

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 7
Number 1 *Parameters* 1977

Article 28

7-4-1977

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Recommended Citation

DeWitt C. Smith Jr, "LAND FORCES IN MODERN STRATEGY," *Parameters* 7, no. 1 (1977), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1121.

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LAND FORCES IN MODERN STRATEGY

by

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The following article is adapted from an address delivered at the Canadian National Defence College, 14 April 1977.

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My topic itself, "Land Forces in Modern Strategy," requires a bit of definition, which I shall get to in a moment. But first, let me make my own position clear on two aspects of it.

First, I am not a special pleader for, or proponent of, "Land Forces" alone. This will not be an exhortation as to the virtues of armies. Armies in civilized societies which would remain free are necessary "evils." They are no more nor no less necessary and evil than navies and air forces.

Next, I should like to underline what I view as the role of senior military leadership in the national strategic process. National policymakers must face every day, or at least during each budget cycle, the question of the *utility* of military force. It is only periodically, however, during crisis situations, that they face decisions as to the *use* of military force. If there is one thing I am inalterably convinced of, it is that the senior military leaders in a western democratic society must never be *advocates* of the use of military force. Their proper role is that of *advisors*. The legitimacy of their advice is based on nothing less than a lifetime of serious study and practice of the military profession. Their advice must be entirely objective. It must be based on measured analysis of the capabilities and limitations of the military forces involved. When military

professionals move beyond their advisory role, they reach beyond their competence, or certainly their authority, and so serve badly the nation they have sworn to defend.

These two conditions are fundamental to my point of view; they underlie everything I will have to say about strategy.

Now to return to definition. Let us start with "strategy." Every lecturer or author on the subject has to begin with defining it. Although the word originated with Greek, it was not habitually used in today's context until sometime after the Napoleonic Wars. George Washington, for example, would not have contemplated his actions in terms of a "strategy of attrition" or a "continental strategy." He was not trained in those terms.

When military people first began to analyze and study their profession, the word was used in a rather straightforward way. Clausewitz considered strategy "the use of the engagement for the purposes of the war."¹ But after the word began to be used by the military, the realization came about that military force was only one means by which a nation could exercise influence on another. A distinction had to be made: Was the author to speak only of the employment of military force or of the employment of the full range of national power? A distinction had to be made, in other words, between national or grand strategy and military strategy.

Another reason for this constant redefining of strategy may be that the early airpower theorists usurped and then misused the word, talking about "strategic" airpower and "tactical" airpower as if it never occurred to them that *tactical* air forces make a strategic

contribution. Anyway, the early airmen confused the issue, and we live with the confusion yet.

In recent years the management theorists have also usurped the word, and there, in the midst of their awful jargon, we find the very respectable military term "strategic planning." That is really the unkindest cut of all! At any rate, I find myself in the same position as others: I must first define my terms.

So whatever "strategy" may have meant to you previously, let us consider here that "strategy covers what we should do, how we should do it, and what we should do it with. Military strategy encompasses the tasks for the military, the operational doctrine we should pursue and the force posture we should develop and maintain."²

I like this definition for several reasons. First, it does not violate my conviction as to the advocacy versus advisory role. Second, it has manageable elements that can be addressed separately. Finally, it was written by a practicing strategist, not a theoretician. The author is General Andrew Goodpaster.

In General Goodpaster's definition, he starts with "what we should do." Immediately, it seems to me, he begins to establish the link between the political and the military. Furthermore, by listing the "what" first, he also establishes the primacy of the political. "What" is an objective, and in this context it is a *political* objective. I am sure this primacy is well understood, and I will not dwell further on it except to say that to the soldier "political" should not be a bad or dirty word. After all, its Greek stem meant "citizen," and in our western societies, the interests of the soldier and the interests of the citizen are one and the same.

Before returning to General Goodpaster's "what," I think I should relate to you my reaction when asked to deal with *modern* strategy. Initially, I sensed there was an attempt to insure against yet another discourse on Clausewitz, Grant, or Schlieffen; that perhaps you agreed with Henry Ford that "history is bunk." I do not believe that history is bunk, but on second thought, I

realized that there *is* something different about "modern" strategy and that it must be emphasized.

Soldiers have traditionally studied "war," the employment of military forces after the clear transition from a condition called "peace" to a condition declared as "war." Today's strategy, modern strategy, is as concerned with war-prevention and war-control as with war-fighting. This may grieve Grenadier hearts, but it is true and very properly so.

