

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 24
Number 1 *Parameters* 1994

Article 16

7-4-1994

The Use of Military Power in Pursuit of National Interests

Edwin J. Arnold Jr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Arnold, Edwin J.. "The Use of Military Power in Pursuit of National Interests." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 24, 1 (1994). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol24/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

The Use of Military Power in Pursuit of National Interests

EDWIN J. ARNOLD, JR.

From *Parameters*, Spring 1994, pp. 4-12 .

In remarking that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means," Clausewitz unambiguously defined the conduct of war--the use of military force--as a means for a state to achieve policy and not an end in itself.[1] He implied, but did not state, that other means must also exist. These other means as well as the use of military force emanate from the four elements of national power: military, economic, political, and social. What Clausewitz did not discuss in his treatise *On War* were the circumstances under which war becomes the correct means with which to pursue policy--the imposition or dominance of one state's national interests over those of another state. He never answered the question: When is it proper to use military force in the pursuit of national interests?

The answer to that question is largely dependent upon the nature and importance of the national interest being pursued. Many authors have described what the national interests of the United States have been throughout our history and what they should be now, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A reasonable approach to the correct application of military power does not require a synthesis of those many discussions. Rather, a simple national interest model, the National Interest Matrix introduced by Donald E. Nuechterlein in 1979, will suffice. Mr. Nuechterlein used four basic interests that could apply to any state: defense of homeland, economic well-being, favorable world order, and promotion of values.[2] Additionally, he introduced four levels of intensity with which states view their interests. These were:

- Survival Issues: The very existence of the nation-state is in jeopardy, either as a result of overt military attack on its own territory or from the imminent threat of attack should an enemy's demands be rejected. . . .
- Vital Issues: Serious harm will likely result to the state unless strong measures, including the use of conventional military force, are employed to counter an adverse action by another state or to deter it from undertaking a serious provocation. . . .
- Major Issues: The political, economic, and ideological well-being of the state may be adversely affected by events and trends in the international environment which thus require corrective action in order to prevent them from becoming serious threats. . . .
- Peripheral Issues: The well-being of the state is not adversely affected by events or trends abroad, but the interests of private citizens and companies operating in foreign countries are endangered.[3]

Nuechterlein developed the matrix to provide "a new conceptual framework whereby scholars and policymakers can be more precise in their use of terms and more accurate in relating national interests to foreign policies." [4] Thus, the matrix will provide a good framework for the discussion of a significant element of foreign policy, the use of military force. Figure 1 shows a sample matrix.

Basic Interest	Intensity of Interest			
	Survival (critical)	Vital (dangerous)	Major (serious)	Peripheral (bothersome)
Defense of Homeland	Libya	--	US France Britain	USSR
			Libya	

Economic Well-Being	--	--	France USSR	US Britain
Favorable World Order	--	US Britain Libya	France USSR	--
Promotion of Values	--	Libya	US Britain France	USSR
Adapted from Donald E. Neuchterlein, <i>America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World</i> (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), pp. 19, 26.				

Figure 1. The 1986 US bombing of Libya as an example of the National Interest Matrix.

In its definitions of the different intensities with which states view their national interests, the Neuchterlein matrix establishes some baseline criteria for the use of military force in support of survival and vital issues. These criteria reflected the prevailing US foreign policy approach to the use of force during the period between the end of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, "Internationalism"--the belief that the security and prosperity of every place on earth was vital to America's own--was the dominant foreign policy view during the same period.[5] The net result was that the United States repeatedly identified any aggression by the Soviet Union or the potential spread of communism as an intolerable threat to its own security even if no otherwise vital or survival interests were at stake. The US military involvement in Vietnam was the classic example of this approach to determining when to use military power.[6]

Failure to achieve US policy objectives in Vietnam through the use of military power led to analysis and speculation about why the failure occurred and under what circumstances the United States could effectively employ military power in the future. In remarks to the Washington Press Club on 28 November 1984, then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger proposed the following six criteria to determine the conditions under which the use of military force was warranted:

- The United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies. . . .
- If we decide it is necessary to put combat troops into a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning. . . .
- If we do decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives. . . .
- The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed--their size, composition, and disposition--must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary. . . .
- Before the United States commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. . . .
- The commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort.[7]

