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Fortissimus Inter Pares: The Utility of Landpower in Grand Strategy

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Landpower is financially costly, politically contentious, exacts a high human price, and impossible to assess until after the fact. It is of apparently questionable value for preserving security in unstable states or maintaining the benefits of kinetic operations. It has been a truism for sixty years never to conduct a major land war in Asia. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested to an audience at West Point, one also might now add the Middle East and even Africa to that admonition.¹ The list of potential theaters of operations seems to be growing thin, increasingly restricted to regions where major war appears unlikely to occur in the near future, where landpower is apparently unnecessary. Has landpower lost its utility? Will landpower be circumscribed to increasingly smaller roles, lighter footprints, and more limited missions? The expenses and dangers of employing landpower are genuine.

Nonetheless, landpower is unique in its capability to deliver strategic effect through the taking and exercise of control. No other grand strategic instrument, military or nonmilitary, can achieve a similar effect. Yet neither the strength nor the dangers inherent in using landpower should be considered in isolation; they are inextricably intertwined and form the basis for employing landpower in the future.

Grand Strategy

Grand strategy concerns the control of manifold forms of power in competitive relationships. Such multifariousness is a necessary aspect of the relationship between grand strategy and the control of power. Professor Colin Gray suggests “[i]f the concept of grand strategy is to have intellectual integrity it has to admit a necessary connection to military force as a, not the only, defining characteristic.”² In the competition for control, recourse to force must remain an available option despite the existence of and the need for other relationships and other tools (diplomacy, sanctions, propaganda, etc.). Edward

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Luttwak argues “[t]he boundaries of grand strategy are wide, but they do not encompass all the relationships of all participants in the totality of international politics”; instead they depend upon the potential to use force as a meaningful instrument.³ The possible reciprocal application of force within the framework of a political competition defines grand strategy and distinguishes it from statecraft, although in practice the line separating the two is, and can only be, indistinct.

The aim of grand strategy is to control the mutually adversarial and interwoven pattern of power manipulation—of events around and during conflict—in time and space. Control of space is meaningless if it is not temporally durable, just as control of events is meaningless if those events are isolated from the theater of a competitive relationship. Control is nevertheless finite both spatially and temporally, for the means to control are ultimately limited—in magnitude, in capability, by geography, etc. Control is not entirely zero-sum, but is instead a trichotomous concept: one may deny control to others, one may take it for oneself, and one may subsequently exercise it. Denial of control to the enemy is implicit in acquisition and exercise of control, but the latter two are not necessary features of the former. One may deny control to another without being able to acquire and exercise it oneself.

Tools of Grand Strategy

The unique capacity of landpower to take control and subsequently exercise it may be juxtaposed with how all the other tools of grand strategy influence the competition for control. These tools, both military and nonmilitary, deny control of particular exercises of power to the opponent, to varying extents and dependent upon the context.

Economic sanctions and blockades constrain the ability of the target to manipulate its economic power at will, thus restricting its internal power creation mechanisms. Propaganda and psychological operations contest the opponent’s narrative and impair his capacity for controlling the opinions of his population and influencing the attitudes of the international audience. Special operations demonstrate and exploit the adversary’s inability to secure his valuable assets, whether they are heavy-water plants attacked by commandos or nuclear enrichment facilities assaulted from cyberspace. Diplomacy, the art of negotiation and persuasion, achieves effect by an agreed-upon mutual limitation of control of power in specific contexts. All these tools ultimately only deny control, by coercive or even noncoercive means. They limit what the opponent may do and impair his strategy. They cannot directly exploit or broaden the options for manipulating one’s own power for positive strategic ends.

Seapower and airpower, which together with landpower comprise the three greatest military instruments of grand strategy, only deny control as well. Men can neither live on the sea nor in the air, where their presence is platform-based and temporary, although the ability to persist in both mediums is impressive. Such limitation to denial of control is due to the nature of their respective mediums and of transitory operations within these mediums. The

geography-exclusive ability to take and exercise control—command of the sea or air—translates only into denial of control at the grand strategic level.

