New Thinking about Strategy, Power and Victory in the Twenty-First Century

Daryl Bockett, Yonsei University, South Korea

Abstract
It is normal to talk about foreign policy *strategy*, in the sense of achieving the national interest, but the language of strategy is often linked to the language of the military: overpowering enemies and defeating them, for example. While this conceptualization of strategy was perhaps relevant as recently as the Cold War, it is fundamentally inadequate for dealing with the challenges of the twenty-first century, even in the realm of international security. For the United States, dealing with potential threats from such sources as China, Russia, and North Korea is not about achieving victory over them in any traditional sense. Even a threat like ISIS, which is being engaged militarily, cannot be defeated through the exercise of brute military power. Yet much of the thinking about foreign policy, including the way that policies and leaders are judged, still relies on thinking of foreign policy strategy as a path to power and victory. This article problematizes this approach, focusing on the United States case, and suggests a new metaphor through which to understand power and strategy—one that better reflects the ways the world is changing.

Keywords: IR Theory; U.S. foreign policy; grand strategy; international security; Asia-Pacific

Introduction

In late 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama was criticized for his remarks on dealing with the Islamic State (ISIS), when he said, "We don't have a strategy yet" (Ackerman, 2014). Critics considered this a failure of leadership, arguing that it was the president's duty to develop a strategy for defeating ISIS. However, a great deal hinges on how 'strategy' is defined. It is true that the Obama administration had no plan for destroying ISIS on the battlefield, but it quickly became clear that they had a plan for creating an *environment* in which the ISIS threat could be dealt with, which is far more likely to yield long-term results. Criticism leveled at the administration for its lack of 'strategy' for the Middle East echoed questions about how it deals with its strategic rivalry with China, and with Russia over the invasion of Crimea.

The problem lies not with the strategies of the administration or its critics, but with the way in which the concept of strategy has failed to evolve. The term 'strategy' is used metaphorically, meaning that the term was transplanted from its original use in the military realm. According to Harper (2015), strategy originally meant the "art of the general;" in other words, a plan for defeating one's opponents militarily. While it has become common to adapt the term to mean 'achieving one's goals', its use in political and diplomatic discourse still seems to carry those original militaristic connotations. This can lead to strategy being framed in zero-sum conflictual terms. Similarly, concepts such as 'victory' and 'power' carry much of the same normative/cognitive baggage. This article will **expose** the inherent weaknesses in this approach and **propose** a new paradigm for understanding strategy, victory, and power in the twenty-first century. Then it will **demonstrate** how this approach leads to more diverse and effective solutions to three of the United States' most important foreign policy challenges: ISIS, Russia and China.

i. The Limits of a Military-Based Metaphor of Strategy

Looking below the surface of the ISIS phenomenon, it is clear that a traditional militarized strategy for dealing with the problem will be inadequate. Firstly, ISIS has its roots in Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), one of many militant organizations that sprang up in response to America's invasion of Iraq in 2003; secondly, their *salafi* ideology calls for a renewal of the Islamic faith and a complete rejection of modern, secular values; thirdly, their proclamation of a Caliphate is an audacious claim to be the sole legitimate successors of the Prophet. In short, ISIS embodies a narrative of Muslims resisting the oppression of the decadent Western/Christian powers, which means that a Western invasion would only reinforce their narrative and increase their appeal. As long as they hold territory, they can be bombed, but doing so does not address the roots of their ideology or support. Moreover, Sunni support for ISIS was fueled by the corrupt, sectarian rule of Iraq's Shi'ite government, a problem that cannot be solved militarily.

