

# A COLLECTIVE FAILURE OF GRAND STRATEGY

## THE WEST'S UNINTENDED WARS OF CHOICE

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**Confusing battle for war and tactics for strategy, the West has found itself unable to counter the 'cumulative strategy' of its opponents. In the winning entry to the 2010 Trench Gascoigne Essay Prize, Lukas Milevski argues that the use of military force must be confined to Schelling's triad of taking, protecting and hurting.**

Today the West finds itself in a strategic situation of some irony. For the greater part of the past thirty years, the only wars in which the West (loosely defined as NATO-based countries) has become involved have been wars of choice. This is a happy circumstance, indicating its privileged position in the world, bereft of capable or willing existential dangers. Although discretionary, the wars the West is fighting are increasingly of a type in which it does not really wish to engage – long wars, against indeterminate foes. Such wars bleed the West of its wealth, its manpower and its political prestige both domestically and internationally. Many interventions meant to maintain or even improve the West's relative international position are in actuality accomplishing just the opposite – weakening that position through a diffusion of assets, prestige and power into ill-considered endeavours. This represents a failure on two separate levels. If one aspect of strategy is using war for political purposes, then clearly there is a distinct lack of understanding of grand strategic goals and processes. Second, if other aspects of strategy concern the actual conduct of war, Western combatants misconceptualise the nature of war and strategy as battle and tactics, with predictable results on the ground. This breakdown of military strategy greatly

exacerbates the pre-existing absence of grand strategy.

### **Taking, Protecting, Hurting**

War is but one tool of grand strategy, perhaps the bluntest when compared to others which may persuade or dissuade, subvert or deny. Following Thomas Schelling, force has three assignments: taking, protecting and hurting, the last singularly being an innate quality of force.<sup>1</sup> When employed, war does not impact simply the two belligerents, but indirectly leaves its mark upon allies, neighbours and rogues, each drawing its own lessons on the meaning of war, perhaps at odds with what the warring parties believe. War, therefore, can never be a private matter between two parties; even the smallest war will have at least limited international ramifications. To wage a war signifies having an immediate effect upon the world. Successful grand strategy demands mastery of two factors. First is the discipline needed to order national interests by priority, in other words where the West most wishes to achieve strategic effect. This requisite discipline has been lost as the concept of security has expanded. Second is an understanding of the reciprocal nature of all human interaction, exacerbated by the overt hostility that war implies, placing the involved parties in direct, violent competition. Strategic effect is

an unavoidable result of war however it is conducted, but undirected effect is impartial and chaotic, possibly equally positive or negative.

### **Post-Heroic Warfare**

The success of a grand strategy that utilises war is thus dependent upon how the strategic effect in war is shaped. The conduct of war is of central importance to grand strategy. Even the best grand strategy falls apart if the military strategy responsible for the conduct of the war, upon which said grand strategy relies, has been misjudged. In the post-Cold War era, the expansion of security into tenuously related fields such as economic or human security has led to a diffuse grand strategy, which amplifies the need for proper military strategy.

### *War can never be a private matter*

In the mid-1990s, Edward Luttwak identified a trend in warfare which he styled 'post-heroic'. It was characterised by professional armies and a reliance on technology rather than manpower to achieve effect and to avoid media-sensitive casualties.<sup>2</sup> This entailed the greatest separation between nation and warfare since the advent of popular armies. The West has simultaneously



ISAF soldiers on patrol in one of the West's unintended wars of choice. *Photo courtesy of Helmand Blog.*

both bucked and followed this post-heroic inclination. This past decade has witnessed far more manpower-intensive tasks than the previous one, yet also the unprecedentedly large-scale use of modern technology, epitomised by drone operations, in place of human presence and action. The Americans particularly, but to some extent the entire NATO-influenced West, do not have a way of war, but rather a way of battle. War is approached intellectually as if it were battle, an activity whose participants are not concerned about politics or strategy, but rather purely with operations or tactics. This approach induces the danger of battle becoming an end in itself.<sup>3</sup> This 'tacticisation' of war frequently makes a post-war security presence necessary, for the West has the military power to freeze conflict, but lacks the insight to resolve it. The pattern of war since 2001 indicates that, although the West can effect great change quickly at relatively little cost, ultimately the true cost of intervention is exacted once the achievement of result must be defended. The 1990s adequately illustrated this dynamic through the myriad of missions sent to

the Balkans to guarantee the peace; the NATO Kosovo Force remains in place to this day, more than a decade after Operation *Allied Force*. Although these missions to the Balkans have not been forcefully challenged since the cessation of hostilities, their necessity indicates the possibility of similar challenges elsewhere, finally borne out in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **Cumulative Strategy**

