



B-52G Stratofortress aircraft take off in formation as part of operational readiness inspection by Strategic Air Command Inspector General team, December 1, 1986 (DOD/Phil Schmitt)

Respecting Strategic Agency

On the Categorization of War in Strategy

By Lukas Milevski

Many—perhaps most—strategists prefer to think about past, present, and future war in terms of categories. Whether in retrospect, in contemporary experience, or in anticipation, they define war by its generalized character. These strategists arguably include Carl von Clausewitz himself, who suggested that “every age had its own kind of war, its own lim-

iting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions. Each period, therefore, would have held to its own theory of war.”¹ Due to this tendency of thinking in categories, strategic studies is often washed by recurring tides of jargon. The current fad in terminology is *gray zone wars*. Often, these faddish terms actually serve to label and relabel the same observed phenomenon.

Simply put, categories are ways of dividing up any particular set of phenomena into distinguishable groups based on some consistent commonality of attributes. There are many categories of

war and warfare: conventional or regular, unconventional or irregular, Martin van Creveld’s trinitarian and non-trinitarian, symmetric, asymmetric, insurgency, hybrid, gray zone, Mary Kaldor’s new wars, and so forth. Some categories naturally fit into dichotomies, such as conventional versus unconventional and symmetric versus asymmetric. Others do not, such as hybrid warfare or gray zone wars, which merely allow observers to distinguish between like and unlike.

Categories of war such as these are cognitive shortcuts for describing in relatively simple and bite-sized ways the

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complex interactions between wartime adversaries. This practice has repeatedly proved to be a double-edged sword. The reduction of complexity in description often results in the reduction of applicability of analysis, as the complexity behind simplified categories is lost and they consequently become less fit for purpose. According to Antulio Echevarria:

While the original aim of such labeling or relabeling may have been to draw the attention of busy policymakers to emerging security issues, it has evolved into something of a culture of replication in which the labels are repeated more out of habit than reflection. As a result, we have an increase in claims about what contemporary wars are (or are not), but little in the way of strategic analysis to support those claims.²

Due to its persistence, the pursuit of categorization may have become an indelible part of American strategic culture. Echevarria states that “in all, the penchant for theorizing about war and warfare is relatively consistent in American military history. The number of sound theories may, however, be a minority compared to those which are not.”³ This stems at least to the birth of modern strategic studies as an academic and practical discipline in the wake of the use of atomic weapons by the United States against Japan. With this change in strategic affairs, there were suddenly clearly two types of wars: nuclear and nonnuclear. The distinctions have only grown finer, although arguably the numerical climax of categorization did not occur, as one might think, in recent years, with the parade of asymmetry, new, or non-trinitarian wars, but rather in 1965. This was when Herman Kahn posited his notion of the ladder of escalation, a concept of progress in strategic interaction involving 44 rungs in 7 broad categories ranging from “subcrisis maneuvering” all the way to “civilian central wars.”⁴ Even the categories were being categorized.

Unfortunately, reliance on categories may take on a life of its own, gaining inertia from habit and lack of reflection. Some have suggested that due to the potential dangers and weaknesses,

thinking in categories of war is a flawed exercise. All categories must necessarily derive from the more fluid actual practice and interaction of adversarial strategies; therefore, it is usually more rewarding to focus on the strategies themselves and their potential mutual interactions.⁵ As the Soviet strategic theorist Aleksandr Svechin similarly argued:

[A] particular strategic policy must be devised for every war, each war is a special case, which requires its own particular logic rather than any kind of stereotype or pattern, no matter how splendid it might be. . . . A narrow doctrine would probably confuse us more than guide us. And we must not forget that only maneuvers are one-sided, while wars are always two-sided. We must be able to get a grasp of war as it is perceived by the opposing side and clarify the other side's desires and goals.⁶

Emphasizing the uniqueness of every war may serve in commentary, and it may be reasonably applicable in the immediate context of war, where the feedback derived from strategic performance is relatively direct. However, in peacetime a focus on specific strategies and their mutual adversarial interaction is far more difficult to achieve. This article considers the utility and pitfalls of categories of war in the differing contexts of war and peace.

