies within herself. This will mean adjusting or compromising any number of ends, means and ways, which then will require ongoing change management and risk mitigation.

At this point in the discussion it may appear as if identity and strategic relativism, as constructs, add complexity but offer little clarity to the already confusing and complex concept of strategy itself. In reality, the strength of these two constructs is that they lead

⁴⁹ Of course, most individuals have many more than the three identities mentioned. Most will identify with their families, with their peer groups, with their churches, with their professions, etc.

to a significant conceptual simplification. All strategies, it will be argued, are reducible to two fundamental types.

Strategy Types

Identities are coherent social constructs that represent complex wilful presences in the world. Like all wilful presences, identities seek to sustain themselves through time in the face of external threats, either perceived or actual. Individuals, organizations and nations have a vested interest in maintaining their identities intact, otherwise their existence is in jeopardy and they will not be able to respond coherently to their surroundings.

Also, there may be times when circumstances have changed so drastically that simply sustaining the same identity actually becomes maladaptive for achieving desired ends. In these cases something more radical is necessary. Instead of trying to change the environment to suit itself, which will require an ‘externally’ directed strategy, the identity may need to implement an ‘internally’ directed strategy of transforming or recreating itself. It will need to alter its own behaviours, values and intentions which, hopefully, will put it in a better position to adapt to the new environment. The assertion is that, on occasion, identities have to transform into ‘better’ versions of themselves, ones that will yield greater opportunities for long term survivability⁵⁰.

Both activities – i.e., identity sustainability and identity transformation – require significant effort, engender significant risk and, ultimately, require strategies directed either externally or internally for achieving their ends.

⁵⁰ There may be cases when an identity wishes to terminate itself – for example, individuals committing suicide, or the planned closure of a company. Though relatively rare, these cases would be considered ‘terminal’ identity transformations.

Given this close link between identity and strategy, the following hypothesis is presented. All strategies, at whatever levels of complexity and uncertainty, are reducible to two (and only two) general types, both of which depend upon identity. Fundamentally, all strategies either attempt to maintain an identity stable in the face of change, or they attempt to change or transform these identities into more stable, advantageous forms. Whether created by nations, organizations, groups or individuals, all strategies exist for the purpose of either identity sustainability or identity transformation.

For example, nations pursue policies and strategies that are in the national interest. These national interests are usually associated with a state's security and survival in the face of threats to its wealth, power, culture and values – in short, threats to its identity. A nation's greatest interest is the perpetuation of its own existence, its own identity, in a highly competitive world. Similarly, the officer cadet's strategy of rising in the ranks is consistent with her personal interests of being identified as a successful military officer. These strategies, therefore, sustain the identities of the nation and the cadet respectively. Alternatively, a military may undertake a strategy of 'transformation' because doing so is consistent with its organizational interests of remaining viable as an identifiable institution in the eyes of its nation. In this example the military may have realized that its identity was no longer current, maybe even redundant, and in need of change. This would be an example where mere sustainability of status quo is perceived as a threat to existence. The military needs a strategy to better itself – to transform itself – in the eyes of its nation.

This paper posits that strategic relativism, together with the concept of identity, advances the field of strategy theory. As a thesis, strategic relativism evolves naturally

from the concepts of complexity and uncertainty; it is consistent with the requirement for ends, means and ways; and it begins to elucidate why strategy is so difficult to conceive and to execute. A word of caution is necessary at this juncture, however. In 1925 Bertrand Russell made the following criticism of people's interpretation of Einstein's theory of relativity: "A certain type of superior person is fond of asserting that 'everything is relative'. This is, of course, nonsense, because, if *everything* were relative, there would be nothing for it to be relative to (italics in original)."⁵¹ Indeed, Russell's admonition foreshadowed current criticisms of post-modernism with its declaration of extreme cognitive and cultural relativism⁵². In a similar vein, strategic relativism does not posit that all strategies are relative, or that every strategy has equal importance in terms of its impacts and effects. Rather, it proposes that each strategy must be understood within the context of other strategies, especially those that embody higher levels of complexity. Furthermore, strategic relativism proposes that a full appreciation of any strategy cannot occur without a careful understanding of who created it. Strategies serve the individual (or collective) intentions of identities; and identities endure through time using strategies. Strategic relativism, therefore, is a theoretical framework by which strategies can be described, studied and understood. Strategies can exist anywhere in the problem space – though they are usually limited to the more complex and uncertain regions of that space – but by limiting them to only two types, considerable conceptual simplification ensues.

⁵¹ Bertrand Russell. *The ABC of Relativity*. (3rd edition edited by Felix Pirani, New York: New American Library, 1969), p.16.

⁵² See Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. (New York: Picador, 1998).

Conclusion

This paper began with a quote from Hew Strachan. It is worth revisiting Strachan to assess whether his admonitions concerning strategy have been addressed. For example, he wrote that “Strategy was appropriated by politicians and diplomats, by academics and think-tank pundits, and it became increasingly distant from the use of the engagement for the purposes of war.”⁵³ Does the analysis presented in this paper reinforce Strachan’s concerns or does it advance the theory of strategy in a coherent way?

There is no question that strategy had its origins in military thought and that it has since taken on a broader, more comprehensive meaning. Strategy, as a concept, now includes the long term intentional activities of individuals, groups and organizations, as well as the long and nearer term interests of nation states. Whereas strategy theorists like Lykke, Liddel Hart, Moltke and to some extent Luttwak saw strategy as simply a sophisticated form of planning behaviour carried out by senior members of militaries (i.e., generals) to achieve political ends⁵⁴, military strategy can now be viewed as an influence process needing to contend with other strategies, including the strategies of its own nation, those of competing departments and organizations, and even those of career minded individual members. By clearly distinguishing strategy from planning behaviour, it becomes possible to isolate characteristics that are unique to strategy, such as the notion that strategy must adapt dynamically in response to its own existence as well as to the existence of other strategies. Furthermore, through the concept of strategic relativism, strategies must always be evaluated in the context of other competing

⁵³ Hew Strachan, p.44.

⁵⁴ To be fair to these authors, their appeal to ‘art’ as an important component of their definitions of strategy suggests that they too were sensitive to the complex non-linear aspects of strategy.

strategies, especially those originating from higher levels of complexity. No strategy exists in isolation; therefore no strategy should be analysed in isolation. Lastly, this paper has argued that there is no such thing as an ownerless strategy. Strategies originate from sentient identities who in many ways identify themselves by their strategies. The close coupling of strategy and identity suggests that all strategies, even military ones, exist either to sustain an identity through time, or to improve the identity's chances of survival in the future.

There is no question that the discussion of strategy in the present paper has taken it "increasingly distant from the use of the engagement for the purposes of war" as Strachan has cautioned. There is also no question that the conceptual framework presented here for strategy is more complex than that proposed by Strachan and other military theorists; however, as was argued, ignoring the importance of complexity in strategy means ignoring one of the most defining characteristics of what it means to be human, as well as what it means to be a member of human society. Hopefully, the conceptual gains achieved by embracing complexity more than offset the advantages accrued by coveting conceptual simplicity.

It is fitting to end this paper with another look at John Boyd's elegant insightful definition of strategy and the way it voices many of the themes discussed:

A mental tapestry of changing intentions for harmonizing and focusing our efforts as a basis for realizing some aim or purpose in an unfolding and often unforeseen world of many bewildering events and many contending interests.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ John Boyd entitled "The Strategic Game of ? and ?", http://www.d-n-i.net/boyd/strategic_game.ppt; Internet; accessed 14 February, 2007.

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