

The Limits of Victory

Evaluating the Employment of Military Power

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On November 28, 1984, then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger appeared before the National Press Club in Washington, DC, to deliver a speech titled “The Uses of Military Power.” The previous year had brought mixed results in the deployment of U.S. combat troops overseas. An invasion of the small West Indies country of Grenada wrested regime control from the one-party socialist People’s Revolutionary Government in favor of a relatively stable democracy. In Lebanon, however, the bombing of a Marine Corps barracks complex in Beirut killed 305 troops and civilians, including 241 Americans, and led to the withdrawal of the multinational peacekeeping force months later. Perhaps most central to Secretary Weinberger’s speech was the Vietnam War, an event that two decades later still struck deep into the institutional fabric of the U.S. military.

The Secretary argued that combat forces should be deployed resolutely with “the sole object of winning” in cases where vital national interests are at stake.¹ Moreover, the use of force must meet six criteria: vital national interests, wholehearted commitment, clearly defined political and military objectives, congruent ends and means, domestic support, and last resort. Seven years later, many viewed the U.S. triumph in the Gulf War as a vindication of this doctrine. Today, this way of thinking is known as the Powell Doctrine, in reference to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush gleefully declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”²

The Weinberger Doctrine continues to figure prominently in considerations of strategy today.³ Polls indicate that most Americans have soured on what politicians and pundits on both sides of the political spectrum derisively term *forever wars*.⁴ Scarred from the mixed results of the post-9/11 wars, many Americans would prefer a ticker tape standard: unless troops can return as victors in a welcome home parade, the war should not be fought. This is not a new articulation of strategy but, rather, sustains a storied tradition dating back centuries—namely, effective strategy is that which promotes clear desired endstates and then pursues these goals through decisive engagement. This tradition draws its roots from the military revolution of the Napoleonic era, and it remains a valuable foundation for strategic thought. However, the failure to recognize

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the limits of this doctrine persists and has led to confusion and frustration by citizens and policy-makers alike.

Americans are inheritors of this distinctly Western strategic culture marked by both an optimism in the ability to foresee endstates and an emphasis on the binary distinction between victory and defeat. This view perpetuates a false dichotomy between clear goals that yield victory, on the one hand, and muddled pursuits that are inconclusive or end in defeat, on the other. Instead, decision-makers should conceive of the use of national power in terms of advancing interests at acceptable costs. We call this the *interest-cost approach*. It is distinct from the victory-defeat approach whereby successful strategy identifies political endstates and then achieves these goals via decisive engagement. The victory-defeat approach makes two errors in its underlying assumptions. First, the statesman is never endowed with sufficient information to determine endstates with full clarity. Second, decisive engagement is not always an option, and even if it is achieved, success is not the painful-but-final victory its proponents believe it to be. Simply put, there is no decisive engagement that can permanently secure interests. Ticker tape parades may make great theater, but they do not offer the marked distinction of the right wars to be fought. What makes strategy effective is not whether decisive victory can be achieved (although this might be a contributing factor), but rather *whether the interests of the state have been advanced at tolerable costs*. This interest-cost approach provides the flexibility and humility that the single governing law of international relations—avoiding global anarchy—demands.

This article contains four sections. The first section explains the foundations of the victory-defeat model in the Napoleonic strategic tradition, focusing on the historical period and the two most prominent writers of the era: Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini. The purpose is to show how deeply

enmeshed the victory-defeat approach is in Western thought. The second part examines the history and writing of the doctrinal canon to demonstrate the limits of this view and why the interest-cost model offers a more workable paradigm. A more complete survey of the Napoleonic period reveals that Clausewitz and Jomini suffered from a selective historical memory that led them to privilege decisive engagement in ways that continue to be misleading for strategists today. In the third part, we sharpen the claim that the victory-defeat model is a culturally specific phenomenon by contrasting it with the Chinese strategic tradition. The last part closes by examining some implications of our argument.

Decisive Engagement as the Truth of Strategy

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) combined the full force of two seismic events—the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution—to mark a true military revolution. Gone was the military strategy of the Old Regime whereby armies were the precious commodity of a dynastic ruler to be used sparingly and toward limited ends. In its place arose a concept of total war. The French Revolution fundamentally changed the concept of citizenship from a bond forged by the happenstance of birth under the same ruler to one predicated on ethno-linguistic ties. To further this new nationalism, revolutionaries in France declared that the national interest “required war, for the nation must will its dignity, its majesty, its security, and its credit, and can only recognize them at sword point.”²⁵ In 1793, France declared mass conscription (*levée en masse*), thereby militarizing the entire French nation for war.