In his elucidation of the principles of maritime strategy, the prominent naval historian Sir Julian Stafford Corbett remarked upon this limitation by noting that “[s]ince men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.” Moreover, the enemy may “remove his fleet from the board altogether,” completely out of reach of one’s own fleet (before the advent of aircraft capable of striking ships in port).⁴ Overwhelming strength on one side may meet self-abnegation of naval ambitions on the other. The stronger party denies the weaker one the ability to exercise his own naval power, but the power of the navy only extends so far into the littoral. The effect of airpower is similar. The interwar airpower theorist Giulio Douhet argued that countries “should be defended from aerial attack . . . by preventing the enemy from flying.”⁵ The first aim of airpower strategy is to deny the enemy the ability to exercise his airpower. The second aim of airpower is to deny the enemy the ability to control the rest of his forces. John Warden, Douhet’s modern counterpart, suggests that “[a]s the death of the king on the field of battle meant defeat for his forces, so the effective isolation of the command structure [by airpower] in modern war has led to the rapid defeat of dependent forces.”⁶ The denial of control postulated by Warden’s theory does not, however, translate into effective acquisition and exercise of control for oneself; it only facilitates both by decreasing the effectiveness of the hostile armed forces.

The practice and effect of both seapower and airpower are thus predicated on denying the enemy the external control necessary to project his own power into that specific medium of warfare. This basis then allows the denying strategist to extend that denial toward some aspects of the opponent’s internal control of his own power. Widespread denial may, in its theoretical absolute form, instigate such a lack of control in the adversary that the targeted political entity may be entirely destroyed. No such instance in historical practice comes readily to mind, although it is arguable that during World War II, Japan might have reached this deadly point had it not surrendered first.

The Strength of Landpower

Having a strategy implies possessing the ambition to contest deliberately the control of some or all aspects of the enemy’s power manipulation. One may be denied control over some particular uses of power and yet retain a coherent strategy for succeeding, albeit one of limited effectiveness. But to face an opponent who has taken control and is exercising it comprehensively is to discover one’s strategy broken, and the need to improvise a response. Herbert Rosinski, an authority on naval strategy, described this condition: “Control being the element which differentiates true strategic action from a haphazard series of improvisations.”⁷ Taking control reduces one’s adversary

to disorganized reaction of a character far removed from the Clausewitzian concept of defense as awaiting the blow with the aim of parrying it to gain a strategically meaningful victory.⁸ Forcing the enemy to haphazard improvisation robs the foe's defensive action of strategic meaning, unless another factor intervenes, such as the attacker reaching his culminating point of victory—as German forces did in the Soviet Union by the end of 1941. Subsequently exercising control exploits this advantage by removing more and more of the adversary's bases of power from his possession, further degrading his ability to act strategically.

Removing a base of power from an enemy's purview through the exercise of control is significantly different from merely denying him access to it. Removal is a definitive action; denial is not. The crucial difference between removal and denial rests within the nature of military force, identified by American economist and nuclear games theorist Thomas Schelling as its three fundamental uses. The first two uses comprise "seizing and holding, disarming and confining, penetrating and obstructing." They are *taking* and *protecting*. The third is *hurting*. "In addition to taking and protecting things of value it can *destroy* value It is measured in the suffering it can cause and the victims' motivation to avoid it."⁹ Denial of a power base is predicated upon hurting the enemy without taking from him. Mere abandonment of the denial campaign returns control, albeit possibly compromised, to the enemy. Removal of a power base is taking from the enemy by force once control has been exercised. To restore his control, the adversary must engage in offensive action. Land alone enables the taking and exercise of control.

The establishment and exercise of control require forces to be able to take, limiting their use to conflict on land, the sole dimension that may be taken. Humans live, work, and travel freely solely on land. To take something means to draw a line in the sand, literally and figuratively, to distinguish between one party's belongings and the other's, and to successfully defend that division as necessary. Taking is the action of a single moment, although its consequences may have to be defended over time. The strategist gains a disproportionate role in controlling the subsequent character of events and of mutual power manipulation, for he combines denial of control to the adversary with the ability to create new opportunities for exploitation. This is the exercise of control, which is the consistent ability to remove, and the action of removing, power bases from the opponent's ownership to effect a downward spiral of the foe's strategic effectiveness. This stage in strategy and war is rarely reached, for most wars end before then. It is so rare there is a special name for conflicts that escalate to this point—total wars—although their sheer magnitude has made such an impression on strategic studies that all other wars are defined in opposition to them, as limited wars. Total wars indicate that ultimately the center of gravity of any conflict is on the land, the heart of control and of human existence. There can be no total war without a dominant land dimension to the warfare and to the ultimate victory.

