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On “Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea”

Christopher Mewett

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This commentary is in response to Lukas Milevski’s article “Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea” published in the Summer 2014 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 2).

In a clash of opposing wills, the side that is willing to resort to violence will usually defeat the side that is not. This truism, convincingly stated in a single sentence, occupied Lukas Milevski for more than a dozen pages in the last issue of *Parameters*. Clausewitz made the same point rather more succinctly almost 200 years ago: “If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand.”

For the Prussian, this logical proposition was merely a start point for a deep and systematic consideration of war’s unique nature—a treatment of the subject that stands unequalled in the history of Western military thought. Milevski seems content, on the other hand, to re-state what is already widely known: power politics backed by the threat of force will triumph over indifference and inaction. The dichotomy he establishes between strategy and “statecraft” does little to improve our understanding of how states behave, or of why their policies succeed or fail. We are left with little more than old Clausewitzian wine, in new confusingly-labeled skins.

The article’s thesis is the “dynamics and outcome of the Crimean crisis were determined by disparate assumptions and methods of thinking on the part of the West and Russia” (23). At root, this means Russia was willing to countenance the use of force to resolve the crisis in its own favor, while other states were not. Milevski explains the two sides’ “disparate assumptions and methods of thinking” by detailing what he understands to be the significant differences between two types of state behavior: strategy and statecraft. Strategy, we are told, is primarily concerned with “threatened (or actual) violence,” as it “is by definition adversarial and seeks victory.” Statecraft, by contrast, is said to be “merely competitive and seeks common ground and agreement” (25).¹

Of course, all of this can be stated in simpler and more familiar terms. Statecraft describes all forms of international politics, while war – the tool of strategy – “is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means” (*On War*, 87). This formulation may have a familiar ring for readers of the journal.

Making sense of this revelation – understanding what it means to characterize war as a “true political instrument” and “not merely [as]

¹ Milevski acknowledges that strategy is actually a sub-set of statecraft, which comprises state-on-state activity “ranging from persuasion to coercion” to include the use of force, but he does not grapple with the implications of this taxonomic overlap (24).

Christopher J. Mewett is a support contractor with the Department of the Army. He studied history at Texas A&M and central and eastern European studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. His research interests include the history of military thought, Clausewitz, American strategy in Vietnam, and US Army doctrine.

an act of policy” – was perhaps the most important intellectual challenge of Clausewitz’s final years. The text of *On War* is inconclusive and unsatisfying on this point, and poses an enduring test to modern interpreters. Milevski’s essay fails to engage meaningfully with this issue, only superficially considering the way violence alters the dynamics of a conflict and ignoring altogether the tension central to war’s dual nature: it is both *violent politics* and *political violence*, and yet its nature is different to those of either violence or politics.

Condensing *all* political action outside war into something “typically conducted via diplomacy” but that “tends, therefore, toward persuasive means of achieving political objectives” – is to accept an impoverished idea of national power and the mechanisms through which it can work. Are economic sanctions a “persuasive means”? What of blockade or embargo? Direct-action special operations, subversion, espionage, assassination, and sponsorship of terrorism are tools that may be used by one government against another without rising to the threshold of war; are these things governed by the logic of strategy or of statecraft? What about raids, or drone strikes, or other isolated applications of airpower?

Many of these tools have violence at their core; but their method of operation on the will of the adversary has more in common with sanctions and diplomacy than with a comprehensive military campaign aimed at destroying fighting forces or conquering territory. The same is true of propaganda and the use of armed proxies as a thumb on the scale of a neighboring state’s politics: however important may be the threat of violence, these means function in fundamentally political (rather than military) ways.

The application of national power through violence *does* differ in meaningful ways from the use of other policy instruments, and Milevski is right to underline this fact. Military force can indeed serve as a form of messaging, however imprecise and open to misinterpretation. But the operative mechanism at war’s logical core is destruction; the message implicit in all military action in war is “I can make things worse for you,” and what’s ultimately at stake is nothing less than the effacement of one’s personal and political existence.

Can Milevski’s framing of statecraft and strategy as analytically distinct categories of thought and action help us to explain differences in state behavior, or does it merely describe differences that emerge from already well-known causes? Does it help us to predict or even simply to understand outcomes in inter-state competition, or does it just validate those outcomes and make them seem inevitable after the fact? Is a difference in mental models the simplest and most plausible explanation for Russia’s success in enacting its will in Crimea against the objections of Western states, or has Milevski confused effect with cause?