The brilliance of Napoleon Bonaparte lay in exploiting the unique social and political developments of his era. By the time he was crowned emperor in 1804, his military strategy and foreign policy were largely one and the same. He sought maximum diplomatic leverage and, consequently,



Departure of the Conscripts in 1807 by Louis-Léopold Boilly, ca. 1808 (Musée Carnavalet)

his military aims were to defeat the major armies of Europe. At Austerlitz in 1805, Jena in 1806, Friedland in 1807, and Wagram in 1809, Napoleon achieved decisive victory through great battles that were punctuated by offensive action, local superiority at a decisive point, and exploitation via pursuit. He pursued this strategy to the end. At Borodino (1812), he finally got the set-piece battle with the Russians he craved, but he could not win it conclusively. After losing at Leipzig (1813) and again at Waterloo (1815), the tactics and strategy that he lent his name to left him to die in exile on Saint Helena.

Clausewitz's *On War* attempts to lay out principles that transcend a particular time or place and is largely successful in doing so. Nonetheless, Clausewitz, who was present at Borodino, naturally drew on the fresh memories of the Napoleonic era to write his classic work. In words that could have come from the French emperor himself, Clausewitz asserts, "Of all the possible aims in war,

the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears as the highest."⁶ He ranks the top three ways to achieve victory as destroying the enemy army, seizing the enemy capital, and attacking the enemy's strongest ally.⁷ Likening war to "nothing but a duel on a larger scale," Clausewitz conceives of a "pure concept of war" whereby "the fighting forces must be destroyed."⁸ Clausewitz privileges "the engagement" above all else. He writes that the "whole of military activity must therefore relate directly or indirectly to the engagement. . . it follows that the destruction of the enemy's forces is always the means by which the purpose of the engagement is achieved."⁹ *On War* argues that for all the various ways to advance political interests, nothing can be as decisive as destroying the enemy army via a major battle.

On this matter Jomini offers striking continuity. Jomini, a French-Swiss officer who served in both the French and Russian armies during the Napoleonic Wars, sought to describe warfare by

“invariable scientific principles.”¹⁰ The theme of these principles was a single prescription for victory: “offensive action to mass forces against weaker enemy forces at some decisive point.”¹¹ If such a maxim is obvious today, it is because of the enduring legacy of Jomini himself. The proposition was foreign to strategists of the Old Regime. Today, decisive engagement is, in the words of military scholar John Shy, “so deeply imbedded in Western consciousness that many adherents refuse to accept it as a ‘mode’ of thinking at all but insist that—correctly understood—Jomini and latter-day Jominians simply offer the Truth about war, or at least about strategy.”¹²

The importance of decisive engagement is further evidenced by an aversion to irregular warfare. In fact, it is a testament to the legacy of Clausewitz and Jomini that intrastate war is today conceived as “irregular” despite such conflicts representing the preponderance of wars in the post-Westphalian era. Clausewitz buries his discussion of small wars in chapter 26 of book 6, and only then to remark that such conflicts were recent phenomena that had been insufficiently researched. He is largely dismissive of such endeavors, holding that “it can be argued that the resources expended in an insurrection might be put to better use in other kinds of warfare.”¹³ Jomini is only slightly more receptive, noting that the Peninsular War (1808–1814) is ripe for study to learn of the challenges inherent in irregular war. However, he too concludes dismissively that:

As a soldier, preferring loyal and chivalrous warfare to organized assassination, if it be necessary to make a choice, I acknowledge that my prejudices are in favor of the good old times when the French and English Guards courteously invited each other to fire first—as at Fontenoy—preferring them to the frightful epoch when priests, women, and children throughout Spain plotted the murder of isolated soldiers.¹⁴

Clausewitz and Jomini join in another key respect: the primacy of strategic clarity. Since war, as Clausewitz famously observed, is a continuation of policy, the statesman must understand the desired political endstate. Clausewitz writes that the “first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”¹⁵ Jomini offers a similar task for the strategist: “The first care of its commander should be to agree with the head of the state upon the character of the war.”¹⁶

Taken together, the strategy comes into clear focus: Determine the policy ends, seek decisive engagement, and defeat the enemy army either in whole or in part. Once complete, the “purpose of the war has been achieved and its business is at an end.”¹⁷ This strategic design sounds familiar to those steeped in the Western tradition—yet even its chief architect had his doubts. Clausewitz considered only chapter one of book one complete and included a prefatory note to *On War* explaining the need for extensive revisions. Namely, he wanted to distinguish between Napoleonic total war and limited war. In the former, the goal was to destroy the enemy to secure ideal terms, while the latter sought to occupy peripheral territory to be used as diplomatic bargaining chips. The note reflects Clausewitz’s concern that he would be read to favor only wars that yield sweeping military victories, a position at odds with his overarching thesis that war serves policy. Instead, the military endeavor remained contingent on the policy objectives. The statesman must identify the desired political endstate and apply means congruent to those ends.