In contrast, the confrontation with Russia in and around Crimea (and recently in Syria as well) is far closer to a military invasion, although Russian President Vladimir Putin has consistently obfuscated on this issue. However, Putin's goals are clearly limited, as Russia has done little since annexing Crimea on March 18, 2014 except maintain a simmering conflict in eastern Ukraine. The United States probably has the military power to force Russia out of Crimea and put down Russian puppets in contested

regions of Ukraine, but the game would not be worth the candle. Even assuming the war—and Putin would consider it a war, as the annexation of Crimea is official in Russia, if nowhere else—could avoid escalating into a nuclear conflict, the resultant destruction in Ukraine would make it a pyrrhic victory at best. In addition, there is a very real chance that U.S. credibility would be tarnished and anti-western forces (in Russia, China, and elsewhere) would be emboldened.

Thirdly and most importantly, the Sino-American relationship defies a military solution. There is no doubt that the Chinese government is conducting wide-scale cyber-espionage against American companies and the government, while pressing its claims to territory and influence in Asia. Yet at the same time, cooperation and communication between these two powers continues across the board, even at the highest levels. It is true that China poses a threat to American interests and broader conceptions of American national security, but it is not true that China is America's enemy. Attempts to confront China militarily, while likely to succeed in the short term, would ultimately only serve to strengthen the position of what Yufan Hao (2007) calls "an anti-America group who are highly suspicious of America"s intentions towards China" (p. 136). Those in Washington who see China as a military threat have the power to fulfill that prophecy, but lack the ability to find a peaceful path around this dilemma.

These three cases demonstrate the deep weakness of the military-based metaphor for strategy. Much like a game of chess (which is itself a common element of the extended military metaphor), strategy has traditionally been seen as a way for one side to eliminate the other side. Thus 'victory' occurs only when the enemy is defeated or weakened to the point of surrender, usually through military means, and seldom with any possibility of coexistence. Yet even though great power strategies are multifaceted, involving economic, social, legal and ideational tools, this military element is invariably essential and usually dominant. This can be amply demonstrated by comparing the size of defense and foreign affairs budgets in any great power, for example.

Despite the primacy of this military-based metaphor for strategy, the great conflicts of the twentieth century have not lent themselves to this way of thinking. The defeat of Germany in World War I was a primarily military victory, but the enemy was not destroyed. Rather, the Germans were defeated militarily, but the German state persisted, and the conditions of that defeat ultimately fueled the next global conflict. On the other hand, World War II shows how a military victory can lead to long-term transformation of enemies into friends when combined with a broader range of political and social tools. The Cold War shows once again that defeating an enemy is not sufficient to achieve a positive outcome for the victor. The fall of the Soviet Union was not military in nature, but rather economic, political, and arguably even cultural. Gorbachev's decision not to use military force to keep the empire together was not the result of American military primacy, but rather was out of American hands altogether, and the victory over the Soviet Union only left the U.S. with a new set of problems (the failure to deal with which contributed to the current stand-off over Ukraine). The failure to take advantage of the Cold War victory to craft a more stable international order can be seen as at least partly the result of an inadequate conception of what a Cold War 'victory' would look like, and this again can be attributed to the prevalence of the military-based metaphor for strategy.

ii. Towards a Game-Based Metaphor for Strategy

An alternative model of strategy is clearly needed just on the basis of the twentieth century record, let alone the emerging challenges of the new century. As Patomäki (2002) pointed out, "the language of world politics is thoroughly metaphorical" (p. 129), because a field as complex as international relations cannot be understood without reference to other, more concrete images. Metaphors, in short, are in inescapable tool for understanding IR. If it is not possible to do away with the flawed military-based metaphor for strategy, it is vital to find a metaphor that more closely corresponds to the essential elements of twenty-first century IR, otherwise the metaphor will be more confusing than constructive. A better metaphor must meet at least four criteria:

- Describe multilateral relations, not merely dyadic ones;
- Combine conflict and cooperation, without assuming the predominance of one or the other;
- Incorporate more than just hard power; and
- Allow for the possibility of defeated actors to remain in the system.

With these criteria in mind, it seems that the world of games offers a more suitable metaphor than the world of war. Many games involve multiple players on independent teams, allow for a combination of cooperation, bandwagoning, balancing and open conflict, combine influence as well as coercion, and allow for repeated iterations after one player has 'won' the game. In this way, a **game-based metaphor for strategy** is a more apt model for today's great power politics than our current military-based metaphor.