“The smaller the penalty you demand from your opponent, the less you can expect him to try to deny it to you; the smaller the effort he makes, the less you need make yourself.” Clausewitz introduces this self-evident truth of politics by way differentiating war from unconstrained violence—to underline the controlling influence of politics on action in war. The state that cares more usually tries harder. Thus ever was it so.

The Author Replies

Lukas Milevski

Christopher Mewett has written a late but undoubtedly powerful critique of my recent article. Although Mewett argues with some justice that the strategy-statecraft dichotomy may not provide satisfactory insight into the many gray areas between war and diplomacy, it strikes me that we do not necessarily disagree all that much. Our disagreements stem primarily from method of argument and presentation, and only secondarily over substantive issues. Mewett's commentary may be reduced to three basic, inter-related points: 1) nothing new is being said in the article; 2) the strategy-statecraft dichotomy does not work; 3) the dichotomy is unnecessary in any case, as other factors explain the results of the Crimean crisis.

On the first point, I surely hope I have said nothing new! In direct confrontations, harder power defeats softer power—regardless of what, and how consequential, the longer-term effects of that softer power may ultimately be. It would be most unfortunate if this were to come as a revelation to those who think about or practice strategy and policy. Yet the hesitant responses, and their apparent purposes, offered by many Western governments to the events in Crimea seemed to indicate that observers and policy-makers believed softer forms of power might overcome the effects of the introduction of armed force. It thus seemed useful to reiterate what should already have been known. Even if policy-makers did not believe their own statements surrounding the utility of their actions in the Crimean context, they might have misled others about their actions' usefulness. Mewett may, of course, disagree with that assessment.

Mewett's second point is much weightier than his first, as he doubts the functionality of the dichotomy I employ in my article. Any rigid distinction between classical strategy and statecraft does seem to be relatively inapt in considering questions of blockade and embargo, among other instruments which Mewett identifies. I implied a broader spectrum of statecraft in my brief discussion by noting the existence of coercive diplomacy even while distinguishing it from strategy. This appears to have been insufficient for the purpose, given Mewett's commentary. Nevertheless, Mewett's overall point here is well taken, as I argued the strategy-statecraft distinction focusing on Crimea, in accordance with my topic. If that distinction requires revision or abandonment for other contexts, so be it. Nonetheless, I still suggest coercive diplomacy of any flavor (arguably up to and including coercion such as Operation Rolling Thunder) remains closer to diplomacy than to strategy—but that would be a different argument, a different article, and certainly not a commentary.

Running throughout the entirety of Mewett's commentary is his third point, really a theme, that the dichotomy employed offers no insight into behavior which observers do not already gain through other

analytical tools at their disposal. I suggest rather strategy and statecraft, as I classify them in the article, are reflections of behavior; they represent assumptions and expectations of effect to be derived from acting with the respective set of tools. As I noted in relation to Mewett's first point, many Western policy-makers appeared to have misinterpreted the significance of Russia's (semi-deniable) employment of force in Crimea. They therefore misread the effect this use of force would have on the course of the crisis and so attempted to act against it with instruments which were inappropriate for their apparent expectations. However, it was precisely their very different geographical proximities, interest disparities, and so on, which led the respective actors to choose either armed force or non-military options. The dichotomy is thus, as already mentioned, a reflection of behavior through which we can interpret actions and events, rather than behavior as such.

Moreover, Mewett ascertains the article particularly fails to address the question of what he describes as the tension in war's nature between violent politics and political violence. As Clausewitz himself did not untangle this last point in *On War* attempting to do so in an article about what was effectively a non-war, rather than an actual war seems overambitious and partially besides the point. The main purpose of the article was neither to describe nor extol the dichotomy as such or to delve into the nature of war, but rather to examine the interaction between military and non-military instruments and particularly to distinguish the uniqueness of force from the rest. Such an interaction can occur either in a wartime setting or in a conflict short of war, such as Crimea. The dichotomy establishes the difference between force and the other instruments of political power, so their respective influences on the course of events may be identified. This, in turn, returns to Mewett's first point on whether or not this is new. It is not. But, given the West's apparent rhetoric and performance in March 2014, this reminder may hopefully prove useful even without any novelty, whether to policy-makers or to their audiences!