

## DEFINING STRATEGY: A NEW APPROACH

Dr Zia Ul Haque Shamsi

Corresponding Author: \*

Dr Zia Ul Haque Shamsi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15638717>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
18 April, 2025	18 May, 2025	03 June, 2025	11 June, 2025

### ABSTRACT

*Strategy is perhaps the most discussed but widely misunderstood term in academic literature and needs to be redefined in the context of its approach and application in the contemporary environment. The term strategy is derived from the Greek term Stratagem, which meant to outsmart the adversary with ease without putting oneself in the line of fire. It also denoted the art of the general. However, its interchangeable use for policy or planning has relegated its mastery to its true meaning. Some well-known definitions of strategy come from notable figures such as Clausewitz, Von Moltke, Liddell Hart, and Andre Beaufre, among others. These definitions formed the foundations of military strategies of many nations over the past two hundred years. However, with time, the term 'strategy,' like 'policy,' has lost its meaning due to misuse by the general public, who have started using it for everything they do, both in and out of their business. Perhaps it is time for the term 'strategy' to regain its glory in literature and not be replaced by the plans of individuals in their day-to-day lives. This article aims to redefine the term 'strategy' to create awareness and understanding of its role and essence in military manoeuvres, enabling victory without significant loss.*

**Keywords:** Strategy, Policy, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Liddle Hart, Direct Strategy, Indirect Strategy.

Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

### INTRODUCTION

The term "strategy" was once the domain of generals and was used only in the context of wars and conflict. Over centuries, the generals spent considerable time, skills, and resources formulating strategies against their adversaries to achieve victory without a significant loss of ground. From the time of the Chinese sage Sun Tzu, who remains the source of foundational strategic precepts on war and conflict, the strategy for a military campaign had to be conceived and executed by the commander, to whom the emperor assigned the task and resources. The commander would then spend considerable time considering how to employ the allotted resources (means) to accomplish the assigned task (ends). In the process, the emperor would not interfere with the commander's methods, which were referred to as the strategy, even if the term cannot be found in the translations of Sun Tzu's masterpiece, *The Art of War*.

Sun Tzu's methods also rely on the thinking of the general, who would perhaps provide the idea only, and let the staff do the planning. However, most European thinkers, including Clausewitz, Jomini, Moltke, and Liddle Hart, have subscribed to the Greek translation: 'the art of the general.' However, this author argues that the strategy is not only an art or science, but an idea presented by the general upon which the staff creates ways to achieve the desired end objectives.

Carl Von Clausewitz, one of Europe's most notable military strategists, defines the term as the art of employing one's troops on the

battlefield to attain well-defined war objectives.<sup>1</sup> He also declares strategy an art and focuses more on the employment part of the battle, because the general uses his acumen to defeat the enemy without losing many of his resources.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Deductive reasoning is considered to maintain objectivity, but inductive reasoning is employed to identify and address misconceptions that have developed within the subject under discussion. Likewise, qualitative analyses of the available definitions of strategy are undertaken through the evolution and development of strategic thought.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant literature on the meaning, essence, and context of the strategy was studied to understand the logic behind the numerous experts defining this term over the centuries, yet failing to reach a consensual definition. For this purpose, the writings of the ancient greats, contemporary literature, and other notable books and articles were scanned again to reach a conclusion that could justify this article.

## STRATEGY DEFINED BY WAR EXPERTS AND HISTORIANS

The term 'strategy' originates from the Greek term 'stratagem', meaning 'the art of the generalship.' The strategy optimizes the available resources, adopts the most preferred ways, and achieves the assigned goals. Professionals formulate strategies after calculating the probabilities of events that may be encountered in achieving the goals set by the policy. Strategy springs into action once the policy has set the goals, allocated means, and provided some broad guidelines on the available ways. Strategy must remain subservient to policy goals set forth by the political leadership. The strategy must remain confined to the available means and stay on course to achieve the set goals. It must not creep up on its mission and lose focus, because strategy cannot afford to be flawed or incorrect.

After all, it would have deployed the available means. Strategy failure has a profound impact on the nation's morale.

The Chinese sage Sun Tzu appears to have pioneered the strategic thought process recorded in his *The Art of War* in ancient times. His precepts remain the most studied, reviewed, and quoted in the realm of strategic studies. Interestingly, Sun Tzu's views have not been challenged by his contemporaries or modern philosophers and strategists. According to Sun Tzu, war is severe for the state, and efforts must be made to win without fighting. This author opines that this was Sun Tzu's basic definition of strategy, even if the translations did not use the word "strategy" in *The Art of War*.

