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REEVALUATING DIPLOMATIC & MILITARY POWER

Employing Military Force in the 21st Century

Michael R. Matheny

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ABSTRACT: As various states assert power more aggressively, US policymakers should apply lessons from past uses of force while developing strategic plans to manage the global and national tolerance for violence.

In the smoking wreckage of Hitler's Berlin and in the burned out ruins of Tokyo, the old world order disappeared. The geostrategic context of international relations and power radically changed, bringing new challenges, trends, and patterns. Globalism, the survival and triumph of market capitalism, the end of colonialism, and the threat of communism, all under the haunting shadow of nuclear weapons, confronted the survivors of World War II and those who followed. In the emerging new world order, the United States stood as the most powerful nation on earth, if not in history. The end of World War II brought a strategic inflection point not only for the world but for the United States specifically—what would America do with its power? In retrospect, the United States managed the emerging challenges fairly well—the world survived.

Since 1945, the United States has found it necessary to exercise its power, to use force in the pursuit of its national interests and those of its allies, but has realized mixed results. After successfully defeating the Axis powers during World War II and winning the Cold War, why has the United States had trouble applying its overwhelming military advantage? In the ledger of US military force applied in Korea, Europe, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, is there something beyond the role of policymakers or the unique strategic context of each conflict that explains success or failure? The answers lie in understanding the actual utility of force—the amount and scale of force necessary to achieve desired political control—and in understanding the lingering problems of America's use of force in an era dominated by limited war.

This era continued beyond the end of the Cold War, and many suggest, progressed to a period of limited wars characterized by nonstate actors, networked insurgencies, and new or resurgent state actors, all of which contribute to persistent conflict and challenge regional stability.¹ The nature of this period may not necessarily alter the utility of force since force has been used successfully to assure, deter, coerce, and compel. Such reasoning, however, depends on a close assessment of our interests and objectives as well as those of our adversaries. Policymakers must understand what military force can accomplish, and once the

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¹ See Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (NY: The Free Press, 1991), ix. This is a consensus view often reflected in professional military journals and publications in discussing the current security environment.

decision to apply military power is made, remain cognizant of its inherent constraints.

America's application of military force in an age of limited war is invariably shaped by the asymmetry of interests between the United States and its potential adversaries, the fluctuation of political will during the conflict, and the challenges of building partner capacity. A better understanding of the nature of the utility of force and its relationship to several key limiting factors can help us develop and execute more appropriate strategies.²

The Utility of Force: Assure, Deter, Coerce, and Compel

For allies, force may be used to influence behavior by providing assurance—the visible result of security. Sir Michael Howard, a preeminent British historian, claimed the West's use of force assured the global economy of safe passage to win the Cold War.³ Howard's view of the Cold War as a largely economic struggle testing the viability of communism versus capitalism meant American force was deployed globally to secure trade—it takes force to assure the global commons. Assurance through forward presence and stationing has been the essence of regional stability in much of the world. Achieved through forward presence and global military capabilities, assurance also provides political leverage, giving substance to diplomacy, credibility, and international agreements. Generally positive, assurance descends on a scale of the potential use of force in which it becomes deterrence.

The advent of nuclear arms and the onset of the Cold War generated a great deal of literature on deterrence. Most evident among state actors, deterrence is predicated on controlling an adversaries' political or military behavior by denying their ability to achieve their objectives or by threatening sure and prohibitive punishment via nuclear or conventional means. Deterrence depends on convincing an enemy of the futility of a potential action or the excessive cost of such action.⁴ Edward Luttwak argued deterrence is by far the most efficient use of force as it does not result in the actual expenditure of military resources. Additionally, the perception of power need not be restricted by time or space.⁵ Positioning the US Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait, for example, is not necessary to convince China that the United States will, in fact, oppose any attempt to conquer the island by force.

As efficient as deterrence may be, there are three problems with its use. For deterrence to work, the potential adversary must be convinced the deterring power has the capability to use force successfully. The adversary must be convinced one has the will to use force. And, the nation being deterred must have assets or interests that can be held at risk. In the first two cases, the burden of deterrence is the occasional

2 Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

3 Sir Michael Howard, "Lessons of the Cold War," *Survival* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1994–95): 161–66.

4 There is a long and extensive literature on deterrence and coercion. Perhaps the best short summary can be found in Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 155.