The potential to take and actually exercise control is the core of the difference between landpower and all other tools, military and nonmilitary, of grand strategy. Landpower, because it alone has the capability to take and then to exercise control on the decisive geography of war, is the unique tool capable of and necessary for imposing one's will upon the enemy directly and actively. Short of nuclear war, only landpower is capable of escalating a conflict to a level that may result in the destruction of entire great powers.

Even the major theorists of guerilla warfare recognized this, for insurgency is not landpower—it, like airpower or seapower, may only deny control. Of the four major theorists and practitioners of guerrilla warfare—T.E. Lawrence, Che Guevara, Mao Tsetung, and Vo Nguyen Giap—only Lawrence did not conclude with a vision of the guerrilla force turning into a conventional army trained, armed, and ultimately employed to take control of the enemy state. This omission was likely due to his particular context: General Allenby automatically fulfilled that role for him in Palestine, as commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. The latter three theorists all recognized that successful insurgents would eventually have to throw away their guerrilla advantage and wield landpower.

Landpower, for these reasons, is *fortissimus inter pares*, the strongest among equals. It alone can achieve the greatest strategic and political effect, through taking and exercising control as required by the specific grand strategic situation. No other tool of grand strategy can achieve as much—although this is not to denigrate any of those other tools. Landpower, after all, cannot be projected to distant lands without seapower providing it with transport, to identify but one example. Landpower can almost never be autonomous. American Rear Admiral J.C. Wylie reflects upon this relationship: “the soldier, few men realize, is the only one of the military men who cannot do his part of the war alone. . . . His flanks are bare, his rear is vulnerable, and he looks aloft with a cautious eye. He needs the airman and the sailor for his own security in doing his own job.” Nevertheless, he is equally adamant “[t]he ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with the gun. This man is the final power in war. He is control. He determines who wins.”¹⁰ He is the soldier, and land is his environment.

The Bravery of Landpower

Fortissimus inter pares translates not only as the strongest among equals. It has a second, equally important, meaning: bravest among equals. Taking and exercising control are the engines of achieving the greatest effect. They are actions with a positive purpose, creating a new, amenable pattern of power manipulation out of the old. Therein lies the first aspect of the bravery in committing landpower to solve a political problem. Taking and protecting, two of Schelling's three fundamental uses of force, are both more difficult to achieve than simply hurting.

Taking and exercising control through the application of landpower to achieve positive purpose serve not merely to acquire and enjoy a position of

strength versus one's opponent strategically. Depending upon the success of his military strategy as landpower asserts control, a strategist may swiftly find himself requiring an explicit and positive policy to serve. This contrasts with the strategist engaging in a campaign of denying control, who must merely identify an undesirable outcome to oppose. Operational success in denying control over time merely pressures one's opponent without unduly testing one's own policy. If a strategist is secure in his denying task, the onus to reevaluate policy is entirely upon the enemy.

In contrast, a strategist aiming to assert control over another's manipulation of power needs to have a clear idea not only of the unwanted outcomes but also of those that are wanted. A successful campaign to take and subsequently exercise control requires knowing what that control is to accomplish. Control signifies ownership, due in part to a force's inherent tasks of taking and protecting, which adhere to landpower alone. Ownership is established by control over not only a geographical area and the sources of power therein but also the manipulation of power in that area over time. Achieving and exercising control is to lay claim to the lion's portion of responsibility for events thereafter. Wisdom in policy is requisite as much as in grand strategy. Those with a negative, denying, purpose do not have this worry, for they do not lay claim to controlling the pattern of events. This is the tragedy of the Iraq invasion, for the identified policy goal—regime change—was only achievable through use of landpower, but landpower was the wrong grand strategic tool. Its nature clashed with the other major goal of policy—to leave Iraqi nation-building solely to the Iraqis, resulting in fundamental contradiction between policy and grand strategy over the question of ownership and control.