Most of the definitions of strategy analysed in this paper relate to the ancient Greek dicta, which state that strategy is the art of the general and his plans, using the means at his disposal, to achieve the ends of policy through military means. Liddle Hart, a British military historian and strategist who studied the two world wars, believed that it's an art of deploying and employing the military means available at a Commander's disposal to accomplish the assigned task."<sup>2</sup>

Antoine-Henri Jomini, a Swiss military officer and a general in French and later Russian service, developed warfighting techniques and tactics as part of his theory and strategy. Jomini insisted on selecting the theatre of war and different combinations to approach from the most favourable direction. He advocated selecting the best strategic line and other manoeuvres to cater to all situations.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is one reason he placed tactics and logistics alongside strategy. Jomini's definition appears more relevant today because he emphasises the significance of logistics. He believed that the movement of the troops would have the most impact.<sup>4</sup> Jomini, very close to Sun Tzu's idea that a Commander must make preparations in his camp, defined Strategy as the art of comprehending all war scenarios on a drawing board to ensure that

<sup>1</sup><https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/clausewitz/works/on-war/book3/ch01.htm> (April 1, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Azar Gat. *A History of Military Thought*. (Oxford: Oxford UP 2001), 395.

<sup>3</sup> Baron de Jomini. *The Art of War*. G.H. Mendell & W.P. Craighill, trans. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co 1862), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 69.

there are no surprises later.<sup>5</sup> He also subscribed to numerous precepts on war and strategy, including those related to most of his troops' resistance to the enemy's centre of gravity (CG). Jomini believed that a victory in war is primarily due to good strategy.

Since strategy was the domain of the generals, several wartime experts defined the term in line with their experience and expertise gained through the knowledge of past wars. For instance, the Prussian Army's renowned strategist Helmuth von Moltke, (Born May 25, 1848, and died on June 18, 1916, at the height of World War I, was of the view that on field employment of the available resources at a Commander's disposal for the accomplishment of the object of war will be of great significance.<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz inspired Moltke, and therefore, referred to strategy as the art of practically adapting to the means to achieve ends through the optimum use of available resources. Moltke also subscribed to the Clausewitzian dicta on the war as a policy option. Moltke viewed war as necessary to achieve policy objectives.<sup>7</sup> Emphasising the necessity of armed conflict contradicts Otto von Bismarck's belief that politics is the art of the possible –the attainable, the art of following the best.<sup>8</sup> Moltke's view on the preparation of violence, if required, was much closer to Sun Tzu's view that war is serious and that a general must think over a hundred times before initiating a war.<sup>9</sup>

According to the French General Andre Beaufre, the strategy was "The art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute."<sup>10</sup> Once again, strategy was declared as an art.

But, for General Beaufre (1902–1975), the "battle was not the only possible means of achieving one's objective; other methods may be more effective."<sup>11</sup> This author was inspired by Beaufre and stated that 'win wars by other means.'<sup>12</sup> However, the primary source of these assertions remains Sun Tzu, who insisted on winning wars without fighting.

Beaufre's significant contribution toward defining strategy was the hybrid employment of ideas of some of his predecessors. On the other hand, Rear Admiral J.C. Wylie introduced the much-needed intellectual framework and working terminologies to understand strategy as a means of control. Wylie, a sea power expert, also viewed strategy as a planned manoeuvre to accomplish the assigned task.<sup>13</sup> Wylie combined the sequential and cumulative strategies to make a greater impact on the intended outcome.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Wylie also referred to strategy as a plan, not an art, science, or idea.

Robert Osgood, a U.S. diplomacy expert who studied World War II, particularly the subject related to the Containment of Communism, viewed strategy as an all-encompassing act that utilised the entire inventory of resources.<sup>15</sup> Though he viewed Americans as more inclined

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>6</sup> M. L. Kavanaugh, What is Strategy, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/what-is-strategy/> November 10, 2016, (accessed April 12, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Otto von Bismarck, Art of the Possible, <https://politicaldictionary.com/words/art-of-the-possible/> (accessed April 2024).

<sup>9</sup> S. B. Griffith, Sun Tzu's Art of War, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Paul O'Neill and Beatrice Heuser, General Andre Beaufre: Two Axes of Deterrence, 10 January 2023, [https://www.rusi.org/podcasts/talking-strategy/episode-11-general-andre-beaufre-two-axes-deterrence#:~:text=General%20Beaufre%20\(1902%2E%20%931975\),methods%20may%20be%20more%20effective](https://www.rusi.org/podcasts/talking-strategy/episode-11-general-andre-beaufre-two-axes-deterrence#:~:text=General%20Beaufre%20(1902%2E%20%931975),methods%20may%20be%20more%20effective). (accessed April 13, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Zia Ul Haque Shamsi, South Asia Needs Hybrid Peace, (New York: Peter Lang, 2022), 7.