On Categorization in Peace and War

Categories are usually a product of peace that are typically, but not always, formed in the absence of a concrete enemy. The lack of such an enemy introduces various types of uncertainty into defense planning, including threat and operational unknowns. The former “reflects a lack of necessary knowledge about both the goals and capabilities of potential adversaries, and about the time when threats will arise,” whereas the latter “describes a lack of necessary knowledge about the type of conflict to prepare for.”⁷ If strategists cannot gain the necessary knowledge about the enemy's goals and capabilities and how he may use the latter to achieve the former—if strategists do not even know

who the future enemy may be—they may be inclined to construct a threat for policy, political, and planning purposes. In the absence of a politically determined adversary during the interwar period, for instance, the U.S. military planned for war against a range of foes from Cuba and Mexico to Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

The current proliferation of categories of war inundating strategic studies stems from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet threat. During the Cold War itself, the one great threat was identified early on and remained central to all considerations of strategy for 40 years. It was obvious what kind of war might break out; therefore, which category seemed best to describe the anticipated war was not important compared to the particular tactics and strategies required to actually conduct it in extremis. Although some analysts sought to apply categories to the anticipated central war between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, such as Henry Kissinger did when he tried to imagine waging a limited nuclear war in Europe, these categories rarely survived long.

Beyond the European theater, alternative categories of war were rarely popular and often required politically powerful advocates even to be considered. The U.S. Air Force preferred focusing on its Strategic Air Command and its mission of massive nuclear attack against the Soviet Union, to the detriment of its performance in other missions in the lesser conflicts that actually characterized much of the Cold War. Although discussion of limited war became widespread among academic strategists after the Korean War, the Army only considered counterinsurgency seriously under presidential pressure, particularly after President John F. Kennedy endorsed such a focus. This latter emphasis did not long endure. The singular traumatic instance of the Vietnam War sufficed subsequently to redirect much of the U.S. military back to its comfort zone in central Europe and to engender the doctrine espoused by Caspar Weinberger (and later by Weinberger and Colin



Sailor briefs group of distinguished international strategists about various watch stations on navigation bridge aboard Navy's forward-deployed aircraft carrier *USS George Washington*, Yokosuka, Japan, February 5, 2013 (U.S. Navy/Justin E. Yarborough)

Powell), which explicitly sought to limit U.S. military involvement in messy limited wars. With the end of the Cold War, the condition of certainty, presented by the need to fend off the Soviet threat in Europe, crumbled.

Habits of strategic thinking had to shift to accommodate the new uncertainty. It was more difficult to focus on strategies because uncertainty about the potential threat or its operational conditions precluded knowledge of the necessary details to anticipate potential strategic interaction, given its contingent and reciprocal nature. The practice of strategy in war depends on vital details of and in the theater of operations, including terrain and weather; the enemy's forces, plans, and objectives; and myriad other factors that cannot be precisely anticipated in a world bereft of concrete foes. Strategists needed these details to perform effectively but no longer had

steady access to them, simply due to new geopolitical circumstances.

Categories of war therefore became popular among strategic analysts and academics. Categories act as cognitive guides or standard templates to mimic and replace as many of the missing details as possible to minimize the uncertainty with which planning must cope. Categories both emphasize and generalize tactical and operational details, which are not only among the most relevant details for strategic analysts but are also the least certain prior to war itself. After all, strategy is carried out with, and as, tactics—if the tactics do not work, then the strategy itself may fail as a consequence.

Strategists tend to ground these tactical and operational categories in history to identify precedents and to establish potential causal relationships between tactical and operational categories and consequential strategic and political

effects. Tactics as such are not a necessarily inappropriate aspect to consider, given their salience to the successful future practice of strategy. Yet to categorize on the basis of tactics is to generalize about potential operating environments, tactical and operational challenges, and some chains of tactical and strategic cause and effect—even if many political and some strategic effects are truly beyond anticipation. The prominence of these considerations is appropriate because they constitute, ultimately, strategy itself.