Assuming responsibility for events is courageous both politically and personally, particularly during conflict and its aftermath. The extent to which any one actor may control events is subject to myriad pressures beyond a strategist's command; such pressures disrupt the ability to control without reducing either public expectation or operational requirements. Friction, uncertainty and, above all, danger pervade war. They comprise the second aspect of the bravery involved in committing to using landpower. These factors dilute the ability of a strategist to control the pattern of adversarial power manipulation.

Friction represents those unknowable events that hamper the execution of strategy and separate it from strategic theory. Its potential is present wherever there is a "moving part" in the employed tool of power. Landpower, of all forms of power, has perhaps the greatest density of such moving parts, particularly so if one considers all the support it requires to operate effectively. Each soldier, and each piece of equipment or technology he or she operates, is a distinct moving part. Land, moreover, magnifies the effects of friction in two ways. First, the sea and air are broadly uniform mediums, notwithstanding the effects of climate or changing weather. Land is not, with important implications ranging from the tactical to the strategic. "Terrain" is a meaningful term only with reference to land, and its variety poses unique challenges. Second, warfare and the weather can change the character of particular aspects of the physical

terrain, with direct implications for tactics; one need only think of the effect of prolonged artillery bombardment during World War I. Landpower is innately more difficult to use than airpower or seapower as there are, from the outset, more natural barriers to its effective employment, and artificial obstructions can be easily produced.

Uncertainty is so pervasive that it becomes the defining context for the practice of strategy: “[s]trategy is a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate.”¹¹ Strategy, by default, exists because of uncertainty: “wars usually begin when fighting nations *disagree* on their relative strength.”¹² Strategy is the instrument for proving, through war, that one political actor is more powerful than another. There are two ways in which uncertainty impacts strategy and landpower. First, strategy manipulates uncertainty in war. Second, uncertainty exists in the geopolitical context in which war occurs, and events beyond a strategist’s control in war may influence the conduct of or the strategic significance of the war itself.

Every strategic activity concerning control—denying, taking, exercising—has an individual, manipulative relationship with uncertainty. *Denying control* means maximizing uncertainty for the opponent, so he cannot know how to escape the stalemate within the limits of his resources. Simultaneously, denying control has the side effect of maximizing uncertainty for oneself as well, for a strategist denying control, unable to employ a force capable of wresting victory, cannot know when his foe will abandon his policy. Without some type of rupture, war becomes a contest of endurance. *Taking control*, a path available only to landpower, means decreasing the uncertainty a strategist faces by beginning or threatening to begin the process of removing the adversary’s sources of power from his possession. *Exercising control* is the execution of the process of removal, resulting in an ever-decreasing amount of uncertainty both for oneself and the enemy. Uncertainty cannot be eliminated; even throughout the most successful exercise of control a strategist will face questions concerning the details of continued employment of force. The enemy also faces a decrease in uncertainty when faced with a campaign of successful exercise of control, although the resulting certainty is a negative one, as he comes to grips with the conclusion that he will be defeated. The adversary always has an influence on this competition over defining the level of uncertainty in conflict. The end thus becomes certain, but the particular means or ways of reaching that end remain inexact.

Uncertainty, moreover, pervades not only the climate of conflict but also its regional and global context. Committing any form of power to the solution of a particular problem is based on temporally locked assumptions about the opponent, the contextual geopolitical situation, and the utility of that application of power against that foe in that circumstance. The fundamental assumptions may be incorrect, but even if they are not, the passage of time modifies all factors, usually gradually but sometimes dramatically. When US landpower was committed to the defense of South Vietnam, the nightmare of

strategists in Washington was the emergence of a Beijing-Hanoi-Jakarta axis of aggressive communist states and the subsequent collapse of dominoes across Southeast Asia. Yet no sooner had US landpower been committed, than Indonesia abruptly overthrew its Communist government and China disengaged significantly from much of the international stage, content to suffer the paroxysms of the Cultural Revolution. The US landpower commitment to South Vietnam had lost its grand strategic utility as the geopolitical context transformed around it. Neither policy nor grand strategy can predict such surprising and upsetting events, but policy and strategy must remain attuned to their influence. Control has its limits and holds little direct relevance to those outside the immediate competitive relationship, yet the impact of unexpected events may profoundly affect the assumptions underpinning the struggle for that control.