Mr. Weinberger used these criteria--the so-called "Weinberger Doctrine"--to address the primary reasons that knowledgeable people agreed had led to the US failure in Vietnam. He continued to assert the idea, pervasive during the Cold War, that military force could only be used in pursuit of *vital* national interests. No doubt this idea seemed relevant, since any use of military power in those times carried the threat of superpower confrontation and escalation to war in which the very survival of the nation could be at risk. Additionally, Weinberger proposed in his sixth criterion that the use of military force be a policy option of last resort. This limited the available means with which the United States could initially pursue policy. However, in the Cold War context, these six criteria or tests were meant to prevent the United States from being caught up in a "gradualist incremental approach" to the use of military power--an approach that more often than not led to insufficient use of force.[8]

The Weinberger Doctrine held prominence as the definitive yardstick for measuring the application of military force until 1991. Two events, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, then

changed the foreign policy playing field and rules. The first, Desert Shield and Desert Storm, in conjunction with two earlier short, successful military operations (Just Cause and Urgent Fury), altered the US populace's perception of the military. Collectively these operations changed the image of the use of military force from the painful, ineffective policy means of Vietnam to a rapid, decisive weapon to insure attainment of US national interest objectives. At the same time, dissolution of the Soviet Union destroyed the Cold War threat of superpower confrontation that had pervaded the previous 40 years. With these changes, revision of the criteria for the use of military force became inevitable.

Several prominent members of the US defense establishment entered the discussion about how and when the United States should employ its military forces. General Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presented the military view of four propositions on when it is appropriate to use force:

- Force should be used only as a last resort. . . .
- Military force should be used only when there is a clear-cut military objective. . . .
- Military force should be used only when we can measure that the military objective has been achieved.
- Military force should be used only in an overwhelming fashion.[9]

These criteria are actually quite similar to the six criteria of the Weinberger Doctrine. Both sets clearly state that the use of military force should be a policy means of last resort, and then only in cases where military objectives can be clearly identified and defined. Also, though not stated in the same terms, the concept of only using overwhelming force appears to be a synthesis of Weinberger's criteria of only fighting to win and properly sizing the forces to meet the military objective. Furthermore, the concept of using overwhelming force alters the nature and duration of guaranteed public and congressional support for committing US forces. Under such conditions, operations involving overwhelming and rapid application of military force would theoretically be completed before support could erode.

The most notable difference, and it is quite significant, is the removal of the criterion for the use of military force in support of policy that is vital to US national interests. This clearly signals the end of the Cold War confrontation and the threat of any military enterprise escalating into a superpower survival issue. Nonetheless, retention of the idea that the use of military force is the policy means of last resort continues to limit the full, flexible use of all elements of national power in pursuit of national interests.

Former Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, while a member of the US House of Representatives, commented in 1992 that General Powell's criteria do not go far enough in describing the potential uses of military force in the post-Cold War era. He stated it is "clear that this brand new world of ours is a world of turmoil and agitation. And that agitation has provoked calls for the use of military force in a whole range of circumstances that don't fit the mold." [10] Aspin thus took issue with the idea of the use of force as a policy means of last resort. He evidently believed that such a constraint would limit the military's usefulness in achieving policy objectives to only extreme cases. Such conditions could lead to the military becoming like nuclear weapons in the Cold War--important, expensive, but not useful.[11]

As Secretary of Defense, Aspin described his preferred use of military power as the "limited objective school" (in contrast to the "all-or-nothing school" reflected in General Powell's four criteria). The heart of this limited objective school is the issue of compellence--"the use of military force against an adversary to influence his behavior elsewhere." [12] Though not specifically addressed, there does not appear to be much disagreement on the other three criteria for the use of military force. Regardless of the scope of the military operations envisioned in support of foreign policy, it is possible to define the military objectives clearly and measurably. Finally, the application of military power, even in the pursuit of limited objectives, could (and should) be overwhelming, to insure rapid success and reduce the likelihood of friendly casualties.