Absolute war, in the sense Clausewitz described it (he did not recommend it), can assume such monstrous proportions in this last half of the twentieth century that it exceeds all political purpose. Today a strategy based on absolute or total war is not "modern" strategy, it is no strategy at all. Indeed, the "what" of General Goodpaster's definition has to include as a fundamental purpose preventing war from approaching its absolute form.

Modern strategy, it seems to me, deals with the use of military forces in peace as well as in war, and also in all those ambiguous conditions in between. It deals with the use of military forces to prevent conflict, to control conflict if prevention fails, and to terminate conflict if it cannot be controlled.

This "what"—preventing conflict from reaching an absolute form—is of vital concern. It led to the high interest in limited war theory; it led to what many quite rationally believe to be the decline in the traditional utility of military force as an instrument of power. Finally, it has demanded critical reappraisal not only of the "what" but of the "how" and the "with what."

The necessity of preventing and controlling conflict has made the "how" and "with what," formerly and legitimately the concern of the soldier, of equal and legitimate concern to the civilian policymaker as well. It has complicated to a great degree civilian/military relationships that were never entirely clear. It is in the context of the objective of preventing and controlling war that the subject of land forces must be addressed.

The terms "land forces," or "land warfare," or "land battle" are somewhat

misleading. Even though they are in my mission statement at the US Army War College, they create difficulties. Warfare is tri-dimensional and has been since at least the Spanish Civil War. To distinguish between surface and air, whether the struggle is for control of a sea area or a land mass, seems wrong. Making a distinction between an "air" battle and a "land" battle is not possible except at the lower tactical or procedural levels, certainly not at a strategic level. There is one air-land battle, one thing, one operation. So in my references to "land" forces, please recognize that I am including tactical air forces in the very same sense I include infantry, cavalry, armor, field artillery, and air defense artillery.

Now, military forces, including land forces, have two important effects on an adversary. One is the physical, the other is psychological. In actual conflict, both are operative. But if the "what" of modern strategy includes preventing the outbreak of conflict, the psychological effect of military force during periods of nonactive conflict becomes all-important. It influences to a large degree (indeed, it may determine) the "how" and "with what" of modern strategy.

To move from the abstract to the more specific, the largest land force on the globe today is that possessed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Let us consider how that land force serves the objectives of the PRC's modern strategy.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) consists of some 3½ million men organized into 138 divisions. It is a predominantly infantry army equipped primarily with a weaponry of the 1950's. It is backed by a varied militia which probably consists of another 5 million (75 divisions) armed and trained men. The Chinese purposely exaggerate the size and competency of this militia. By western (and Soviet) standards this force is definitely antiquated. It has a range of deficiencies (again by our standards) in fire power, air support, armor, mobility, communications, and logistics. Its ability to project power any distance beyond its borders is severely limited. Generally, the

PLA is deployed throughout China, but the center of gravity of its concentration is definitely to the north and northeast of Peking.

Despite the shortcomings mentioned, the PLA serves the Party and the Republic well. It obviously has an important role in internal security and development. While at the moment it constitutes no threat to the Soviet Union, should the situation change—should the Soviet Union become heavily engaged on its western front or should it be severely wounded by nuclear attack—the PLA is quite capable of taking advantage of that situation to try to recover areas which were once Chinese.

But the PLA's principal task is to defend against what the Chinese perceive to be a threat from Soviet forces in Central and Eastern Asia. The deployment of the PLA is interesting. They have not packed their forces (as I suspect we would) into what estimates might conclude are the most likely avenues of invasion. Rather, their forces are dispersed and deployed some distance from the border areas. This deployment, as well as the composition of the PLA and militia, signal two important messages to the Soviets.

First, the Soviets are being told that the PLA does not constitute an immediate threat to eastern Soviet territories. Second, but no less emphatically, the Soviets are being told that any invasion of China for any reason will be met with fanatic and prolonged resistance everywhere. The Soviets are promised no quick victories in China, no decisive battles of

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annihilation, no Cannae, no France of 1940. An invasion of China, the Soviets are being told, will result in a people's war of resistance that, if necessary, will bleed the Russians for centuries. The PRC has its own version of a strategy of deterrence, deterrence based not on a promise of the destruction of modern European Russia, but on the promise of a protracted unwinnable war with one quarter of the world's population.

That, in sum, is how China uses its not-so-modern land forces in its modern strategy. By capitalizing upon its most available and least expensive commodity, manpower, it has constructed a deterrent which to date has proven every bit as effective as the more modern deterrent of the West.