Nevertheless, this approach of generalizing about tactics from historically diverse wars does have its dangers. As M.L.R. Smith has argued, “All wars are unique to their time and place. They all have distinctive origins and directions. Because they are multifarious they defy categorization and cannot be reduced and subsumed under general labels like guerrilla war or low intensity conflict.”⁸



MV-22B Osprey assigned to Ridge Runners of Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 163 operates in Indo-Asia-Pacific region to enhance amphibious capability with regional partners and serves as ready-response force for any type of contingency, South China Sea, April 4, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Devin M. Langer)

An emphasis on tactical categories may obscure political variability of both the would-be insurgent and the counterinsurgent. Politics and resultant policies are contingent upon cultural, economic, and other types of beliefs of the day and on the specific responsible decisionmakers. For example, the relatively successful ancient Roman or modern Russian ways of counterinsurgency do not appeal to the liberal West, despite their arguably greater success when compared to the West's unenviable record of the past few decades. The liberal West is politically unwilling to generate strategic and political effect out of the counterinsurgent tactics prevalent at other times or in other places, even if the cost of this reluctance may be policy failure, as has frequently been the case. Cultural and political distance, stemming from physical geography as from changes wrought over time, implies variations in cause and effect, the very subject in whose anticipation strategists employ categories.

Strategy is often nonlinear. The independence, intelligence, and activity of the enemy mean that tactical cause does not necessarily lead to the desired strategic or political effect. Defeat causes

some belligerents to buckle and others to buckle down. Victory may induce either hubris or caution. One may learn the wrong lessons about strategy in war from battle and so foreclose upon a successful strategy or persist with a failing strategy. According to Colin Gray, "The trouble is that there is a radical difference in nature, in kind, between violence and political consequence . . . [and] this dilemma of currency conversion is central to the difficulty of strategy."⁹ When war is categorized, this adversarial interaction with nonlinear cause and effect, which is always historically unique, is generalized among multiple cases such that the non-linearity is lost.

Another vital issue concerning categories is that of *anticipation*. Anticipation is the reverse aspect of the question of historical uniqueness. Western countries have often played catch-up, identifying new categories only after they apparently emerge in reality and have already done damage to Western interests. This question of catch-up most recently surfaced in March 2014, when suddenly hybrid warfare became popular as a category to describe Russian strategy in Crimea and

the Donbas. Strategists and politicians in the West were taken by surprise by both the content of Russian policy and the form of its strategy, and a new—or renewed—category was immediately codified. Usually labeled hybrid warfare in the West, it is sometimes also called full-spectrum conflict or new generation warfare. Regardless of the label, a new category appeared for the blindsided politicians and strategists to explain what Russia was doing and how it was doing it.

Anticipation is hard, as one is trying to predict a historically unique event. Anticipation is especially difficult once one is forced to leave the confines of one's own cultural context. According to Ken Booth, "Strategists as a body are remarkably incurious about the character of their enemies and allies. Ethnocentrism is one way in which individuals and groups consciously and subconsciously evade reality."¹⁰ A litany of Western cultural and political blunders indicates the lack of interest in the politics, policies, and perspectives of potential adversaries, and consequent lack of insight about how they might seek—through the use of force if necessary—to achieve their

political goals, especially if these goals are counter to the West's own aggregate interests.

Ethnomorphism further hampers the assessment of others' policies and potential strategies. *Ethnomorphism* "is the conceptualization of the characteristics of another group in terms of one's own. . . . the mistake of assuming that the development of [one's] own particular group was a prototype for the development of all groups."¹¹ The West has difficulty accepting that the rest of the world is not necessarily interested in its model of political development or its political cultures, ideas, and ideologies. Therefore, it has difficulty believing that others would want to change the status quo in the world to the detriment of the West and fails to anticipate the strategies potential adversaries employ to change the status quo through force; Russia's adventure in Crimea came as a surprise, and the idea that Russia may still seek to challenge NATO is often met with skepticism because ethnomorphism makes it hard to imagine what Russia would gain from such a policy. Because the strategic imagination or empathy required to anticipate others' strategies or the policies those strategies serve is lacking, a new strategy comes as a surprise, is then immediately codified as a new category of war, and so continues the ossification of strategic analysis.