<sup>13</sup> JOSEPH WYLIE, MILITARY STRATEGY: A GENERAL THEORY OF POWER CONTROL, APRIL 18, 2014, [HTTPS://WWW.AMAZON.COM/MILITARY-STRATEGY-GENERAL-CONTROL-CLASSICS/DP/1591149843](https://www.amazon.com/Military-Strategy-General-Control-Classics/dp/1591149843) (ACCESSED APRIL 22, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> "The sequential strategy consists of a series of visible, discrete steps, each dependent on the one that preceded it. A cumulative strategy is the less perceptive minute accumulation of little items piling one on top of the other until at some unknown point the mass of accumulated actions may be large enough to reach a critical point."

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Osgood, Limited War Revisited, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, New York: Routledge, 1980.

toward limited wars for coercion at an affordable cost, they suffered a setback in Vietnam, Iraq, and finally, Afghanistan. Osgood's overall plan insisted on utilising all elements of national power to enhance the capacity for armed coercion to support foreign policy objectives.

Back to Clausewitz, who concentrated more on the war and its political objectives, and Moltke, both refer to the object of war. Unfortunately, none of these great thinkers, strategists, theorists, and practitioners are critical of war and fond of peace.

Strategies have not changed in contemporary times. It remains an art and a plan. Sir Lawrence Freedman also subscribes to this approach of gathering power artistically, whereas Gregory D. Foster referred to this power as efficient for achieving objectives.<sup>16</sup>

In his famous work *On Grand Strategy*, John Gaddis defines strategy as the "calculated relationship of means to large ends."<sup>17</sup> However, the generals and admirals maintained that strategy was an art. Field Marshal Earl Haig defines strategy as placing troops in the zone of operations from where it is easy to inflict damage on the adversary.<sup>18</sup> Admiral Eccles also viewed strategy as an all-encompassing plan for executing the accumulated power to accomplish the war objectives.<sup>19</sup>

After a comprehensive review of the definition of strategy by renowned strategists and practitioners, this author turned to different encyclopedias to find a bookish definition. However, the contents were no different. According to *Encyclopedia International*, the strategy is a planned use of a nation's armed strength to secure war objectives. In contrast, as per the *Encyclopedia Americana*, strategy is the "Art & Science of developing and employing the political, economic, psychological, and military forces of a nation, during peace & war to afford the maximum support to national policies."<sup>20</sup>

## DEFINING STRATEGY ON 5WS AND A H

Having reviewed the definition of strategy by renowned historians and strategists, it is necessary to explore the term further using the established appraisal tool of '5Ws and a H'. The 5 Ws are What, When, Where, Who, Why and How. On this scale, only 'What is to be done' deals with policy, whereas all other Ws and Hs deal with strategy. Therefore, the policy must first be defined to set the pace for strategy, because strategy is subservient to policy in terms of ends and means.

## POLICY EXPLAINED

The term 'Policy' is inspired by the French term 'Policies' from the 16th century. The policy defines objectives that align with the purpose of the state. It caters to all possibilities for the defined timeline. It is futuristic and can take natural, circumstantial, global, regional, and domestic shocks.

The policy is a process that forms part of the top-down approach, with leadership providing the vision for ministries to develop policies. The policy allocates resources to achieve the objectives stated in the policy. The policy is a publicly declared statement by the leadership on which an open debate is undertaken. Policy reflects the mindset of leadership and is a reflection of people's aspirations. Policy must give a sense of security to the people. The policy must be progressive and forward-looking. A policy must have the capacity to employ all available means to accomplish the assigned tasks identified by the leadership.

The policy is the 'what' part of the process that leads to the accomplishment of the tasks through the formulation of the strategy. Hence, the policy is predictable because it is made public by the leadership to garner political mileage, whereas the strategy must remain covert for both the adversary and the people who do not need to know it.

Machiavelli emphasises the ruler's ability to ensure freedom and prosperity within their domain; they could go to any length to accumulate power. There is little doubt that his

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, Penguin Press, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> M. L. Kavanaugh, *What is Strategy*, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/what-is-strategy/> November 10, 2016, (accessed April 12, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



assertions about the world being a dangerous place were accurate, and hence, he made the Prince responsible for his people and prepared him for the evolving situations.<sup>21</sup> However, Sun Tzu's precepts on the emperor's authority in defining policy goals and allocating resources served as a directive for the commander, who was then required to achieve the targets with the optimum utilisation of the available means. The two differed in their approach to strategy. Sun Tzu emphasised the importance of winning a war without fighting, whereas Machiavelli was unconcerned with ethical politics.