Recognizing the insatiable nature of state interests, Clausewitz the realist acknowledged that wars did not mark strategic ends but rather produced a new international reality in which political

actors coped. No doubt reflecting on Napoleon's demise, he writes, "Even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date."¹⁸ Clausewitz rightly observes that for all the value of decisive engagement, it is not a panacea. However, he does not sufficiently explore the implications of this critical point. His is an error of emphasis. He did not have to reach far back in history for correction. To fully appreciate the limits of decisive engagement, we must broaden the examination of Napoleon's rise and fall.

The Napoleonic Wars and the Limits of Victory

No statesman pushed the bounds of decisive engagement more than Napoleon, yet few exposed the limits of the strategy to the same degree. For all the stunning victories that allowed France to periodically seize hegemonic control of the European continent, France never secured a lasting victory. Wars on the periphery never resulted in the culminating conventional battle Napoleon desired, and the set piece conflicts he did secure at Leipzig and Waterloo proved his undoing. The lesson of the Napoleonic era is the exception that proved the rule: Decisive engagement cannot deliver permanent victories but, like all strategy, can merely advance interests at corresponding costs.

A clear starting point for this discussion is in the western region of Vendée where, enraged by the militarization of French society by elites in the far-off capital, an anti-government insurgency ultimately seized the town of Saumur in June 1793. This was no small far-off war. Napoleon himself acknowledged that with most of his forces in the east, Vendéans could have reached Paris and the "white flag [of the Catholic and Royal Army] would have flown over the towers of Notre Dame before it

was possible for the armies on the Rhine to come to the aid of the government."¹⁹ A brutal counterinsurgency campaign marked by indiscriminate killing suppressed the rebellion. Nonetheless, the Vendéans never surrendered their political aims. The Vendean insurgency rose again after Napoleon's return from exile, and 30,000 troops that would have otherwise supplemented France's outnumbered forces at Waterloo were instead sent west.

His struggles in Haiti were no less taxing. A critical economic asset, Haiti exported sugar, coffee, indigo, and cocoa, constituting more than one-third of France's foreign trade, 40 percent of Europe's sugar imports, and 60 percent of the continent's imports.²⁰ An uprising for independence led to brutal bloodshed, claiming the lives of 200,000 blacks and "mulattos," 25,000 white colonists, 50,000 French troops, and 15,000 British troops. The war yielded Haitian independence at a staggering cost. Fighting the insurgency with the same ruthless tactics as the Vendée, Napoleon could never attain the pitched battles that he so desperately craved and was forced to call back his troops to Europe.

Last and most significant, the Peninsular War sparked a rebellion from which the term *guerrilla war* got its name. Between 1810 and 1812, the French deployed more than 350,000 troops to the Iberian Peninsula. Working in tandem with regular forces, Spanish irregulars drained Napoleon's resources from the moment he placed his brother on the throne in 1808. By the fall of 1813, the toll had become overwhelming. Great Britain crossed France's southern border, while Austria, Prussia, and Russia closed in from the east. Napoleon abdicated the throne in April 1814. In exile on St. Helena years later, Napoleon would lament, "That miserable Spanish affair is what killed me."²¹

Vendée, Haiti, and Spain demonstrate three limits of the victory-defeat paradigm. First, endstates can serve as north stars but never as prophecies. At best, Napoleon could focus on

various policy goals—pacified colonies, domination of Europe, and so forth—but his ends and means adapted to changing circumstances that he could not fully control or predict. Second, decisive action cannot always be attained. All three of these conflicts denied France a set-piece battle, yet each was important enough to fight nonetheless. Third, decisive action, when achieved, does not mark permanent victory but rather yields an advancement of interests at some corresponding cost. In Spain, for example, clear conventional victories could be considered wins in that they advanced French interests by placing a puppet regime in Madrid. Rather than signal an end, this merely rearranged an international power distribution that continued to be litigated through armed conflict. Even in Central and Eastern Europe, where decisive victories did not create insurgencies, surrender terms then created new realities that political actors fought over. In 1814 and again in 1815, strategic aims that Napoleon had hoped to resolve via decisive engagement were once more adjudicated on the killing fields of Leipzig and Waterloo. Napoleon could advance interests but never win them permanently.