5 Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 2. "In the imperial period at least, military force was clearly recognized for what it is, an essentially limited instrument of power, costly and brittle. Much better to conserve force and use military power indirectly, as an instrument of political coercion."

demonstration of capability and will. In the latter case, not every adversary has fixed assets that can be easily threatened or attacked. Within a state's borders are fixed assets that can be threatened; beyond those borders are sustaining international political, economic, and financial connections, which can also be threatened.

The Cold War is perhaps the most successful example of the utility of conventional and nuclear deterrence to international stability. The US nuclear arsenal threatened Soviet cities and industry while conventional Western forces defended and denied an easy conquest of Western Europe. In fact, mutually assured destruction was mutually assured deterrence.

Even so, does deterrence have utility at the lower range of conflict? Can nonstate actors—terrorists or insurgents, networked or distributed—be deterred? History suggests deterrence has little, if any, utility in dealing with such threats, which often require coercion instead.

Like deterrence, coercion is based on punishment or denial. Coercion by denial uses force to deny the enemy's ability to achieve its objectives, demonstrating the futility of resorting to force. Coercion by punishment seeks to affect the enemy's cost-benefit calculation such that the behavior is prohibitively expensive. Coercion results in the actual consumption of resources—blood and treasure. Coercion is about forcing your opponent to choose and often ends in negotiation.

In the Korean War, the United States coerced North Korea and China to abandon their designs for South Korea by physically denying its conquest. By the same token, the United States was coerced into abandoning South Vietnam due to the high military, economic, and political cost of continued support; however, since coercion involves the use of force—the employment of violence—it unleashes the dogs of war with all the attendant potential for escalation and unforeseen contingency. So far, the utility of force consisting of assurance, deterrence, and coercion are most frequently successful in statist warfare where the rational and objective calculation of interest and effort are more evident and the intensity of national interest varies. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest coercion is any more effective than deterrence at the lower range of conflict with nonstate actors who have vital interests at stake.

In 1966, Thomas Schelling both coined the word for, and initially defined the concept of, the use of compellence. In the context of the Cold War, he sought to understand the utility and relationship of force in nuclear strategy. Schelling's definition of compellence is very inclusive, embracing coercion, but it is fundamentally different from deterrence. He asserted deterrence is defensive, negative, and static while compellence is positive, offensive, overt, and dynamic.⁶ Since 1966, the expanded discussion of assurance, deterrence, and coercion suggests Schelling's concept of compellence can be refined to arrive at a more complete understanding of the utility of force.

Whereas coercion uses force to manipulate the adversary's cost-benefit calculations, leaving the decision to comply in his hands, true compellence offers the enemy no choice, no negotiation—the winner completely dictates terms of ending the war. Saddam Hussein was

6 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 71–72.

coerced to abandon his conquest of Kuwait through the denial created by Operation Desert Storm; twelve years later he was compelled by Operation Iraqi Freedom, which offered no opportunity for negotiation and removed him from power. Think regime change: Adolf Hitler, Saddam, Manuel Noriega, and Muammar Gadhafi were offered no choice in abandoning their ambitions and power.

The great theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, asserted resistance is the product of will multiplied by means.⁷ In this political formula, compellence reduces the capability to resist to zero by eliminating the means. Thus, wars exist in a vast variety of forms ranging from demonstration to total war in which compellence is the ultimate argument of arms. Of all the uses of force, compellence is the most expensive and the most decisive.

In the post-World War II period, the United States has rarely had the recourse to compel its adversaries. The reasons are pretty straight forward—the advent of nuclear weapons and the fear of nuclear escalation ushered in an era of limited war. For more than four decades following World War II, the specter of triggering nuclear escalation kept the use of force in the realms of assurance, deterrence, or carefully calculated coercion. Compellence only becomes an option in our backyard, as in Panama, or after the fall of the Soviet Union, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, or when seriously provoked in the pursuit of a vital national interest or in a cheap pursuit, as in removing Gadhafi in Libya.

There is an obvious symmetry between uses of force and levels of national interest, a range that may be broadly categorized from peripheral, to important, to vital. This careful calculation of national interests determines the level of force allowable to achieve them. The force must be scaled to the perceived interest. Herein lies the first problem in the United States's use of force since 1945—the asymmetric and dynamic nature of national interest.

The Asymmetry of Interest

Few nations or nonstate actors can actually threaten the vital interests of the United States. Virtually everyone, however, can at some level threaten lesser interests. American diplomatic and military power are used to pursue security and economic interests as well as support American values throughout the world. At what point those interests become sufficiently threatened to require the use of military power is at the heart of the cost-benefit calculation in the use of force.