The flaws of categories in peace become the flaws of categories in war. Yet categorization also has dangers particular to war. Because categories are cognitive shortcuts, they can have an easily understood sound-bite quality that begins to carry weight in domestic politics. Thus, the possibility that a war may fall under a particular category and not another becomes politically charged and reflects on the higher political and strategic direction of the war—specifically because categories are ultimately shorthand descriptions of adversarial strategic interactions. Among the most recent major examples of the political weight of categories occurred in 2003–2005 when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld forbade the term *insurgency* to describe ongoing events in Iraq. If the violence that wracked Iraq had

been characterized as an insurgency, it would have invalidated all the neoconservative political assumptions and rhetoric about postwar Iraq that underpinned the U.S. invasion in 2003. In such circumstances, strategy is beholden to a political debate about labels and is prevented from serving the desired policy. Use of a label becomes of greater concern than pursuit of success in the war.

In Iraq, the political refusal to accept a category sent strategy awry and negatively impacted U.S. strategic performance for years because it forbade candid appreciation of the emerging threat. Not only was the category "insurgency" more apt than whatever description Rumsfeld preferred at the time, but also the refusal to consider insurgency prevented the United States from objectively analyzing actual relevant details in theater. Categories in war thus inhibit strategy-making because their use may prevent accurate assessment of engagements in theater and because their misuse or disuse can similarly prevent accurate evaluations. In either case, strategy suffers because strategists are forbidden from either properly examining the conflict or providing apt direction to defeat the enemy.

Categories, as cognitive shortcuts, may also obscure important tactical and strategic details during war because those details do not fit the favored category. This extends also to the retrospective analysis of war. Vietnam is an excellent case in point, the historiography of which remains divisive to this day. The primary historiographic schism relates to the particular character of the war. One side believes it to have been primarily an insurgency, with particular unflattering conclusions about U.S. tactical and strategic conduct as Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, simply did not understand the war it faced. The other side believes it to have been primarily a conventional war against another country, with particular unflattering conclusions about U.S. political leadership and the domestic political scene, as the home front and politicians did not recognize the character of the war and prevented the military from winning the war as it should have done.

Yet the United States did not confront a particular category of war in Vietnam, but rather a fluid and effective North Vietnamese and Vietcong strategy, which sought relative advantage through either guerrilla or overt, large-scale tactics as necessary. Through a generally superior strategy, the North Vietnamese held greater and more effective control over the war relative to the United States and its South Vietnamese ally. Superior North Vietnamese strategy has led to the appearance of the Vietnam War having been merely presented to U.S. decisionmakers as a particular category, rather than as an interaction in which the United States was an independent and occasionally effective strategic actor.

In considering categories of war, strategists too often forget to respect strategic agency—not only that of the enemy, but their own as well. On the former, just because one categorizes the enemy or the war in a particular way does not oblige the enemy to act or react in accordance with the categorical rules one sets out. On the latter, the West often forgets that it too influences the character of any war in which it participates. The character of any particular war is controlled more by the belligerent with a good (enough) strategy and less by the one with a strategy that is not working. As one commentator observed in the wake of World War II, albeit employing the term *grand strategy* rather than *character of war*:

in all the great wars of modern times the aggressor dictated grand strategy in the pursuit of political objectives as long as he had liberty of decision and action. Once he lost liberty of decision and action the aggressor was thrown back on the defensive, and his ability to determine grand strategy passed to adversaries. From that time on the original aggressor could only counter the strategy of opponents who frequently were satisfied to merely thwart his political designs.¹²

Is Categorization a Lost Cause?

Categorization is unavoidable; it is one of the prime purposes of theory.¹³ War itself is a category concerning a certain section of human interactions, just

as peace is a category encompassing another section of human interaction. War exists as a category because, as Michael Howard has rightly noted, “after all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity.”¹⁴ Among all wars there is sufficient mutual commonality for war to be a meaningful category. We must think in categories; otherwise, we cannot distinguish among various phenomena. Where does that leave the utility of categories regarding the two major challenges mentioned—of deriving conceptual generality from historical specificity and of anticipating future historical specificities through the application of conceptual generalities?