Clausewitz and Jomini shared Napoleon's aversion to all but decisive conventional conflict. If statesmen could only spell out their interests plainly, and then pursue them by politics with the addition of other means, they would find success. However, this assumes a level of foresight that no statesman, not even Napoleon, possessed. Policymakers suffer from bounded rationality on both epistemological and metaphysical grounds. No decisionmaker is endowed with the totality of information (a phenomenon Clausewitz famously called the "fog of war"). As such, it is unrealistic to assume that the statesman can do much better than make an educated guess from the outset as to "the kind of war on which they are embarking."²² Moreover, even if all the information was available, policymakers must deal with the contingent nature of history. Events

interact in complex ways, with known inputs yielding unknown outputs. Even if one was omnipresent at the outset of a policy pursuit, the interaction of social and political forces would soon create a new scenario with which to cope.²³ Moltke the Elder stated, "No plan survives first contact with the enemy," but the boxer Mike Tyson observed even more bluntly, "Everyone has a plan until he gets punched in the face."²⁴

In sum, the victory-defeat approach defines successful strategy as fulfilling two requirements: clearly defined political endstates and decisive engagement. This view has deeply planted roots in a tradition born from the Napoleonic experience. However, it is an overly narrow reading of that era and makes two unrealistic assumptions. First, endstates are useful planning tools but can never be fully determined and must change with variable circumstances. Second, decisive engagement cannot always be achieved, and when it can, the results are not necessarily permanent. By contrast, the interest-cost model defines success in terms of advancing interests at acceptable costs. Doing so is consistent with the historical record and leaves the policymaker better prepared to cope with an international system marked by anarchy and insatiable interests.

Examining an Alternative: Chinese Strategic Culture

The American historical memory recalls its most prominent wars in terms of battles won and lost. Such an approach flows directly from the Western canon of Napoleon, Clausewitz, and Jomini. This doctrine is so deeply implanted in Western strategic culture as to call to mind a parable recounted by the author David Foster Wallace:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the



China's terracotta army

*water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?"*²⁵

Indeed, such is the influence of the Western strategic tradition that the victory-defeat lens seems to most Americans as self-evident as water to a fish. In an era of great power competition, it is increasingly important to recognize the strengths and limits of this paradigm, as well as its alternatives.

Keeping in mind the potential biases of the author of this article as a student of the American tradition, and with a cautionary eye toward avoiding military orientalism and overly broad characterizations, the Chinese case can present a potent alternative. In modern China, "Karl trumps Carl."²⁶ Marx's philosophical principles partner with Sun

Tzu and the ancient principles of Confucianism, making for, seemingly, a solely semantic difference in strategic logic. Where the U.S. method is to *create*, the Chinese method is to *exploit* and *capitalize*. The victory-defeat approach is supplanted by one using dialectics to approach strategy through an "objective-subjective" technique of formulation. The differences between the two strategic cultures are subtle, fundamental, and profound.

If asked, many would be quicker to offer Sun Tzu or Mao as the titans of Chinese strategy rather than Karl Marx.²⁷ But the presence of Marx in the strategic logic of the People's Republic of China should come as no surprise. Marxism's influence on Chinese strategic logic stems from the concept of dialectical and historical materialism. Marxism posits that historical events are interpretable as a series of contradictions and their solutions.²⁸ For Marx,

the conflicts were social and material. Communist regimes derive some level of legitimacy from this principle—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims to be the sole entity capable of divining these enduring truths and solutions. Mao and the party he led served as the vehicle for Marx’s insertion to Chinese strategic culture. In *On Protracted War* (1938), Mao invoked the idea that war “is a contest in the subjective ability between commanders . . . in their struggle for superiority and for the initiative based on material [objective] conditions.”²⁹ Leading thinkers in the CCP and People’s Liberation Army continue to use the dialectic to develop the fundamental feature of Chinese strategic logic: the objective and subjective.

Objective reality refers to “the objective world [the strategic environment] which exists independently of man’s will and has its own law of development.”³⁰ Man’s will takes the form of the *subjective*, which is “man’s ability to comprehend the objective world and consciously transform it to achieve certain purposes.”³¹ The objective is the situation, and the subjective is the manmade strategy. Key to understanding the difference is that rather than trying to muscle an endstate on the strategic situation, the subjective initiative of a strategy seeks to agree with objective reality.³² Any subtle or fundamental change in the latter demands an adjustment to the former.

The alignment of the subjective according to the laws and trends of the objective leads to the achievement of Sun Tzu’s concept of *shi*. Sinologists disagree as to the exact translation of *shi* and whether it is the “key defining idea” in Master Sun’s work but concur it is pivotal.³³ *Shi* can be more broadly conceptualized as “the propensity of things,” and its determination allows the cultivation of leverage and influence—a strategic advantage.³⁴ Only when strategy (the subjective) comports with the situation (the objective) is *shi* reached. Put another way, the strategist capitalizes on the situation’s essence

(objective reality) and tendency toward an outcome by developing a subjective strategy to exploit it. It necessitates an unceasing, in-depth analysis of the strategic environment to ensure alignment of one’s strategy because “by developing a full understanding of those factors that define one’s relationship with the enemy, and by actively controlling and shaping the situation . . . one is able to *ride the force of circumstances to victory*.”³⁵ The passive and reflexive approach fosters what Alistair Iain Johnston labeled “a pervasive acceptance of absolute flexibility”—attacking or defending according to the opportunity provided by the ever-changing situation.³⁶