Morgenthau, another authority on power and politics, also views it as an art, not just a science, requiring wisdom and courage.<sup>22</sup> This author believes that domestic politics often dictates the process of formulating policies based on future possibilities. However, political expediencies aside, people's well-being must form part of every policy and enable them to navigate the complexities that may arise from time to time.

#### WHY IS STRATEGY AN IDEA AND NOT AN ART OR SCIENCE?

Most historians and strategists have referred to the term 'art' in the context of strategy. This definition is inspired by the original Greek definition that says, 'strategy is the art of the general.' However, this author argues that art has an inherent linkage with the idea that triggers the output on the canvas. Moreover, an idea has no limits of imagination, which is what a commander needs when formulating his strategy to achieve victory over a thinking adversary. In this context, the four-letter word IDEA needs to be understood because each letter directly reflects the context of this author's argument. The letter 'I' stands for Innovation and Imagination. An idea must be innovative and imaginative to bring something different, achieving surprise and deceiving the adversary. Both have been lamented as essentials in war since Sun Tzu and the centuries that followed.

The letter 'D' denotes the Doability and Deliverability of the idea after careful analysis of the exercise 'Know your enemy and know yourself.' To determine the feasibility of certain operations, this author has proposed an academic model, C7+Political Will, which is currently under publication.<sup>23</sup> Doability is the most crucial element of any idea because it helps determine the optimal ways to utilise the means to achieve the desired policy ends. The letter 'E' stands for Edifying and Envable. The commander's idea must be educational and indicate his intent and imagination so the staff can plan the desired operations. Finally, the letter 'A' represents the Appealing and Attractive element of the idea. The commander's thought must be appealing to motivate his subordinates to do it wholeheartedly.

To summarise the dissection of the word IDEA, it must be innovative, doable, enviable, and appealing to realise the commander's imagination for achieving the end objective within the available means. With this explanation of the word idea, this author opines that strategy is a commander's idea that can outclass the total sum of the adversary's ideas. The staff will develop plans to realise the commander's idea of defeating the adversary in each battle, thereby achieving the end of the policy.

Once the policy has been formalised by the leadership and disseminated at the execution level, formulating a suitable strategy begins. Now, the political leadership does not interfere with the process after it has dispensed the resources and the task. This is what Sun Tzu also prophesied. The Commander entrusted with formulating the strategy is expected to account for all possible situations and must not be taken by surprise. The military establishments formulate strategies related to national security and defence matters. However, all stakeholders must own these strategies.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and approaches*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64.

<sup>22</sup> See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Vs Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

<sup>23</sup> This author's article "Introducing the Framework Model for the Evaluation of Deterrent Value of States" *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, Vol. 7(2), 2024, 1-14.

Interestingly, the study's argument suggests that problems arise when these strategies fail to align with policies set by the political masters. Therefore, all stakeholders must be on the same page to ensure that there are no gaps in understanding, planning, and execution of the political objectives through the strategies formulated by the professionals. Hence, the organisational gaps must not allow the enemy to exploit this advantage, particularly when the nuclear buttons are under the military's command. Therefore, nothing should be left to chance, and all stakeholders must ensure they are aligned on security issues.

### IDEATIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGY AND DETERRENCE

This author posits that there is a conceptual relationship between strategy and deterrence. While the plan is discussed in detail in the paper, deterrence must also be defined to support this ideational relationship.

### DETERRENCE DEFINED

The concept of deterrence is as old as the history of wars and conflicts. Likewise, the idea of punishment for crime and rewards for good deeds has been enshrined in the Holy Books, and Lawrence Freedman has referred to this concept in his book, *Deterrence*. Therefore, neither the idea nor its application is new in the international system, which is deeply rooted in an anarchic system of power and security. Still, the concept remains at the centre of academic debates and draws a wide range of interest among researchers. However, like security, deterrence remains a contested subject, and there is no universal definition or execution technique that any state has adopted since time immemorial. States employ the concept of deterrence in various ways after determining the deterrent value of their actions and those of their

opponents. Relatively stronger nations rely on the material strengths of their military to deter the adversary, whereas smaller states rely on the support of allies to achieve similar objectives. However, the concept of deterrence as part of military strategy was hijacked by nuclear strategists of the time, following the advent of nuclear technology in 1945.