The tactics used to challenge the West in Iraq and Afghanistan are those of guerrillas and terrorists. But these are tactics; there is no such thing as guerrilla or terrorist strategy. What they do have is a form of cumulative strategy, part of the strategic dichotomy Herbert Rosinski introduced and US Navy Rear Admiral Joseph Caldwell Wylie elaborated and adopted as the centrepiece to his own theory of military strategy. It is an 'entire pattern ... made up of a collection of lesser actions, but these lesser or individual actions are not sequentially interdependent. Each individual one is no more than a single statistic, an isolated plus or minus, in arriving at

the final result.'<sup>4</sup> Cumulative strategy is strategy for the weak in that it is based upon avoidance, but weakness is not necessarily the sole reason one would choose such a strategy; indeed, cultural factors may automatically determine that this strategy be followed involuntarily. A cumulative strategy conducted properly may be a highly effective, albeit lengthy, method of achieving a particular kind of strategic effect. It is unfortunate for the West that cumulative strategy is well suited to countering both post-heroic military policy and the Western misconception of war as battle.

### *Strategic effect is an unavoidable result of war*

The strategic effect of cumulative strategy is predicated upon its ability to *deny control* to the enemy without asserting it for oneself, control being the 'imposition of certainty upon any given situation', all the way up to the war as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Certainty imposed is that of ends, but not ways: one may be

certain that one will be successful, even without knowing exactly by which path that end-state will be reached. Strategy relates to control and certainty in three distinct manners. A strategic actor may assert control (as in, indicate that one *can* exercise control), which indicates certainty; exercise control, which fulfils certainty; or deny control, which disputes certainty. Battle is the most significant means of asserting control and, in the case of victory, of exercise of control; it is not connected to only denial of control. The West, viewing war through the lens of battle, when denied control, forms ideas such as hybrid war as its intellectual response to the challenge, although what is really envisaged is hybrid battle. Avoidance is alien to battle whereas it is not alien to war. This leaves the full import of cumulative strategy outside the scope of recent Western concepts created to understand it. The true effect of cumulative strategy upon post-heroic military policy and the battle-centric concept of war is debilitating.

### *The conduct of war is of central importance to grand strategy*

#### **Wielding a Swift Sword**

Cumulative strategy depends upon avoidance of the enemy; one can only deny control to a superior enemy if one is not drawn into a significant engagement in which that same enemy can inflict a decisive defeat and assert control over the pattern of the war. For militaries whose institutional mindset conceives of war as battle, avoidance and denial are bewildering. There can be no battle if there is no enemy, yet an opponent is clearly present, albeit not apparent. An avoiding foe whom one cannot locate is free to act, confident that control over the course of the war has been denied and is absent to the superior belligerent. Denial is a necessarily slow manner of achieving effect, whereas the West's preferred methods of asserting and exercising control are meant to be quick and decisive. Cumulative strategy is a slow-acting poison, whereas the West prefers to wield a swift sword.

This fundamental asymmetry in strategic thought has led to an energetic search for methods of countering cumulative strategy. This same energy, combined with a lack of conceptual rigour, unfortunately leads the West to mistake its counter-insurgent and counter-terrorist tactics for a strategy and even to see such tactics as an end in themselves. They alone cannot address the fundamental question of strategic connection of means, ways and ends, but are instead tools for the strategist to wield as he chooses in the process of addressing this question.<sup>6</sup> Population protection tactics on their own cannot impose defeat upon an insurgency but merely make avoidance more difficult for the insurgent. Yet population protection is worth little if young men sneak off to join the insurgents anyway. It is thus a necessary action, but not a sufficient one; the pool of potential indigenous recruits for the insurgency must be shrunk as well to reduce the insurgency's durability. The archetypal consequence of population protection is the restriction of insurgent groups to less-populated regions to ease the tasks of detection and elimination. In practice, a porous border between countries may mitigate much of the effect of population protection tactics, and require similar measures from the border's other side. Trans-border post-heroic efforts (such as drone strikes) are insufficient and indeed perhaps counter-productive; the beneficial strategic effects may only be fleeting, whereas the neighbour's outrage and hostility may last much longer and be more serious.

#### **The Ultimate Failure of Post-Heroic Strategy**

Post-heroic military policy cushions the populations of the West from the challenges faced, mistakes made, and injurious strategic effect suffered in other parts of the world. The West may be at war, but that war is far away and life at home goes on largely as normal, excepting military families. This gap is quickly spanned by reports of casualties which adversely affect populations at home. These populations require concrete results for casualties suffered to justify the sacrifice. In a sizeable battle, even if casualties are high, there

is an immediate implicit if not explicit result; someone wins, someone loses, something significant is decided.