The essence of American strategy has been posited here as seeking lasting victory through a decisive engagement. In contrast, the essence of Chinese strategy is “to make ‘someone do something for himself that he is actually (unknowingly) doing for you.’”³⁷ This is brought about by applying the concept of stratagem in the process of formulating a subjective strategy to exploit *shi*. *Stratagems* are designs that seek to mislead the enemy and trick them or divert their attention. It calls to mind Sun Tzu’s “winning without fighting.” Some have argued that both concepts may originate from ancient Chinese notions of morality emphasized in Confucianism.³⁸ Confucius placed a premium on harmony, a prioritization that manifested in edicts that “benevolence should be put in first place” and emphasized being polite and honest when dealing with barbarian tribes.³⁹ One could morally deal in foreign affairs by exhausting “all the influences of civil culture and virtue” to gradually attract enemies into submission.⁴⁰ These thoughts were not limited only to Confucianism but are also found in Taoism: Lao-Tzu, the veritable plankowner of Taoism, opposed aggressive actions and warned that the world could not be conquered by force of arms.⁴¹ Scholars at China’s own Academy of Military Science concede that “traditional Chinese

security strategy was a rational one in which exerting cultural and political influences was as [*sic*] the main focus while applying limited military means as an adjunct, and the goal of this strategy was to ‘spread the influences of Confucian virtue into the periphery.’⁴² With the understanding that Chinese strategic culture is much older than that of the West, the quotation can perhaps provide unique insight to how Chinese strategists understand their own history—a selective historical memory still seen today, and one markedly different from that of the United States.

But do these stuffy and nebulous conceptual principles really amount to anything in Chinese strategy? Are they reflected in the real world? Looking at the words and approaches used by successive leaders of the CCP, the answer appears to be yes. Mao’s affinity for the dialectic has been noted, and his invocations of Sun Tzu and stratagem while balancing the Soviet Union and United States throughout the Cold War are wide-ranging. China’s strategy of “hide and bide” has been attributed to Deng Xiaoping, wherein he advised CCP cadre that China should keep a low profile and bide its time—exploiting the current objective reality—while convincing increasingly global powers that they could profit from China’s rise. In a 1998 meeting of Chinese diplomats, Jiang Zemin identified the objective trend of the times as a “trend toward multipolarity” that emerged after the end of the Cold War and asserted that China was presented an opportunity for “undermining hegemonism and power politics.”⁴³ Jiang later calcified what he called China’s “Strategic Opportunity” of the first two decades of the 21st century, in which China could exploit the post-Cold War trends of diffusing power, worldwide recognition of national self-determination, and economic globalization by using a subjective strategy of growing strong from these trends and riding their tides toward China’s interests.

Xi Jinping has broken with the “hide and bide”

strategy used by Deng and Jiang and asserted that China now “stands tall,” “offers a new option for other countries,” and should “take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system.”⁴⁴ Though less subtle, Xi’s new strategy still respects the objective-subjective paradigm. In a 2018 speech to a conference of CCP diplomatic cadres, Xi told the audience that “to have a good grasp of global developments and *follow the underlying trends of the times* is a constant and crucially important task that requires our abiding attention.”⁴⁵ Even the name of Xi’s new approach, *socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era*, acknowledges a change in the objective strategic environment.

Finally, the Chinese approach is equally tangible at the operational level. Attempted creation of *fait accompli* reflects a desire to achieve *shi*, creating the foundation for a future situation where armed confrontation would tip to Chinese victory and deter adversarial intervention. Toward the creation of such an advantage, Beijing employs the concept of “three warfares.” An apparent legacy of Confucian moralistic principle and Sun Tzu stratagem, three warfares engages an adversary in the realms of public opinion warfare (propaganda), psychological warfare (aimed at adversarial will/decision), and legal warfare (employed at all levels for legitimization).⁴⁶ These warfares embody the objective-subjective in two ways. First, according to Elsa Kania, a prominent rising analyst studying the Chinese military, the “three warfares have the potential to establish favorable conditions for battlefield success and eventual victory.”⁴⁷ In other words, the establishment of “favorable conditions” (the objective) is done using the three warfares in the subjective. Second, the preference for this approach indicates the Chinese have identified the usefulness of these nonviolent approaches given the trends of the strategic situation (proliferation of information technology, difficulty in discerning the veracity of information, and respect for the rule of law).