At the same time, the PLA is maintained at a level that tells regional military powers other than the Soviet Union—the two Koreas, the United States, Japan, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, India—that they must always consider the PLA in any calculus as to the utility of military force in the vicinity of China's borders.

So if the political objectives of the PRC include maintaining stability along its borders, the PLA, antiquated as we may think it to be, serves that objective quite well. On the other hand, if China's national objectives include expansion of influence, if not territory, to the south, the PLA can also support that objective.

Moving now to the other side of the Sino-Soviet border, we know that since about 1967 the Soviet Union has steadily constructed a modern mechanized army facing China. It reached its apparent programmed size and composition in 1972 and has remained level since. It consists of about one-fourth the land, air, and naval forces of the USSR, or nearly a million men, including approximately 40 divisions. It is an army that has been built without any reduction in Soviet forces in the west, a fact that cannot be ignored by either NATO or China. It is nearly as modern as the Soviet armies in the west. It is, as are all Soviet-built armies, an offensive instrument (but now in dug-in defensive positions). It is deployed astride the major avenues of advance into

northern China and Manchuria. It appears to be an army which is both equipped and postured to execute classical armored thrusts deep into the Chinese homeland as well as to defend the Soviet motherland and its critical cities, ports, and rail lines which lie close to the border. It seems the Soviets are sending a very clear signal to the Chinese leadership.

First, the presence of this army tells the Chinese that they must not look to force as a means of settling any of the outstanding issues—ideological, political, or territorial—between themselves and the Soviet Union, and that any indication of an attempt to do so can be and will be preempted by violent Soviet attack. Next, it cautions the Chinese leadership against any temptation to use force to influence China's southern neighbors against Soviet interests in that region. Finally, it warns the Chinese against any close military relationship with either the United States or Japan or both.

If it is the Soviets' political objective to neutralize the People's Republic of China, to isolate her from natural allies, to reduce her influence outside her borders, the Soviet eastern armies appear to be making a major contribution to the accomplishment of that objective.

So the Soviet Union's modern land forces in Central and Eastern Asia are an important element in her modern strategy, providing not just security of her territory, but a strategic and political freedom of action that would not exist without the presence and capabilities of those armies.

But if the presence of Soviet land forces in Asia has been supportive of their foreign policy, the Soviet land forces in Eastern Europe have been absolutely critical. In the late 1940's and 50's, these forces served effectively as a counterdeterrence to the superior strategic nuclear capability of the West. Their presence as a threat against Western Europe has severely limited the options of the United States elsewhere in the world. It should be remembered that what US decisionmakers most expected as a response to the Cuban quarantine was a move against Berlin.

Throughout the more than 30 years since

the end of World War II, these Soviet forces have successfully kept together the "Socialist Camp"—East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary—and when called upon to exercise force against these allies, they have done so expeditiously and brutally. Essentially, it was the Soviet Army that established those regimes, and it has been the Soviet Army that has kept them in servitude. What the Soviets won with their armies, they have kept with those same armies.

In the last several years, we have witnessed an alarming buildup and modernization of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe (I include Western Russia in that region). While the number of divisions has not grown significantly, the size, staying power, and modernization of these divisions have. Together with the Warsaw Pact allies there are some 58 divisions in varying degrees of readiness deployed against the NATO Central Region. They are so postured that they are able to attack with little preparation and would be able to sustain that attack over a longer period than ever before.

What are the political advantages that the threat of that Army gains for the Soviets?

By maintaining discipline within the Warsaw Treaty organization nations and dominating those states, the Soviet Army insures a geographic buffer between its homeland and those Western European states that throughout history have invaded Russia, twice in this century. This is an historical fact to which the Russians are understandably sensitive. The mortal enemy, Germany, is divided, occupied by foreign armies, and nonnuclear; this series of conditions gives the Soviets particular satisfaction, I am sure.

The impact of this modern offensive land army on other Western European and Atlantic nations could become particularly severe with Soviet achievement of strategic nuclear parity or "essential equivalence" or whatever you prefer to call it. Even under conditions of nuclear inferiority, Soviet strength in East Europe deterred the West from any initiatives in respect to demonstrated Soviet vulnerabilities in East Germany, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia and from any ideas of "rollback" once expressed by Foster Dulles.

Strategic nuclear parity, coupled with conventional superiority in Europe, could lead to temptations that even the traditionally conservative Soviet regime might find hard to resist.