When Clausewitz suggested two kinds of wars exist—limited and unlimited—he referred not to means, but to objectives.⁸ Unlimited wars usually involve vital national interests, existential threats, which summon the greatest will and effort. Invariably, compellence is often involved in unlimited wars. Limited wars, however, run the greater range of conflict, requiring the careful calculation of cost and benefit. These are wars of coercion, wars of choice. One of the chief problems in the exercise of US military power since 1945 is that most of these conflicts have been a limited war for the United States, but unlimited for its adversaries. Therefore, despite the vast power available to the

7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 77.

8 *Ibid.*, 585.

United States, the careful calculations of costs and benefits have been domestically controversial and rarely match the will and efforts of America's adversaries.

One of Clausewitz's more emphatic assertions is his insistence that "the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."⁹ Policymakers must understand what kind of war they are embarking upon, limited or unlimited, and understand the nature of the war for the enemy as well. While US objectives in the Vietnam War were limited, they were clearly unlimited for the North Vietnamese.

This asymmetry of interest in a coercive use of force, meant the North Vietnamese were much stronger, not in means, but in will and willingness to sacrifice. This element suggests some obvious strategies for targeting US weaknesses. American efforts to coerce the North Vietnamese through force, by physically denying them conquest of South Vietnam, was likely to become expensive and to require constant vigilance. In contrast, the North Vietnamese could not be coerced, but only compelled, to abandon their ambition to unify Vietnam—an unlimited objective. Given the risks of escalation and self-imposed constraints, compellence was not a likely option for the United States.

This rationale remains the current and likely future case in the exercise of American power in attempting to maintain regional stability. Whether designing a policy over Crimea or Taiwan, nuclear-armed nation-states have the capability to threaten the United States existentially. All other threats are likely to be limited in both ends and means, resulting in controversial wars of choice. The exercise of US power will continue to be carefully calculated and largely circumscribed not only by the asymmetry of interest but also by domestic tolerance and partner capacity to assume or end these conflicts.

The Domestic Clock

In September 2007, General David Petraeus, commander of US forces in Iraq, traveled to Washington to face a skeptical Congress conducting a cost-benefit analysis on the Iraq War. Petraeus's mission was simple but not easy: put more time on the domestic clock—convince Congress and the public that more time would permit the United States to apply power in Iraq successfully.¹⁰

Due to the asymmetry of interests between the United States and its adversaries, America has chosen to limit carefully the amount of force applied to conflicts since 1945. As a result, in these limited wars of choice, the public as well as the Congress has been and will continue to be involved in any cost-benefit analysis involving blood and treasure in the pursuit of national interests. Consequently, time has become a problem for the employment of American power, working against the

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 178. Also see Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 49.

consistent use of US force absent a consensus on the threat or the nature of the national interest.

Inevitably, two questions arise during cost-benefit analyses during a conflict: are we winning? And, is it worth it? The more limited the war's objectives, the more the constraints and the restraints, the more political and the more partisan the war will become. Any perceived lack of success will be used as a political bludgeon by the opposing party. As the clock ticks, the military must provide incremental success to sustain public and political will. The rheostat for the amount of force used in limited wars must be adjusted to the objectives, the means, and most importantly, the clock.

To sustain public support for the use of force, we should use overwhelming force to eliminate quickly an opponent's means to resist or to use protracted war over time with such a low level of violence that the public remains indifferent. This approach creates a long or short war scenario measured by the amount violence required. Short wars are intense, violent, and dominate the media, the national agenda, and public attention—but, they are short. To make the clock less relevant, violence can be dialed down such that it drops below the level of public interest.

Following the Persian Gulf War, Operation Southern Watch engaged significant proportions of US airpower to protect the Shia population. American airpower attacked any Iraqi air or ground forces from the thirty-second parallel to the Kuwaiti border. In the first six years alone 86,000 sorties were used to constrain Saddam's use of military force.¹¹ Virtually every day, the United States delivered violence in southern Iraq in the pursuit of these objectives. Yet, the low level of violence kept these operations out of the public eye and allowed the application of force over a considerable period of time. Absent the ability to achieve political objectives with the application of minimal or carefully constrained force over time, we are left with a final option—let someone else do it.