Bernard Brodie emphasises the fear of retaliation and suggests that from now on, the military would aim to avert war instead of to win it.<sup>24</sup> Initially, the theorists stressed dissuading the aggressors of the gravity of retaliation and the 'can not will do' effect.<sup>25</sup> However, the opponents' understanding of deterrence has evolved. They understand that it is not a given and must be earned for its efficacy. Moreover, the concept is universal, and they are more rational than their opponents.

According to Henry Kissinger,

Deterrence is the attempt to keep an opponent from adopting a particular course of action by posing risks that seem disproportionate to any gains to be achieved. The higher the stakes, the more absolute must be the threat of destruction which faces him...However, the reverse is also true; the smaller the objective, the less the sanction should be.<sup>26</sup>

Deterrence involves convincing adversaries that undesired actions will be responded to in a manner that results in damages that may outweigh any likely benefits. The proliferation optimists, led by Kenneth Waltz, believe that the spread of nuclear weapons would deter states from going to war against other states.<sup>27</sup>

### APPLICATION OF STRATEGY ON ENDS-WAYS-MEANS FRAMEWORK

Within the framework of Ends-Ways-Means for strategy, the Commander knows two of the three Ends and Means because the political leadership defines these two. Ends would define the core

<sup>24</sup>Bernard Brodie, "The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and the World Order," Institute of International Studies, Yale University, 1946. Accessed November 15, 2013.

url:

<http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2013/June%202013/0613keeper.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup>Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review*, 84, no.3 (September 1990): 732-745.

<sup>35</sup> Henry A Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 96.

<sup>25</sup> David J. Karl, "Proliferation Optimism and Pessimism Revisited," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34/4 (August 2011): 619-641.

objectives the state aspires to achieve, and the means denote the total national resources placed at the commander's disposal to accomplish a particular task.

Now, the commander must find ways to achieve the defined ends using the available means. Most importantly, the commander needs to understand the value of the means made available to them for specified tasks and find the best ways to deploy them in a manner that is most beneficial for achieving the end goal. However, at this stage, if the commander believes that the resources are insufficient to accomplish the assigned task, they can return to the political leadership with a request for additional resources or a revision of the end objectives.

Once a commander accepts the task and the resources, they now need to generate ideas that can help them find the best ways to approach an uncertain and complex situation, as they are faced with a thinking enemy. It is necessary to reiterate that strategy is not a plan, but a plan is part of the strategy. Therefore, a commander will only conceive an idea, which will then be converted into plans utilising the best means to achieve the desired ends. For instance, Sun Tzu introduced the concept of winning a war without fighting, and then it was up to his staff to devise plans to execute this idea. Likewise, Machiavelli thought that the state's interests must be protected at all costs, and plans had to be prepared accordingly. However, it is the commander's responsibility to convey that he has thought through all possible situations and considered the nature of the task and the available means.

Perhaps, it is necessary to reiterate that the policy is predictable because it is a public document and carries the essential guidelines for allocating and utilising the means toward accomplishing the defined ends. However, the strategy must be unpredictable and unknown to those who do not need to know it. It must possess certain tangible features, which are required by the staff preparing the draft strategy for the Commander's approval, as per his idea. There

will be a few intangibles that require greater attention as the staff prepares the draft strategy.

## CONCLUSION

Suppose the policy is 'what to do' and the strategy is 'how to do'. In that case, it is incumbent upon both the policymakers and the strategy formulator to be aware of the environment in which that policy will be implemented and the strategy will be executed. Sun Tzu comes to mind again: 'Know your enemy and know yourself ...'

While the term strategy is now used more in business and political spheres, "it remains rooted, however, in war, and it is in the field of armed conflict that strategy assumes its most complex forms."<sup>28</sup>

This author proposes that strategy must not be considered only as art or science. But an idea that employs all available means in a hybrid manner to outmanoeuvre the adversary's plans to achieve victory without significant loss of one's own lives and living. The strategy calls for ideas on how to utilise available means to achieve the Ends. Proposing a strategy as an idea is by no means to suggest that the definitions by experts, insisting on the intersection of art and science, are being relegated; instead, a new approach is proposed for broader discussion and analysis before it finds its rightful place in the strategic literature. The purpose is to highlight the significance of this term, which has been misused by people unfamiliar with it.

There is little doubt that the term strategy deserves its rightful place in the strategic literature. Strategy, in its true sense, means making the best use of available resources to accomplish policy objectives easily.

<sup>28</sup> Strategy, Britannica,  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/strategy-military> (accessed April 1, 2024).