First, we must understand what it is that we should actually be categorizing. Should we categorize war and warfare, or should we categorize strategy and strategies? To categorize the former is to compress the interaction of two opposing sets of strategic intent, actions, and performances into a single generalized label. Conventional war, for instance, implies that both sides are operating with regular armies on large operations and so forth. Unconventional war implies that one side—and probably not our side—is acting in a strategically unconventional manner. Yet there is always an implicit sense of special pleading in these categories. First, it “assumes there is only one truth and model for warfare, and that we alone have it.”¹⁵ Second, there is also a sense of unfair play. As British general Rupert Smith wrote of asymmetric warfare, “[I]labelling wars as asymmetric is to me something of a euphemism to avoid acknowledging that my opponent is not playing to my strengths and I am not winning.”¹⁶ Categorizing war itself is heir to all the challenges already mentioned.

To categorize strategy and strategies, however, is to seek to understand an individual belligerent’s strategic intent. Many of these categories have been familiar terms for a long time—for example, annihilation, exhaustion, and attrition. In terms of nuclear strategy, one might identify countervalue, counterforce, and countervailing, among others. Behind

each of these words is a set of assumptions about the value of military force applied in the appropriate manner combined with a theory of victory, a theory of why this particular set of means and measures would be sufficient to break the strategic and political will of the enemy. It is more productive because it gets to the core perceptions of cause and effect with which strategists enter into conflict. As Antulio Echevarria writes of gray zone wars, “One way to approach the problem of gray-zone wars is to reduce the hostile actions undertaken in Ukraine and the South China Sea to their core dynamic—which is a combination of coercion and deterrence.”¹⁷ That is, one should reduce the category of gray zone war to the strategies chosen by the primary aggressive actors, Russia in Ukraine and China in the South China Sea.

To think of strategy and strategies rather than thinking in terms of the whole interaction of competing strategies alleviates the challenges to categorizing wars at the cost of being more difficult. Rather than requiring a sufficient level of historical continuity in patterns of historically unique cases of interactive cause and effect (wars), it would only require continuity in patterns of perceived and anticipated cause and effect among individual actors (strategies). Furthermore, as long as we are specifically thinking about other strategic actors, due to this deeper level of study and understanding, we stand a better chance of anticipating their future strategies.

If strategists need to boil down categories of war to the actual strategies in action to understand how the enemy is attempting to achieve effect anyway, they should simply skip the categories of war to think just about strategy. To think about strategy is to think about strategic agency—our own, and that of our enemy. To think about war is to think about how these two independent sets of strategic agency interact in an adversarial manner as each side seeks to achieve its political goals and deny its enemy strategic fulfillment. The former enables a historically unique reaction to a similarly unique adversary’s strategy, whereas the latter already posits a conceptual straitjacket

about mutually adversarial interactions. One must first think about strategy and possible mutually interacting strategies before one may think productively about the interactivity of war. JFQ

Notes

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 593.

² Antulio J. Echevarria II, “How Should We Think about ‘Gray-Zone’ Wars?” *Infinity Journal* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2015), 16.

³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, “American Strategic Culture: Problems and Prospects,” in *The Changing Character of War*, ed. Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 439.

⁴ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 40.

⁵ Lukas Milevski, “The Nature of Strategy Versus the Character of War,” *Comparative Strategy* 35, no. 5 (December 2016), 438–446.

⁶ Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis: East View Information Services, 1991), 62.

⁷ Emily O. Goldman, “Thinking About Strategy Absent the Enemy,” *Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (1994), 42–43.

⁸ M.L.R. Smith, “Guerrillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003), 37.

⁹ Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 136.

¹⁰ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 17.

¹¹ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 224–226.

¹² Paul M. Robinett, “Grand Strategy and the American People,” *Military Affairs* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1952), 30.

¹³ Harold R. Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (December 2011), 855.

¹⁴ Michael Howard, “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (March 1981), 13.

¹⁵ Stephen J. Blank, *Rethinking Asymmetric Threats* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 15–16.

¹⁶ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 4.

¹⁷ Echevarria, “How Should We Think about ‘Gray-Zone’ Wars?” 17.