Consider a card game. Many players with different power resources may sit down at the same table, and while they are all competing for the greatest gains, there cooperation between the competitors. Perhaps the most important element of a game is the explicit acceptance of a set of rules and standards, understood by and equally binding to each. Each player agrees to these rules because that arrangement suits their interests better than not playing the game. Additionally, players can still enjoy the game even if they lose the particular game, which corresponds to the interest that states (and non-state actors) have in a stable international order.

Applying this game-based metaphor to international relations, a 'game' refers any set of organizing principles that a state would like to apply to some aspect of international affairs. In contrast to game theory, which begins by looking at how players will behave during a particular iteration of a game (e.g. a hand of cards in poker), the game-based metaphor for strategy looks at a particular game for which a state seeks new players (e.g. a player who prefers poker to cribbage). Each actor may have their preferred game, or perhaps different games, meaning different organizing principles for different aspects of international affairs. From the point of view of the United States, their preferred game is a combination of free-market capitalism, liberal democracy internally, and a rules-based international order externally, centered on Westphalian norms and the institutional framework that evolved from the Bretton-Woods institutions after WWII. Many states have already adopted this framework, but most notably great powers Russia and China have not.

This game-based metaphor readily suggests a new approach to victory and strategy: victory (the end point of strategy) is defined as bringing other actors into one's preferred game, getting them to accept the rules, participate actively, and reproduce the game. Strategy must then involve establishing a framework by which other actors will abandon their games in favor of the preferred game, accepting its rules as they do so.

This approach to strategy is far more likely than the military-based metaphor to meet the criteria outlined earlier: it can be multilateral, incorporates cooperation as well as conflict, allows for the use of both hard and soft power, and frames victory/defeat in a way that allows victors to coexist with the defeated.

This metaphor also explains why the victory in WWII was so complete, as the defeated parties came to have a keen interest in the continuation of the game. We could interpret the interwar years as Germany initially joining the Allied game (Versailles Treaty), then reversing course, cheating, and attempting to start a different game (WWII).[1] Germany and Japan were then fully integrated into the (Cold War) game, now with the U.S. dealing instead of Britain or France, and proving to be very skilled players, to the benefit of all. During the Cold War, the United States was more successful than the Soviet Union in attracting new players to its game of liberal capitalism. In the aftermath, Russia never internalized the rules of the American game, and eventually tried to establish its own game.

Before applying this game-based metaphor to devising strategies for specific foreign policy challenges, three points must be clarified. Firstly, adopting the game-based metaphor does preclude the use of force or even open war; it merely acknowledges that war itself is never the desired goal of any actor, nor does mere victory in war ensure that the winner achieves its ultimate goals. Some actors may be willing to resort to force rather than give up their metaphorical game, or accept someone else's preferred game, and some games may be based on force rather than cooperation—it has not been unusual throughout human history for the strongest powers to favor force and conquest as organizing principles.

Secondly, a game-based metaphor doesn't presuppose the desirability or normative superiority of a preferred game. Whether or not one is critical of the liberal capitalism or the institutions at the heart of the liberal international order, the United States is consistently pushing other countries to adopt this set of organizing principles. Similarly, the Cold War can be described as a competition between the capitalist and communist games in which capitalism was ultimately victorious. This analysis doesn't presuppose any normative value for either game.

Thirdly, while the metaphor may seem western-centric, it is not necessarily so. For a Western audience, card games such as poker may be easier to understand, but every culture has its own games. Indian, Chinese or Japanese audiences may prefer to think of the metaphor in terms of chess, *mah jong,* or *shōgi,* but the core of a game-based metaphor as a tool for understanding international strategy remains unchanged.

---

[1] Metaphors can only be pushed so far, but perhaps we could imagine Hitler sneaking in a few extra aces and stealing chips from other players.