In sum, the Chinese approach can be defined as the limited advancement of interests given costs calculated based on an ongoing, flexible, in-depth understanding of the objective situation that seeks to align actions with identified trends. The result of the application of the modern Chinese strategy has been dubbed “salami slicing,” a series of small actions that do not serve as *casus belli* themselves but may cumulatively produce a larger and/or unlawful action. It stands in stark contrast to the victory-defeat paradigm, explaining at least in part why the United States has struggled to counter those tactics and techniques it labels as Chinese attempts at hybrid or gray zone warfare. Americans continue to draw a line between politics and war, connecting the two by the single thread of political ends. Chinese strategists acknowledge the Gordian knot tying together politics, war, and everything else in a complex system. American strategists continue to prepare for and seek their set-piece battle, wishing to cleanly impress their ends before returning to a booming victory parade. Chinese strategists, understanding the realities of working within a complex system, wage a hundred quiet and small battles each day.

Implications for Policymakers and Citizens

The shift from the victory-defeat model to the interest-cost model inspires numerous possible changes to the employment and evaluation of national power. In this section we offer three proposals.

Limitations of the Ends-Ways-Means

Approach. One byproduct of the victory-defeat approach is the U.S. military’s embrace of an ends-ways-means strategic logic. To summarize, political ends are established and sought, while ways are designed to best achieve them using available means manifesting as resources, power, and capabilities, formulated with an eye to the associated costs and risks.⁴⁸ This is not, by any stretch, an unwise way to approach strategy. In fact, it is well-informed by

the writings of great strategic thinkers and lessons drawn from historical conflicts, as this article has illustrated. But the ends-ways-means approach is not a panacea.

The weakness in the ends-ways-means approach is that ends are established based on a snapshot analysis of the strategic situation. The situation is seen for what it is at the outset of the strategy’s formulation, and this comprehensive evaluation forms the sought-after outcome. Though logical enough, it does not account for the complex and fluid nature of conflict. Think of it this way: the international system is itself a complex system wherein actors simultaneously participate using all their elements of national power across multiple domains, with the actions of one incessantly influencing the environment and the behavior of others. The constant feedback of these actions makes for an ever-changing environment impossible to predict. Within that system, states, at times, again participate in *another* complex system: war. Why, knowing that these are the systems in which one acts, would one attempt to formulate and strive for static, situationally—or environmentally—defined ends that constitute rigid and absolute victory? Strategists are left hamstrung to strive for goals defined in the context of an outdated situation and to iteratively reevaluate the entire strategy in search of “victorious” strategic ends.⁴⁹ The term *ends* itself is indicative of the problem; it sees too clean a break, too neat a stopping point for the effects of the system’s actors.

Here we find that the American strategic logic is a particularly active one. It believes that strategists should impress on the future their desired endstate (through Clausewitz’s “engagement” or Jomini’s “offensive action”) despite the system’s complexity. The National War College is clear on this point: “Strategists must consider what kinds of outcomes are reasonable—and achievable—given the advantage and leverage they are able to *create*.”⁵⁰ Emphasis

on the active role of the strategist was not an inevitability but is instead the result of an American strategy informed by the victory-defeat paradigm and reinforced by selective historical memory.

Strategists need not dispense with the ends-ways-means approach. The limits of this methodology, however, must be made plain from the outset. Ends are useful to orient action but necessitate flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Ways and means must recognize the inherent complexity of action: known inputs invariably yield unknown outputs. In an April 1864 letter, Abraham Lincoln wrote, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”⁵¹ Adding such a sentiment to the ends-ways-means methodology could provide much-needed humility to a sometimes-hubristic American strategy.

A Change in Political Rhetoric. Perhaps the most immediate consequence of this paradigm shift is a much-needed change in American political rhetoric in favor of presenting a more nuanced view of American history. The passage of time has a misleading way of glossing over the detail, drama, and complexity of the past. History is not teleological; it is contingent. Nothing is preordained or inevitable, but the forces of human behavior make them appear so. It is commonplace for policymakers and citizens alike to long for the era when the United States won wars. This creates an unrealistic and counterproductive barometer for when and how national power should be exercised.⁵² A historical reappraisal need not recast the victors of our most memorable wars. The focus should instead be narrowly fixed on what victory truly meant—what was gained, and at what cost. Meanwhile, instead of perceiving conflict across the range of military operations as anathema to the American strategic tradition, one should recognize it as figuring prominently. Decisive engagement is not a cure-all, and when it cannot be achieved, there still may be interests at stake. The

overarching question remains whether the gaining interests are worth the price to be paid.

This change will be synergistic. Instead of a ticker tape parade, citizens will demand of their representatives a foreign policy that is the best among a menu of options constrained by the circumstances. Policymakers in turn will speak openly about the inherent tradeoffs in any foreign policy rather than promise a stark and misleading contrast between victory or inaction.

A less appealing (but no less significant) implication is that policymakers must recognize the biases of their audience. The tradition of the victory-defeat paradigm will not wash away overnight, and domestic support consistently wanes when perceptions of a quagmire take root. Still, the American state has interests that must be advanced. Honest dialogue about communications strategy is typically frowned on, coming dangerously close to the distasteful notion of propaganda. The reality, however, is that decisionmakers have an obligation to explain their policies and build support by ethically and responsibly casting judgments in the most favorable manner possible. Where public perception cannot be moved, policymakers should consider two consequences of these domestic constraints. First, a policy may be beneficial for the state but will not sustain the support necessary to wage it successfully. Second, where interests are compelling, covert, or low-level, involvement that avoids prominent media attention may be the most viable option. Doing so carries risk but may be sound policy nevertheless.

Expansion of Options, Moderation of Goals.

A likely objection to the interest-cost approach is that it leads to endless intervention, often in pursuit of nonessential interests. After all, the Weinberger Doctrine was intended to constrain U.S. involvement overseas. In an often-cited debate over U.S. action in Kosovo, then-US Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright complained to General Colin Powell, “What’s the point of having

this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?"⁵³ Without question, the interest-cost approach expands the menu of options available to policymakers. Unshackled from the misguided constraints of the Weinberger Doctrine, the United States can advance its interests through a broader exercise of national power. However, this change would also force a level of discipline and humility that the alternative approach does not. Given the uncertainty of endstates and limits of decisive engagement, policymakers must take seriously the limits of power any state possesses—including a global power such as the United States.

The issue with counterinsurgency, for example, is not that such campaigns never work—in fact, counterinsurgents have prevailed over insurgents only one-third of the time since World War II—but rather that the costs are often too high to justify intervention.⁵⁴ The same can be said of the use of nuclear weapons in war. What advancement of interest would be sufficient to justify the use of these weapons? The question does not exclude the potential resort to nuclear arms. Instead, it forces the decisionmaker to evaluate on first principles under what situation nuclear war would be wise. The answer will place the threshold at some nearly inconceivably high bar, but the threshold would be established nonetheless. Questions regarding humanitarian intervention, war by proxy, and foreign aid, which are stripped of meaning under the victory-defeat model, could similarly be framed in this manner.

Conclusion

Neither Secretary Weinberger's 1984 speech nor the sentiments of many of his fellow citizens appeared in a historical vacuum. Two-and-a-half centuries before he took the podium, a Western strategic canon emerged privileging strategy that identifies political endstates and achieves these policy goals through decisive engagement. The foundations of

this victory-defeat approach remain steady: the West remains the dominant military presence in global affairs to this day. But while most of the foundation stands strong, cracks remain from the earliest days of construction. The victory-defeat approach developed from an overly narrow view of the Napoleonic experience. Rather than a peripheral issue to be ignored, the limits of decisive engagement should be understood as central to Napoleon's fall as they have been to American successes.

Scholar Eliot Cohen is correct when he writes, "Perhaps the greatest error a strategist can make, in fact, is believing in the chimerical notion of 'victory'—as opposed to incremental and partial success, which then merely gives way to new (if, one hopes, lesser) difficulties."⁵⁵ The policymaker and citizen alike would be wise to dispense with an artificial notion of final victory. Instead, the barometer must be what it always ought to have been: successful strategy that advances interests at acceptable costs. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Caspar Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," remarks prepared for delivery by the Hon. Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, to the National Press Club, Washington, DC, November 28, 1984, available at <<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html>>.

² Maureen Dowd, "After the War: White House Memo; War Introduces a Tougher Bush to Nation," *New York Times*, March 2, 1991, available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/02/world/after-the-war-white-house-memo-war-introduces-a-tougher-bush-to-nation.html>>.

³ We use Lawrence Freedman's definition of *strategy*: "The art of creating power." See Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

⁴ J. Baxter Oliphant, "After 17 Years of War in Afghanistan, More Say U.S. Has Failed Than Succeeded in Achieving Its Goals," Pew Research Center, October 5, 2018, available at <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/05/after-17-years-of-war-in-afghanistan-more-say-u-s-has-failed-than-succeeded-in-achieving-its-goals/>>.

⁵MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, *The Dynamics of Military Revolution: 1300–2050* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63.

⁶Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 99.

⁷Ibid., 598.

⁸Ibid., 90.

⁹Ibid., 95.

¹⁰John Shy, “Jomini,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 146.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 184–185.

¹³Clausewitz, *On War*, 478.

¹⁴Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans.

G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 24.

¹⁵Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

¹⁶Ibid., 49.

¹⁷Ibid., 91.

¹⁸Ibid., 80.

¹⁹Quoted in Anthony James Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 55.

²⁰Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2013), 93.

²¹Quoted in Joes, *Resisting Rebellion*, 66.