The Partner Capacity

Even with the application of significant US power to any particular strategic problem, one question always remains: how ought this use of force end? The proverbial problem of strategic handoff is often the most vexing. While American military power can sustain weak regimes, our record of nation-building, or even building sufficient partner capacity that allows newly constructed allies to sustain or finish the fight, is decidedly mixed. American optimism in its ability to use force to reshape local political, economic, or military realities rooted in long-standing and foreign cultures has been at the core of its failure to succeed in limited wars since 1945. There are undoubtedly plenty of lessons available. But perhaps the greatest unlearned lesson evident from Vietnam is that despite its great military power, the United States constantly overestimates its ability to effect change in local or regional politics.¹²

11 Gregory Ball, "1991—Operation Southern Watch," Air Force Historical Support Division, September 18, 2012, <http://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458951/1991-operation-southern-watch/>.

12 David L. Anderson, "Introduction: The Vietnam War and Its Enduring Historical Relevance" in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 83.

America views the military as the primary instrument for building sufficient partner capacity to carry on or finish the fight even as the public wearies of the cost of such wars. The unfortunate but important truth is that all militaries are simply reflections of the society which creates them. If that society is rife with factionalism, corruption, predatory power structures, and inept leadership—those characteristics will inevitably be reflected in the military. The United States can give its partners equipment and teach them how to shoot, but it cannot always tell them whom to shoot. In short, America cannot change their culture.

In some cases, the only hope is that the enemy, the adversary, is more corrupt, inept, and predatory than one's erstwhile ally or proxy. The relative long-term balance of power can rarely be altered if the enemy is not already predisposed to failure. The United States can weaken its adversary through attrition, decapitation, or sheer destruction, but a better-equipped proxy will soon revert to its own preferred cultural styles of management, leadership, and interests.

The final assumption in such proxy strategies is that one's interests and those of one's proxies or partners will align. America may be able to build partner capacity, but can it direct how the capacity will be used? America's efforts to influence partners to do its bidding instead of pursuing their own interests will always be limited. After spending much blood and treasure in attempting to make Iraq and Afghanistan capable of defending themselves and ending the wars the United States started, America should not be surprised if the regimes in power are more interested in retaining and extending their domestic power than pursuing the US view of regional peace.

Of course, all alliances are based on mutual interests to some degree, and diplomacy clarifies and aligns those interests where possible. American leverage in regions and in countries is invariably overestimated; however, its perceptions of interest and cultural logic mirror the images of its partners' responses. If asymmetrical interests, the clock, and the problems inherent in building partner capacity make the application of US power in limited wars problematic, what can be done?

The Potential Solutions

How might a better understanding of the utility of force and the inherent limitations in the application of American military power be addressed in formulating strategy? Possible approaches might be found in better organization and process, innovating a truly national strategic planning doctrine, or just education. Some years ago Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry Watts noted a decline in American strategic competence. Harkening back to the practices of the Eisenhower administration, the authors recommended modifying the current organization of the National Security Council (NSC) to include a planning board and a coordination board supplemented by small study groups and invigorated by frequent senior policymaker participation.¹³ The current council consists of a Principles Committee, a Deputies Committee, and a set of Policy Coordination Committees. Perhaps a standing Strategic Planning Committee or strategic planning groups,

¹³ Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts, "Lost at the NSC," *National Interest* 99 (January–February 2009): 63–73

formed as necessary and armed with a strategic planning doctrine, could plan for the employment of American national power.

Currently, there is no true national staff systematically planning for the application of American power. The National Security Council staff advises the president by providing options to address immediate and long-term national security problems while under the pressure of political and public scrutiny. That staff also integrates efforts across and enables cooperation among departments and agencies. Since the National Security Council serves the president, each administration usually modifies and employs the staff as it sees fit. While these changes may aid in political responsiveness, they may not provide a consistent approach to planning the strategic use of force. More consistency may be found in the deeply embedded planning culture of the Department of Defense, which is likely why the National Security Council looks to it when the nation considers flexing its military muscle.

The Department of Defense has service and joint doctrine at the tactical and operational levels to consider and to execute a uniform planning process regarding the application of force even though there is no true national strategic planning doctrine. Detailed and deliberate contingency planning is done at the combatant command level in anticipation of potential conflict before it is reviewed by Defense Department. Directed theater, strategic, and even global plans are normally built from the bottom up with an incremental review and approval; however, these plans target very specific problems reflective of a strategic approach even though they are, in and of themselves, only operations.

The challenge is every conflict is essentially unique. Plans can only be made to address unique snapshots in time, reflecting the domestic, international, and regional conditions assumed to exist at the moment of crisis or decision. As conditions may be radically different from any anticipated scenario, there may be no preexisting deliberate plan, as was the case for the Afghanistan War. Perhaps it is time for a national strategic planning doctrine that formalizes the development of strategic net assessments and mandates strategic reassessments beyond the theater level, possibly even coordinating global war plans between theaters. In the absence of such a strategic planning staff or formalized process within the National Security Council, the Defense Department could ensure assessments are coordinated and considered across departments and agencies in the Joint Staff or within the office for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, as appropriate.

As part of a strategic planning doctrine, a strategic net assessment would clarify friendly and enemy interests and objectives, not as a checklist but as part of a more deliberate process to avoid impulsive or inappropriate use force and ensure that force can, in fact, achieve our national objectives. Additionally, a national-level strategic net assessment might identify the strengths and the weaknesses of our partners and adversaries, allowing us to match strengths and weakness across all the elements of national power. Strategic reassessments would continue to calculate the costs and benefits as inevitable interactions with our adversaries change and influence the strategic situation. The reassessment should also reassess the clock on the pace and scale of the

national effort to manage public expectations and determine the need and timing of incremental success to sustain public will.

Enormous challenges—of time, effort, and other resources—will accompany attempts to improve the application of force through strategic planning and doctrine at the national level; however, the stakes are high even though no process, no doctrine, no implementation can ever guarantee strategic success. But, such forethought may help reduce the risk of oversight, cognitive bias, and political impulse.

Fundamentally, strategy is an art, a direct result of the talent and efforts of senior policymakers, commanders, and planners. The entire process, regardless of the organization and the doctrine, is driven by the personality of the decision-makers; certainly, the nature and inclinations of the president are foremost. In this respect, education and awareness leading to understanding the real utility of force and its limitations in an era characterized by limited warfare is perhaps the most realistic solution. Appealing again to Clausewitz, military theory is meant to guide, to educate, to “light [the commander’s] way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.”¹⁴

With regard to the utility of force and its limitations, some general observations should be considered. First, the type of conflict should be identified: it may be limited for us but unlimited for the enemy. A careful, matched calculation of our own and our adversary’s interests, resources, and risk must be completed. In this way, a determination of the appropriate use force for the strategic problem set can be made.

When dealing with state adversaries, the utility of American force in foreign relations remains its ability to assure, deter, coerce, and compel; however, American power has demonstrated difficulty in deterring conflict and coercing nonstate actors and emergent enemies in limited wars. In such wars, the United States can choose to go fast, go slow, or not go at all. A strategic net assessment should carefully understand the international and domestic constraints and restraints in the possible use of force. The application of overwhelming force to compel an enemy can be used where appropriate to eliminate nonstate actors primarily with state support. This demonstration of willingness and capability may also serve to deter further state-sponsored extremism and assure allies. The problem of handing off in the smoking ruins of a regime change or in the sticky use of partners prosecuting proxy wars will remain; however, realistic expectations and pragmatic, rather than idealistic foreign policy, may help establish what passes for regional peace, aligned as close as possible to our national interests.

When international or domestic constraints will not allow compellence, violence should be applied at such a level of intensity to allow its application over time. Persistent scaled violence will exhaust the adversary, slowly destroying the adversary’s capability or at least contain the adversary until it can be eliminated. The use, scale, and type of violence over time has two possible objectives: to make the nonstate adversary strategically irrelevant or simply to drive the level of enemy violence into the criminal domain. Like crime, fanaticism that makes use of terrorism may never be eliminated, but it can eventually be exhausted or beaten

14 Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

into the realm of political crime and treated as such. Marshalling the coordinated resources of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Interpol, and other allied-state agencies may be the best recourse for countering strategic-level violence driven into the criminal domain.

Finally, there is restraint. One piece of wisdom attributed to the Greek historian, Thucydides, suggests “of all the manifestations of power, restraint impresses men the most.” The decision to use force to assure, deter, coerce, or compel should be made carefully, deliberately, and always with the knowledge that violence is escalatory. Perhaps the great caution about the future use of force is that with rapid development and use of robotic technology, resorting to force will become altogether too easy. The promise of delivering violence precisely, with little collateral damage, and without unnecessary friendly—or even unfriendly—casualties will be hard to resist when political and public voices demand action. Unfortunately, the belief that one can shape or influence local or regional politics and conflict by the carefully measured use of force is the most persistent and dangerous illusion in the era of limited warfare following World War II.