Adopting this game-based metaphor leads to a diverse and potentially innovative range of policy prescriptions. This approach to strategy involves the following steps:

1. Identifying your game
2. Identifying present players
3. Strengthening players against non-players
4. Encouraging present players to commit more to the game
5. Encouraging/forcing non-players to join your game
6. Undermining attractiveness of rival games

Most obviously, a state must be clear about what organizing principles it wants to develop, and then identify those states (or other relevant actors) that are already 'playing by those rules.' This analysis has an important qualitative element that the military-based metaphor for strategy lacks. In war (and therefore in traditional diplomacy), one side can increase its chance of winning by making alliances, thereby increasing the size of its forces, and this could be seen in the way the superpowers conducted the Cold War. Both sides supported governments that didn't share their ideologies or values, in order to increase their influence. As Craig and Logevall (2009) put it, "charges of hypocrisy flew" (295) during the entire period as the U.S. criticized the human rights records of its opponents while turning a blind eye to those of their allies.

In war, all that matters is that another party is willing to fight with you. Under the game-based metaphor, it doesn't mean anything if someone occasionally sits at the table with you; they can't join your game until they agree to *all* the rules of the game. Given that the ultimate goal of the strategy is to persuade other actors that these principles are the best organizing principles for international relations, states cannot simply pay lip service to those ideas; each player must adhere to the rules of the game for the strategy to be effective, which militates against hypocrisy and alliances of convenience.

Once an actor understands its preferred game and has identified current players, then it can strengthen those players relative to non-players; this is similar to building up allies in a traditional military-based strategies. However, at the same time it is important also to encourage those players to commit more to the game. If the current players are willing to 'buy into' the game, devote more resources to it, or adhere more closely to its rules, then this increases the game's attractiveness to non-players.

The previous two steps were inward-looking, in that a state looks to those actors who are already playing its game. However, a state must also look at potential new players: those who are playing by other sets of rules. Those players can be attracted by either push or pull factors, i.e. making the preferred game seem more attractive, or making competing games seem less attractive. During the Cold War, the U.S. was successful both in restricting the economic growth of the Soviet Bloc, through economic sanctions and so on, but also making its own model seem more attractive, through both prosperity and soft power.

iii. Applying a Game-Based Metaphor to U.S. Foreign Policy Challenges

The game-based metaphor of strategy is readily applicable to the three foreign policy challenges discussed earlier: ISIS, Russia, and China. Rather than assuming that the challenge is an enemy that must be defeated, the contemporary strategist must ask

what a truly beneficial victory would look like, and then find a path that leads to that outcome. For example, the U.S. is *not* trying to destroy or defeat China or Russia in any military sense, and any attempt to defeat ISIS through military force would inevitably strengthen the narrative that gives ISIS its power. Rather, American interests are better served by Russia integrating more with Europe, both economically and politically, and relinquishing its claims to a privileged position with regards to the former Soviet empire. Similarly, American interests are better served by a prosperous and politically open China that accepts, rather than challenges, the institutional status quo, even if it eventually achieves superpower status. In the Middle East, the ideal end-game for the United States would be a stable regional order of independent and secure states, with economic and social development that addresses the needs of all citizens. This would likely deprive groups like ISIS and Al Qaida of their ideological appeal. Using the military-based metaphor for strategy is unlikely to lead to any of these outcomes, and therefore does not serve the long-term interests of the United States as well as the game-based metaphor does.

1. Identifying your game

As the preceding suggests, the organizing principles of the American game—democracy, market-based economies and a rules-based international order—offer long-term solutions to all three challenges. In an important sense, the U.S. does not need three separate strategies for dealing with China, Russia, and ISIS. Different techniques may be needed in each area, but the end goal is similar in each case.