Danger is the result of military strategy, “the art of the dialectic of force or, more precisely, the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute.”¹³ Danger in conflict arises out of the adversarial interaction of two opponents for control. It comes in many forms. First, the danger of failure is ever present. The enemy has a vote in the outcome of the conflict and he may ultimately become the one in control. The quality of one’s military strategy relative to the opponent’s is ever important. Second, escalation is a constant danger. The stymied strategist may choose escalation as a way of breaking an unyielding situation, whether it is a denial of control by the enemy, the foe’s acquisition of control, or the foe’s reluctance to bend his will during one’s own exercise of control. The escalation may concern even those parties beyond the immediate conflict, for good or ill. Finally, the bedrock of danger consists not of escalation or failure but of death and destruction. Danger manifests itself most clearly in casualties taken and inflicted, and destruction suffered or dealt. Nearly all forms of power are able to eschew danger to some extent. Seapower and airpower, in particular, have shown they may eschew it entirely, albeit at a cost of reduced effect. Only landpower cannot avoid danger while retaining effectiveness; one must be in the theater. The best method is to fight and win quickly, which maximizes danger in the short term to minimize it in the long term.

These three factors—friction, uncertainty, and danger—indicate control cannot be absolute even when achieved. The actual achievement of control is difficult, and may be beset by a foe’s countercampaign of denying control. The outright commitment to controlling and owning the future pattern of power manipulation in a particular geographical space is thus politically courageous for the politicians at home as for the generals in the theater. “Detractors stand ever ready to magnify a policy or strategy’s errors or limitations. Even success is open to criticism from pundits who question policy or strategy’s role, methods, or continued validity.”¹⁴ These detractors and pundits may be domestic or international, official or unofficial, may represent only themselves or great swathes of opinion, and may or may not have strategic, political, or even policy implications. Even when committing landpower and taking control is the best available choice, such deep involvement into a geopolitical issue and

chosen goals will have to be justified at the outset and again following every setback, real or perceived, in accomplishing the objectives set.

Conclusion

Control determines the character of power manipulation by a particular political or strategic actor, or collection of actors, in a particular area over time. Landpower exclusively may take and exercise control, allowing the strategist to establish the character of power manipulation. This is achieved through taking and protecting two of the three elementary tasks of force. Taking control and exercising that control are the greatest threats one strategic actor can pose to another, for their theoretical conclusion is the destruction of the threatened actor as an independent political player.

Control is not an unalloyed good. Its negative aspects are manifold. First, one assumes responsibility for the consequences of the attempt to rewrite the future pattern of power manipulation. Control is ownership, and when that ownership rules over the future of a foreign country, it will be closely scrutinized by all, for reasons that may be moral, political, strategic, or educative. Onlookers, even allies and domestic constituents, may disagree on the desirability of the new character of power manipulation or on the cost, or even the viability, of achieving it. Friction impedes control. Uncertainty within conflict mitigates it, and uncertainty without conflict influences its usefulness. Danger reflects the substantial costs of attempting control, in its overall utility as in its human losses.

There is latitude in international politics for disinterest or for lower levels of involvement. Landpower does not have to claim utility in every possible contingency nor should it. Choices on commitments need to consider not only one's own stake in a dispute but also the potential foe's. There will frequently be mismatched political wills. Landpower may be the only plausible solution, but it is one which strategists and politicians are loathe to employ. Other times, hurting the enemy and denying him control over his immediate future without actually taking or exercising control are sufficient to bend, if not break, his political will and bring him to the peace table. Forms of power besides landpower are meaningful because not all geopolitical issues require the most definitive use of power to postpone, resolve, or redirect.

Landpower, of all tools of power, faces the greatest impediments, risks, and dangers in its use. These perils are handmaidens to its unique strengths, and so the two cannot be separated. Landpower fulfils a particular, unique role, suited to political issues of great intensity and importance—issues worth owning. It is the role of policymakers and strategists together to establish compatibility among policy goals, grand strategy, and the tools of power. “If the strategist is forced to strive for final and ultimate control, he must establish, or must present the inevitable prospect, a man on the scene with a gun. This is the soldier.”¹⁵ Landpower is indeed the *strongest*—and in the context of friction, uncertainty, danger, and, above all, necessity for political ownership, also the *bravest*—tool among equals.

NOTES

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