Former President George Bush also expressed his views on the appropriate application of military power. In a speech to West Point cadets as he neared the end of his term in office, he elaborated his beliefs on the use of military force. He discounted the need for a fixed set of criteria to determine the use of military force, stating that each case is unique and requires judgment. Further, "to adopt rigid criteria would guarantee mistakes involving American interests and American lives and would give would-be troublemakers a blueprint for determining their own actions." [13] In spite of this belief, President Bush described at least four principles that should inform the decisions to use military force:

- The relative importance of an interest is not a guide. Military force may not be the best way of safeguarding something vital, while using force might be the best way to protect an interest that qualifies as important, but less than vital. . . .
- Using military force makes sense as a policy where the stakes warrant, where and when force can be effective, where no other policies are likely to prove effective, where its application can be limited in scope and time, and where the potential benefits justify the potential costs and sacrifice.
- A desire for international support is not a prerequisite for acting, although acting in concert with allies and friends is preferred. . . .
- It will be essential to have a clear and achievable mission, a realistic plan for accomplishing the mission, and criteria no less realistic for withdrawing US forces once the mission is completed.[14]

Generally, with these views, President Bush's criteria resemble Aspin's "limited objective" school. With such phrases as "real leadership requires a willingness to use military force, and force can be a useful backdrop to diplomacy, a complement to it, or, if need be, a temporary alternative," and "selective use of force for selective purposes,"[15] Bush clearly believed that the use of military force is one of the means available at any time to achieve national interests, not only the means of last resort.

Post-Desert Storm applications of military power seem to fit the limited objective school of thought rather than the all-or-nothing school. This is not overly surprising since the former is the school most closely aligned with the beliefs of President Bush. Clearly, the idea that use of military force is a policy option of last resort is no longer a restraint for policymakers. Additionally, limiting the use of military force to the pursuit of only *vital* national interests seems no longer to be a consideration. Before developing a model for future applications of force, it is important to understand the environment in which nations presently pursue their policies.

Without a doubt, the world has changed significantly in the past few years. For the first time in this century, none of the most powerful states of the world seems to harbor aggressive intent. The fear of forceful domination on a global scale appears to have ended for the foreseeable future. Great-power and regional competition will continue, but for other than military dominance: for political influence over issues that concern state interests, for market share and technological leadership that affect state power and prosperity.[16] Military power is losing its importance as a means of achieving national interests and has given way to economic power as the preeminent element of national power. The new world order will see military-political states lose their leadership position to trading states.[17] In such a world order, the survival interests of the United States will not generally be at risk even though at least two countries, Russia and China, will continue to possess the capability to attack the United States with nuclear weapons well into the next century. Most vital interests will deal with protection from the loss of economic power, prosperity, and technological advantage. In these areas, the use of military force will have minimal usefulness.

In what instances then, will policymakers seek to use military force? The apparent answer is that the United States will now consider using military force in pursuit of national interests with only "major" and "peripheral" levels of intensity. Of course, the strategic nuclear deterrent will remain as long as other countries in the world possess the capability to launch attacks against the US homeland. And US forces will undoubtedly intervene should any country attempt through military aggression to attack the sovereignty of one of its allies. With these exceptions, which have little likelihood of occurring in the near future, military force will most likely be committed in support of national interests in the bottom half of Nuechterlein's issues hierarchy.

The intervention in Somalia provides an example of such policy. Vital national interests are not at stake in that country; promotion of American values and a favorable world order, both peripheral interests, are at stake. Under the circumstances and conditions that existed in Somalia, however, application of military power was probably the only option that had a reasonable prospect of producing favorable results at acceptable cost. Unfortunately, the initial intervention into Somalia brought back memories of intervention into Vietnam, particularly since there was no clear definition of the desired end state upon which to base the withdrawal of American troops from the country. The emergence of a rogue leader, the onset of armed opposition to UN forces, and the expanded mission prescribed for UN forces in UN Security Council Resolution 814 serve to highlight the immaturity of end-state planning concepts and processes.

Military capability, including the prospect of armed force, could be used to preserve the prevailing world order--to promote world congeniality--or to insure American economic access to important trading areas. In the first instance, US presence in stable military alliance structures in Europe and the Pacific assures neighbors of Germany and Japan that those two countries are not disposed to autonomous military policies that could threaten regional interests.[18] In the second case, American leaders appear to be trading continued support of the US nuclear deterrent in Europe for German leadership support of American economic presence in European markets.[19] The evident trend, therefore, is to use military force in a wide range of policy options, much as explained by President Bush as he left office and supported by former Secretary Aspin, whose defense views were presumably supported by President Clinton.