2. Identifying present players

In Europe and East Asia, there are many countries playing the American game,[2] including many Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) members in the former, and at least South Korea and Japan, if not ASEAN as a whole in the latter. This gives the U.S. a number of partners who can model the American game for Russia and China. However, the Middle East is a different story; Israel has historically been the only democratic state in the region, but even there the marginalization of the Palestinian population makes it useless as a role model to attract or inspire others in the region. For the American game to attract new players in the Middle East, America's authoritarian allies such as Egypt and the gulf states will have to join Tunisia in embracing democratic reforms as an alternative to repression and propaganda. This will be difficult, especially as the ISIS threat may cause an instinctive turn away from liberalism in those governments, but without it there is little hope for a lasting solution. The U.S. and its European allies may need to pressure states like Egypt, Jordan, and the gulf states to open up their political processes in exchange for western aid. After all, if they aren't playing the American game, then their nominal allegiance doesn't serve America's long-term strategic interests.

3. Strengthening players against non-players

Once states have accepted the rules of the American game, then it makes sense to strengthen them—militarily but also institutionally. In some cases the most pressing need may be for military defense, but in most cases—especially in Europe and East

---

[2] It could just as easily be called the western game, or even the European game, in terms of who invented the rules, but in this case we are focusing on America's grand strategy, and therefore it is correct to refer to these liberal organizing principles as 'the American game' in this instance.

Asia—it is more important to strengthen allies' ability to model the benefits of the western game, which can require longer-term commitments.

4.   Encouraging present players to commit more to the game

A significant part of the American game is the rules-based international order, embodied in institutions like the United Nations. However, it is notable that America and its allies often prefer to cling to their national sovereignty rather than trust these institutions to resolve their problems. For example, the U.S. has been agnostic in regards to international arbitration of the territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan, and has failed to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Both are actually opportunities to increase the attractiveness of the American game, by demonstrating trust in that rules-based order. The U.S. should push its allies to solve their disputes through international arbitration, and be more willing to submit to the same rules that it wants other states to play by. Failure to do so dramatically undermines the appeal of the entire package that comprises the American game—not just UNCLOS or the International Court of Justice, but liberal democracy and free trade as well.

5.   Encouraging/forcing non-players to join your game

Using the game-based metaphor as a foundation for strategy does not necessitate a reliance on soft power alone. There may be cases where coercion or even invasion is necessary to force a state to abandon its current organizing principle—it is doubtful that Nazi Germany would have abandoned its ethno-nationalist world view through soft power alone, or that the Afghan Taliban would have moved from theocracy to democracy through the power of diplomacy. However, states are more likely to internalize a new set of organizing principles and truly accept the rules of new game if the decision is not forced on them by a conquering army. The kind of rollback experienced in post-WWI Germany and post-Cold War Russia strongly supports the idea that encouraging change should be the focus of strategy wherever feasible, rather than coercion.

6.   Undermining attractiveness of rival games

One of the fundamental advantages of the game-based metaphor as a basis for strategy is that it requires an actor to identify its long-term interests—going beyond today's adversary and tomorrow's war to a clear vision of an optimal future. Not every actor on the world stage today has such a consistent vision, and many who do—ISIS is a dramatic example of this—envision a future that is unacceptable to many other actors. An actor that can successfully proselytize its vision of the future will have a huge advantage in shaping the future international order, and at present this is an advantage that the U.S. can leverage over its challengers.

Putin's Russia is simultaneously taking advantage of the post-Cold War liberal international order (through global trade and its position on the U.N. Security Council, for example) and undermining it by attempting to carve out an exception for its 'near abroad' and supporting the Assad regime despite numerous human rights violations and the illegal use of chemical weapons. According to Ioffe (2015), Putin has simultaneously castigated the American invasion of Iraq and claimed that comparable Russian actions were noble. To the extent that Russia even has a strategic vision for the future, it seems limited to special rights for great powers, which even America's

critics would acknowledge is less attractive than the nominal equality of the American order.