But of equal concern to the West is the political leverage and freedom of action this condition would provide the Soviets in other areas of the world. An Atlantic community paralyzed by its military inferiority in Europe could only wring its hands as Soviet power and influence moved unimpeded into the so-called Third World, portions of which provide the materials upon which the industrial, economic, and social health of the industrial West depend. In essence, we would have a situation in which the West, in tactical terms, is "pinned down" in Europe, while growing Soviet naval power or Soviet surrogates slowly but not imperceptibly isolate its Atlantic adversaries.

So even if one believes that an attack on Western Europe is not a very likely scenario, he still cannot view the growing strength of the Soviet Army in Eastern Europe without a certain uneasiness. For that Army not only serves the Soviets' legitimate security interests, but it also exercises an influence on the Atlantic Community that could be in the long run as fatal as naked aggression. The Soviet Army in Eastern Europe is an awesome military machine, and as such it is a powerful political instrument. It is a vital element in the modern strategy of the Soviet Union.

Opposite this Soviet Army in Central Europe, the nations of the Atlantic Community maintain an army structured into 26 divisions and about 1600 tactical aircraft. There is a litany of shortcomings that one hears with ever more frequency in regard to the effectiveness of this army. Nonetheless, for almost 30 years, it has accomplished the basic mission for which it was formed—to deter Soviet attack on Western Europe.

But the military situation is not static. I have mentioned earlier both the increased effectiveness of the Soviet Army and their achievement of strategic nuclear parity. This latter achievement puts in serious question the credibility of both strategic and theater

nuclear weapons as an appropriate and useful response to Soviet aggression. It places an increasing burden on the conventional forces deployed in Germany.

So the weaknesses of the Atlantic Community's army do require attention. Can we any longer accept maldeployments; lack of war reserve equipment; shortages in ammunition stocks; inferiorities in artillery, tanks, chemical and electronic warfare capabilities; nonstandardization of equipment and tactical doctrine; and vulnerabilities of lines of communication?

It is not just the current but the future effectiveness of this army which is in question. While agitation for the reduction of US forces in Europe has subsided for the moment, it could rise again if within the US it is thought or perceived, however fairly or unfairly, that Atlantic partners are not bearing an equitable burden. The British Army of the Rhine unhappily must continue to act as a troop base for Northern Ireland. Belgian, Dutch, and French forces in Germany gradually become redeployed to their homelands. France's military role with NATO remains uncertain. (What is certain is that NATO does not now benefit strategically from the *certain* commitment of France, and the depth which its territory could provide to NATO's defensive base.) Erosion of the effectiveness of the Atlantic army will inevitably result in an erosion of political will, strategic flexibility, and freedom of action.

As a bare minimum, it is the role of the Atlantic army to replace the strategic nuclear deterrent as the instrument with which the attack option is foreclosed to the Soviet Union. But that is a bare minimum. In a modern strategy the Atlantic army must provide for the West a sense of security to a degree that will encourage it to act and react in respect to global events with confidence. That forecloses to the Soviet Union the options of intimidation, blackmail, and political leverage.

The political requirement is that the military situation in Central Europe be in balance—that it be stabilized so that global freedom of action is not impaired. There is

much work to be done if this political requirement of modern strategy is to be met. A stable nuclear balance makes imperative a stable conventional balance in Europe. Without that stability there can be no political or military counter to expanding Soviet influence in the Near East, South Asia, Africa, or in the great ocean basins upon which an interdependent world relies. Not the least of these ocean areas are the North Atlantic and North Pacific—vital to North Americans.

I have focused my remarks here on land forces. I doubt that one can place in priority the value of strategic nuclear forces, naval forces, theater nuclear forces, and conventional land forces. As a matter of fact, I am quite sure one cannot. All are links in the chain of defense, deterrence, and strategic freedom of action. None can be slighted or emphasized at the expense of another. Nonetheless, I think it is clear that land forces are still highly relevant to the protection of national interests and to the achievement of national objectives.

As important and relevant as land forces and military forces generally may be, they represent only one element in the strength of the nation. National strength is not just military, nor even predominantly so. It is also political, economic, social, physical, and technological. Most important of all, national strength grows from the moral strength of a people and the value they place upon their freedoms.

NOTES

The expert assistance of Colonel Harry P. Ball, US Army War College, in the preparation of this paper is here gratefully acknowledged. Recently retired, Colonel Ball was formerly Chairman of the Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations.

1. Karl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 128.

2. Andrew J. Goodpaster, "Military Strategy for the Eighties," address at the National War College, reprinted in *The National Security Affairs Forum*, Spring/Summer 1976, p. 9.