What considerations should be met before the use of military forces becomes the policy means of choice? The following five elements offer a preliminary answer.

- First, generally speaking, the intensity of the national interest being pursued should have little effect on the decision. The obvious exception is the situation in which the survival of the nation is at stake and the nation must fully apply all aspects of national power--military, economic, political, and social--to insure the welfare of its citizens and continuation of the state. In most other cases, once policymakers decide that the United States must use some element of its national power to achieve a foreign policy objective, they can decide on the use of military force if it offers the best benefit-to-cost/risk option for the situation. The first consideration calls for the selective use of force for selective purposes.
- Second, of great importance for any use of military force is the unambiguous statement of clear, attainable, and measurable military objectives whose attainment will satisfy the pertinent policy objectives. Not only does this permit the military to compose a force appropriate to the mission, but it also establishes the parameters for an end-state condition that signals the end of military force application and the withdrawal of American forces.
- Third, military force obviously becomes the option of choice if all other options have failed or if no other policy option offers reasonable prospect of success.
- Fourth, in most instances the United States should opt to use force within the framework of an international consensus, even if it is only an implicit consensus, especially in cases where the interest being pursued is not a vital US interest.
- Fifth, military force application decisions should not contain unrealistic limitations. To achieve the quick, decisive, and low-casualty results that have come to characterize US military operations, overwhelming force at the point of decision is a prerequisite. This consideration brings together the means and ends issues inherent in strategic planning and should help to clarify the principles and processes of end-state planning and management.

The debate about the proper size and use of the US military will surely continue for some time as policymakers try to balance competing demands and deal with diverse situations. The Cold War exacted a high price from both superpowers: the Soviet Union dissolved and the United States experienced neglect and erosion of its own internal strengths. While major-power politics may shift to the politics of economics and technology development in a unipolar setting, we should not delude ourselves about the durability of turmoil, agitation, and aggression. Only some of the terms of reference for the application of military power have changed.

As the remaining global military power, the United States has a responsibility to the world and to itself to learn to use its military power judiciously. The country cannot and will not sustain the continuous economic drain, nor could the military survive the debilitating effects that would result, from trying to use the military as the solution to every crisis that erupts in the world. The country must adopt a strategy of selective military engagement that most fully supports the pursuit of national interests, regardless of interest intensity but mindful of benefit versus cost. The five considerations presented above will support the development of such a strategy.

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 87.
2. Donald E. Nuechterlein, "The Concept of 'National Interest': A Time for New Approaches," *Orbis*, 23 (Spring 1979), 76.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
5. Alan Tonelson, "What is the National Interest," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1991, p. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
7. Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," *Defense '85*, January 1985, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. Les Aspin, "With the Soviets and Cold War Gone, What is the Future for US Forces?" *ROA National Security Report*, November 1992, p. 23.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
13. George Bush, "The Use of Military Force: The President's Difficult Choice," *Defense Issues*, 8 (No. 1, 1993), 2.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Terry L. Deibel, "Strategies Before Containment," *International Security*, 16 (Spring 1992), 80.
17. William Clinton, "A New Covenant for American Security," *ROA National Security Report*, February 1992, p. 150. Michael Vlahos, "Look Homeward," *The National Interest*, No. 20 (Summer 1990), 52. James Kurth, "Things to Come," *The National Interest*, No. 24 (Summer 1991), 11.
18. David S. Yost, "U.S. Military Power and Alliance Relations," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 516 (September 1991), 90.
19. Kurth, p. 12.

Colonel Edwin J. Arnold, Jr., is Commander of the Engineer Brigade, 1st Armored Division, in Germany. His previous tours include command of the divisional engineer battalion of the 3d Infantry Division, Wuerzburg, Germany; and plans officer and Secretary of the General Staff of the 2d Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas. A 1993 graduate of the US Army War College, he holds B.S. and M.S. degrees from the University of Texas at Austin and an M.M.A.S. from the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Reviewed 5 May 1997. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil.