Strategy: theory for practice and the use of history

Article

Accepted Version

CentAUR

Author: Dr Kenton White

Strategy: Theory for Practice

'… strategy is about ideas for action, not action itself.'
War, Peace, and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History

The use of strategic theory to support the practice of the use of military force was the subject of many of Colin's books, articles and lectures. Strategy, at some point, must convert policy from ideas and objectives into the use, or threat of use, of military force. It is this conversion that I intend to examine here through Colin's works, my conversations with him, and teaching his works to my students. An understanding of Clausewitz and Thucydides are fundamental to Colin's approach to strategy. From their practical methods he largely succeeded in further developing strategic theory, and almost single-handedly created the concept of Strategic History.[1] As a practitioner, he sought to provide the firmest of foundations possible for those charged with the conversion of policy into the use of force.

My students have, on occasion, commented to me that Colin's work is often complex and difficult to comprehend. Indeed, in a paper entitled *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* Colin wrote about his own, '… dense prose …' perhaps being too forbidding for non-academics.[2] Some reviewers criticised his work for the same fault. Many of the concepts that he wrestled with require sophisticated language to fully express their complexity. Despite this, to paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, the knowledge gained is certainly worth the effort necessary to understand the full breadth and depth of Colin's work.[3]

Colin emphasised that the theory of strategy should be taught and understood, but that the process of designing and creating strategy itself was unteachable. Strategy is more an art than science, and the practice cannot be taught; 'Strategists cannot be trained, but they can be educated.'[4] Strategic theory is there to guide the strategist but the theories need to be understood within the context of the political objective obtaining at the time. History can teach lessons which may guide the strategist and indicate options available, but always with

---

[1] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, 2nd ed (Abingdon, UK : New York: Routledge, 2011).

[2] Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), 3.

[3] Keith B. Bickel, 'Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History (Review)', *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 1 (2004): 321–22, doi:10.1353/jmh.2003.0354.

[4] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Politics* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 59.

the current context necessary to modify the design of strategy. One cannot take a successful strategy from the past and apply it, unchanged, to a current or future circumstance. Colin's employment of examples from history were central to illustrating his approach to the use and validity of theory when compared to practice.[5]

Colin Gray was a great advocate of the use of history to inform current strategy, but to view that history through the lens of strategic theory. Strategy has to be viewed as a whole, with the distinctions of 'ends, ways and means' valuable to the foundational understanding of what makes a strategy, but not necessarily how to make a *good* strategy. Whatever the high-level definitions of strategy are, its mechanisms reach down to the operational and tactical level of military action. Indeed, they are the tools of strategy. Tactics and doctrine are taught, as is the operational level of war. These can draw immediately from historical examples and current capabilities. His overall position was that the past is a reservoir of knowledge that should be used for guidance of *what* can happen and *how* it happens. Even if the circumstances leading up to important events were different in some way, their consequences may not change significantly.[6]

Originally, my work with Colin looked at the development of NATO capabilities to fulfil its strategy over the last two decades of the Cold War, including the period of Colin's engagement in the Reagan Administration. The research investigated the capability of the NATO countries to prosecute a non-nuclear strategy. His first question to me on our initial meeting was to ask if I intended to write a counterfactual 'history' of a Third World War. Once I had assured him that was not what I intended, he warmed to the subject of my research. He guided me to the works of Bernard Brodie, and although much of Brodie's work was directed at developing nuclear strategy, his straightforward approach to strategy itself was simple, but important; 'Strategy is a "how to do it" study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently. As in many other branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work?'[7]

---

[5] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice*, Cass Series Strategy and History 15 (London: Routledge, 2006).

[6] Colin S Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2005).

[7] Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics: A Major Statement on the Relations Between Military Affairs and Statecraft by the Dean of American Civilian Strategists* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 452.

Strategy: Theory for Practice

We attempted to draw a metaphorical line from the strategy designed by NATO and adopted in 1967, known as 'Flexible Response', through the means provided to NATO by the Alliance members, ending with the ways for executing the defence of Western Europe. Under Colin's expert eye I employed strategic theory to identify those actions which should be undertaken in order to obtain success. As the method of converting political objectives into military action the concept of strategy requires clear and consistent objectives, supported by the means and ways to achieve it. As the components of strategy (ends, ways, means and assumptions) diverge, so the risks increase. At all times the attendant assumptions and risks of any strategy should be reviewed and assessed. The conclusion we drew, from extensive archival research, was that no NATO country could successfully counter a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe for more than one or two days. Regardless of how capable and tactically competent the NATO forces were, simple arithmetic to calculate the use of ammunition against its level of stockpiling showed a lack of essential supplies. Ammunition for Anti-Tank Guided Weapons would have been exhausted as quickly as the start of day two of a war. NATO command would have been called the use of tactical nuclear weapons to stop the Warsaw Pact advance. Indeed, in the exercise manuals for the British Government, this was a scenario practised several times. The alternative to nuclear first use was a complete surrender of NATO. This simple fact indicated a dislocation between ways and means to achieve the required ends. The implication was extreme risk if war ever came to Europe.

This led to long conversations regarding whether, for a given strategy, the armed forces of Western countries have been, or were being, adequately prepared. Immediate history of Iraq and Afghanistan would provide a rich source of material for this ongoing research. Colin was insistent that whatever the strategy, it must be good enough to achieve the objectives set by the polity. But equally, the polity must set realistic goals for the use, or threat of use, and effects of military force. The conclusion was that whilst most forces were 'good enough' for short term operations, the military and political systems in many Western European countries were just not up to the job of fighting a peer adversary. Where that threat might come from, perhaps Russia or China, perhaps another Alliance, one couldn't know.

Those who predicted dramatic changes in the style of warfare, or the use of technology in war, tended to provoke doubtful comments from Colin. In seminars, lectures and general conversations Colin emphasised the overstatement of the importance of counter insurgency,

and that it was not the future of warfare. Changes in the character of war, especially those of technology, should not be overestimated when assessing the options for strategic thinking. Throughout, Colin reminded me that it was almost impossible to predict the future. The bases of strategy, those of policy, theory and context, mean that there is no possibility of being able to predict what strategy will be good enough for the future. The future strategic environment is unknown to us, and the strategist, perhaps prompted by optimistic politicians, must not fall into the trap of predicting with certainty future events around which a strategy should be built. He commented on the uncertainty of the course of resorting to using military force; 'What matters above all else is that we all, especially our military planners, never forget that a decision to wage war is ALWAYS A GAMBLE and the historical record does not demonstrate that bold decisions for war initiation typically are rewarded with conspicuous success.'[8]

Colin expressed particularly strong views to me regarding the problems of treaty verification. Having been a practitioner under the Reagan administration, he said that this was one of the most difficult areas, not only regarding nuclear, but also conventional, strategy. He mentioned problems with the respective Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and the Reduction Talks (SALT and START), as well as the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). The Soviet Union, and afterwards the Russian Federation, were troublesome when it came to verifying their adherence to any particular treaty obligation; Colin was insistent that the US kept to their side of the bargain. President Reagan, in his speech at the signing of the INF Treaty in 1987, used the old Russian proverb, 'Trust, but verify' in recognition of the problem.[9] The development of nuclear strategy required clear verification of the force sizes on both sides, but this applied to conventional forces too. Practical actions which are based on false or unverifiable information is a fool's errand. Real-world knowledge of the opponent's capability, political will and determination are key for designing not only a competent strategy, but also converting that strategy into the use, or threat, of force.

---

[8] Colin S. Gray, 'Nuclear Strategy – A Tale of Consequence', *Military Strategy Magazine* 7, no. 1 (Spring2020): 6–10.

[9] 'Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty' (Washington, 8 December 1987), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/120887c . The original Russian is Доверя́й, но проверя́й. The direct translation was verified by Dayana White, in whom I have complete trust.

Because many historians and politicians, even some strategists, focus on warfare rather than war, Colin warned, 'The principal wrecking beacon for the understanding of strategy is the attractive power of the military instrument itself. The use of force is confused with the use made of force. The difference is small on the page, but cosmic in understanding.'[10] In one of the last articles Colin wrote, for *Military Strategy Magazine*, he again drew on historic example to illustrate an article of strategy. Whilst discussing the potential consequences of nuclear war, he emphasised that the post-war environment is the most important consideration. It is the raison d'être of choosing to use military force in the first place.

Mentioned frequently by Colin was the necessity for a Plan B (or C or D) when a decision to use force is made. Strategic success relies not only on the capability of the forces involved, but on the flexibility of the command of those forces and the ability of those forces to adapt to differing environments and circumstances. Fighting the 'wrong war' would quickly find flaws in the strategy of any nation, as Colin explained in Maxim 25 of *Fighting Talk*.[11] The enemy always gets a vote in any conflict. Simply because your forces excel in one facet of warfare does not imply overall success. Making a strategy in a vacuum to exploit this 'excellence' is dangerous, and entirely without merit. A better strategy on the part of an adversary, or knowledge of yours, either through subterfuge or educated guess, will render success difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. A good strategy can succeed even if the forces are only 'adequate'. A poor strategy will not be saved even by the most effective of forces. In other words, the strategy will not work.

In his book *Strategy and History* Colin proposed some potential scenarios which might influence future strategy making, whilst emphasising the caveat that, '… none of the dire developments just outlined have occurred.'[12] He stated that certain events are much more likely to occur, such as the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The likelihood of these events happening was suggested based on an understanding of the waxing and waning of previous events, and on the demands placed on military forces, through history. He posits scenarios which current strategists should consider as possible options. Strategic thinking

---

[10] Gray, *Strategy for Chaos*, 92, (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2005).

[11] Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007), 107.

[12] Gray, *Strategy and History*, 189, Cass Series Strategy and History 15, (London: Routledge, 2006).

should take possibilities into account, even potential surprises, to retain the flexibility necessary for success. Changes in the balance of power, and shifts of focus, perhaps to the Pacific and China, need to be considered in any strategy design. Climate change will also put pressure on resources which may significantly affect many states' security, leading to the use of force either to secure one's own resources, or to stop an attempt by another state to take them. We return full circle to how strategic theory can be applied to the creation of strategy to address the current situation was always foremost in his thinking. The problems of security, whether it is national, resource or data, are nothing new, but at the same time unique. Politicians and military leaders alike make the mistake of ignoring history at their peril.