²²Clausewitz, *On War*, 88. This Clausewitz excerpt became particularly popular with critics during the early years of the Iraq War. Two of the best-selling books on the war at the time—Michael R. Gordan and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), and Tom Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003–2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007)—quote this passage verbatim. The implication (not at all mistaken) is that the U.S. Government failed to grapple with the growing insurgency after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In sharing the Clausewitzian overestimation in the ability to foresee challenges, the authors risk over-drawing their condemnation. While it is true that the United States fell shockingly short in its initial planning and execution for Iraq reconstruction, the totality of negative consequences cannot serve as a grab bag for criticism. Instead, after-action criticism must be narrowed to what could reasonably have been known given the bounded rationality that constrains any given actor’s projection of follow-on stages and endstates. This does not absolve the Bush administration of criticism, but it does narrow the terrain on which such critiques are leveled.

²³To be sure, uncertainty is not an excuse for strategic nihilism. National power should always be exercised with some goal in mind, but humility and flexibility must reign supreme.

²⁴Mike Tyson, Twitter post, October 17, 2018, available at <<https://twitter.com/miketyson/status/1052665864401633299?lang=en>>.

²⁵“5 Takeaways from the Greatest Commencement Speech of All Time,” *Time*, May 22, 2015, available at <<https://time.com/collection-post/3894477/david-foster-wallace-commencement-speech/>>.

²⁶This phrase is borrowed from the first chapter of renowned military sinologist Timothy Thomas’s sweeping overview of Chinese military strategy. See Timothy L. Thomas, *China Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2014), 11.

²⁷Ibid., 11–12.

²⁸Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, ed., *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975; originally published 1939) 105–130, available at <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/>>.

²⁹Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, Academy of Military Science of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, English version, 2005), 57. See also Thomas, *China Military Strategy*.

³⁰Wu Chunqiu, “Dialectics and the Study of Grand Strategy: A Chinese View,” *China Military Science*, No. 3 (2002), 144–145, in Thomas, *China Military Strategy*, 16.

³¹Wu, “Dialectics and the Study of Grand Strategy,” 146.

³²Timothy L. Thomas, “China’s Concept of Military Strategy,” *Parameters* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2014–2015), 42.

³³Ibid., 44.

³⁴Thomas G. Mahnken, *Secrecy & Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture* (Double Bay, NSW, Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2011), 21. Emphasis added.

³⁵Tao Hanzhang, *Sun Tzu’s Art of War: The Modern Chinese Interpretation* (New York: Sterling Innovation, 2007), <http://www.freading.com/ebooks/details/r:download/OTc4MTQwMjc3NzAxMQ==55>.

³⁶Alastair I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 25.

³⁷Thomas, *China Military Strategy*, 24.

³⁸ See Tiewa Liu, “Chinese Strategic Culture and the Use of Force: Moral and Political Perspectives,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (May 4, 2014), 556–574, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.843944>>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley J. Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993). See also Liu, “Chinese Strategic Culture and the Use of Force.”

⁴² Tiejun Zhang, “Chinese Strategic Culture: Traditional and Present Features,” *Comparative Strategy* 21, no. 2 (April 2002), 79.

⁴³ Jiang Zemin, “The Present International Situation and Our Diplomatic Work,” in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2011), 193.

⁴⁴ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” speech delivered to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, October 18, 2017, available at <xinhuanet.com/English/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf>. The official English transcript begins by marking the second page as “1.” These passages are found on pages 9 and 54 of the English language transcript, respectively.

⁴⁵ Xi Jinping, “China’s Diplomacy Must Benefit Its Major Country Status,” in *The Governance of China*, vol. II (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 480. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ See Sangkuk Lee, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’: Origins, Applications, and Organizations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (February 23, 2014), 198–221.

⁴⁷ Elsa B. Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares,” *China Brief* 16, no. 13 (August 22, 2016), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-pla-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares/>>.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive explanation, see Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler, eds., *A National Security Strategy Primer* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), emphasis added, available at <<https://nwc.ndu.edu/Portals/71/Documents/Publications/NWC%20Primer%202020%20Final.pdf?ver=NKiGA4Ocm119DU5GveImYw%3d%3d>>.

⁴⁹ To be fair, the ends-ways-means approach does advocate for iterative assessment to ensure a strategy is effective. However, it cedes only that ends should be changed as a last resort.

⁵⁰ Heffington, Oler, and Tretler, *A National Security Strategy Primer*, 50.

⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Albert G. Hodges,” *Abraham Lincoln Online*, April 4, 1864, available <<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/hodges.htm>>.

⁵² World War II is frequently cited as the example to emulate. Yet this case fits well within the interest-cost model. The war was fought over hegemonic control of the European continent—the central question of global politics since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia and a resurrection of the primary issue of World War I. Rather than settle this question with the fall of Nazism, World War II gave way to a U.S.-Soviet Cold War where domination of Europe remained the central battleground. The war advanced a central interest but did not resolve its foundational point of contention.

⁵³ “A Muscular Apostle of Restraint,” *The Irish Times* (Dublin), December 18, 2000, available at <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/a-muscular-apostle-of-restraint-1.1121690>>.

⁵⁴ Seth Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 177.

⁵⁵ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 198.