### *The Americans do not have a way of war, but rather a way of battle*

The conduct of cumulative strategy explicitly denies the possibility of concrete results through engagements. Instead, although the casualty rates may hypothetically be the same, they are dispersed across a much longer time period. Rather than a single, shocking closure of the gap, many intermittent, small spikes of war become a minor but ever-recurring theme in the daily life of a nation. Post-heroic military policy ultimately fails because, although styled to make interventions more acceptable and less onerous for the public, the gap between war and nation never remains wide enough for the separation effect to occur. It is constantly narrowed time and time again. This would be acceptable if the sacrifice obtained the desired result, but the opponent's cumulative strategy precludes results through denial of control and progress through achieving control. The consequence is stalemate at best and a deteriorating situation at worst. Cumulative strategy collapses the central tenet of post-heroic military policy – achieving a beneficial effect without straining the nation. Instead, effect is extremely difficult to achieve over the long term and even this non-result cannot be accomplished without distressing the domestic population.

Strategic effect, even if it undermines the opposing strategy, means little unless it ultimately influences the opponent's decision-making. This is the great weakness of employing a cumulative strategy. Wylie, writing in the 1960s, noted that 'there is no major instance in which a cumulative strategy, operating by itself, has been successful'.<sup>7</sup> Just as the efficacy of cumulative strategy is based upon avoidance and denial of the chance to impose a condition of helplessness upon the cumulative strategists, so too are these same strategists incapable of utilising

cumulative strategy to inflict helplessness upon the enemy. A cumulative strategy may never defeat an opponent militarily, but it can induce him to recognise his inability to force a result and withdraw of his own accord. Such recognition does not come readily, resulting in a downward spiral of inappropriate strategies, overlong interventions, increased casualties and popular discontent. In a situation where neither party can impose a decisive defeat upon the other, but can only induce a breakdown of will through the accumulation of minor effects, the deciding factor is the willpower and amount of support each enjoys within its decision-making processes and the general population.

### The West's Desire to Escape

The ultimate effect of cumulative strategy is a disconnection between the superior opponent's military strategy and grand strategy. A grand strategy relying primarily upon the use of force and ignoring other available tools will find itself hobbled, able only to undertake those tasks identified by Schelling: taking, protecting, hurting. These imply that the opponent is an outright foe who must be hurt, whose resources must be taken, or whose attacks must be deflected. However, most recently none of these conditions are truly applicable. The West has involved itself in locations not only where it does not wish to remain, but indeed from which it seems eager to escape. Taking cannot be a valid mission in such circumstances. Hurting the foe is unlikely due to the logic of cumulative strategy. Protecting applies to a brace of

client governments but denied the ability to engage, how may one protect?

### *There is no such thing as guerrilla or terrorist strategy*

Yet the validity or invalidity of these three tasks obfuscates the nature of missions such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although not originally planned as such, both of these interventions have over the past decade become missions of nation-building. The real task is Creation. This is not something any military force can accomplish, and is difficult even without the adverse pressures of war. One cannot make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, as the saying goes, but nevertheless breaking the eggs and making the omelette are two separate actions requiring two separate skill-sets. Force may be used to protect the process of nation-building to some extent, but cannot otherwise be involved in it. To complicate matters further, any state's first priority must necessarily be to safeguard its own power, without which it is a failed state. The nascent state must necessarily provide for its own security, which it may have little incentive to do when dependent on others for apparently indefinite periods of time.

Time is against the West. With every day the strategic situation deteriorates further and spreads across national borders. Each day also decreases Western willingness to continue the fight and increases the burden of costs in both

manpower and money. Contributing states to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan have already begun leaving, or setting time limits on how much longer their troops can stay; even the United States is following suit. The indeterminate character of cumulative strategy is slowly but inexorably winning.

The past decade may be remembered as the time when the West suffered a collective failure of grand strategy, being too militarised in its outlook to recognise the limitations of force and therefore unable to match military means and ways to political ends. The lack of serious strategic thought has led to a decline in faith in the efficacy and applications of military power, for it has been called upon to accomplish tasks that are alien to its natural assignments of taking, protecting and hurting. Rekindling confidence in the strategy-making processes in Western corridors of power is necessary, for good strategy will renew trust in the armed forces while simultaneously allowing other tools of national power the scope they require to work well. ■

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### Notes

- 1 Thomas C Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 2.
- 2 Edward Luttwak, 'Toward Post-Heroic Warfare,' *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 74, No. 3, May-June 1995), pp. 109-22.
- 3 Antulio J Echevarria II, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).
- 4 J C Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 3.
- 5 Lukas Milevski, 'Revisiting J.C. Wylie's Dichotomy of Strategy: The Effects of Sequential and Cumulative Patterns of Operations,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, forthcoming.
- 6 Gian P Gentile, 'A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army,' *Parameters* (Vol. 39, No. 3, Autumn 2009), pp. 5-17.
- 7 Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 25.