Similarly, Chinese ideas of non-intervention in internal affairs and Asia for Asians, are at best an underdeveloped vision of the future. For the China's smaller neighbors, there is little difference between preventing American intervention in Asian affairs and re-establishing Chinese regional hegemony. This is a vision that will obviously appeal to China, but has little resonance with its neighbors. In both the Russian and Chinese cases, the U.S. strategy seems clear: point out the exceptional rights that Russia and China are claiming for themselves on the basis of power or past primacy, and contrast that with the rules-based international order that, at least in theory, constrains America in much the same way that it constrains other states. The looming shadow of the Iraq War complicates this narrative somewhat, but even then it should be clear that the 2003 invasion was not in any sense an American 'land-grab'; the same cannot be said for the annexation of Crimea or Chinese militarization of the South China Sea.

In a sense, ISIS has the most clearly developed future vision of the three challengers, and it has been successful in proselytizing that vision to some extent. However, this apocalyptic vision of Islam waging war against the forces of Rome has only appealed to a tiny minority of Muslims, and is anathema to non-Muslims. The American vision of a democratic Middle Eastern state that protects the rights and interests of Muslim citizens seems likely to be more attractive over the long term. This is complicated by the dearth of concrete examples, especially when it is hard to see a difference between Saudi Arabia's oppression and Iran's, and so it must be concluded that the key to solving the ISIS problem lies in long-term nation building. In the short-term, however, it may be necessary for the U.S. to use hard power to prevent ISIS from coopting more territory into its jihadist game.

Conclusion

The preceding represents a first attempt to use a game-based metaphor as the basis for grand strategy, focusing only on ways that the United States can develop more effective strategies for dealing with foreign policy challenges from Russia, China, and ISIS. Even from this limited overview it is clear that changing the underlying metaphor of strategy, from defeating an enemy in a military context to expanding a political game to more players, yields significantly improved long-term planning. This has direct implications for the practice of strategy and diplomacy in international relations, but the possibilities of re-rooting prevalent metaphors in new contexts can have relevance for all social scientists.

The game-based metaphor is a more suitable foundation for great power strategy than the traditional, military-based metaphor. It accounts for the realities of today's world, which include a decline in great power war and the great difficulty of destroying or absorbing a defeated foe, and it allows much greater scope for *smart* power, combining hard power resources with persuasion and communication. This seems essential in a world where even dictators must pay attention to their increasingly networked citizens, and the world still struggles to make sense of the international order in the twenty-first century. Above all, the game-based metaphor is a tool for those who realize that war must be an *instrumental* exercise of force. War may be

necessary, or even desirable, in some situations but the war itself is not the goal; even victory in a war does not necessarily serve the interests of the victor unless the post-war order includes an acceptable role for the defeated parties.

At this moment in history, the three greatest geopolitical challenges to the United States and its allies are all cases where a militarized approach to strategy will necessarily be ineffective. Only by evolving past the traditional framework of strategy, such as defining victory in terms of assimilating enemies into the preferred game, is it possible to develop more comprehensive and effective policies to meet these new challenges.

References

Ackerman, Spencer "Obama: 'We don't have a strategy yet' to combat Isis militants," *The Guardian,* August 28, 2014. Available online at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/28/obama-us-strategy-isis-iraq-syria. Accessed May 10, 2015.

Craig, Campbell and Fredrik Logevall (2009), *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity*, USA: Belknap Press.

Harper, Douglas, "Strategy," *Online Entomology Dictionary website,* 2015. Available online at: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=strategy. Accessed October 8, 2015.

Ioffe, Julia (2015), "What Chekhov Tells Us About Putin's Syria Airstrikes," *Foreign Policy,* October 1. Available online at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/01/what-chekhov-tells-us-about-putins-syria-airstrikes-lavrov-kerry/. Accessed November 10, 2015.

Patomäki, Heikki (2002), *After International Relations,* London: Routledge.

Yufan Hao, "The Diplomatic Relationship: Substance and Process." In Shambaugh, David L. (ed.) (2013), *Tangled Titans: the United States and China,* Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield.