

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Military Strategy

in a Hurry

How wars are actually won

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Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 6

The Core Ideas 8

How It Actually Works 22

What People Get Wrong 32

Use It 37

Terms 42

Go Deeper 47

Notes and Sources 49

Bibliography 58

The Whole Thing in One Page

War is usually pictured as a violent scoreboard. One side destroys more forces, takes more ground, captures the capital and therefore wins. The picture turns chaos into arithmetic and is wrong often enough to be dangerous. Hannibal destroyed Roman armies and lost his war. Napoleon occupied Moscow and lost his empire. United States-led forces removed governments in Kabul and Baghdad with extraordinary speed, then found that overthrow and political control were different achievements.

Strategic success exists when organised force helps create a political condition that the opponent cannot or will not reverse, without costs that defeat the purpose. Everything military is a means to that condition. A battle may destroy a formation, open a route, frighten a coalition, buy time or prove that resistance still works. Its value depends on what it changes in the choices available to governments, armed groups, allies and populations.

Strategy is the contested conversion system. Policy states the purpose, limits and acceptable settlement. Strategy supplies a causal theory about how power can produce them. Operations arrange campaigns across time and space. Tactics fight engagements. Information must move through them in both directions. A tactical loss can break political will. A political demand can make an operational success irrelevant. A plan that suppresses such feedback is teaching the organisation to lie to itself.

Power must first become usable. People, industry, administration, alliances, transport, training, maintenance and legitimacy determine which forces can be created, moved, replaced and kept in the field. A rich state may fail to convert potential into sustained pressure. A poorer movement may turn local knowledge, discipline, sanctuary and political organisation into endurance. Logistics is therefore part of strategy before the first convoy moves.

The opponent is inside the machinery and may contain actors with different interests. Governments, commanders, factions, sponsors and communities observe, deceive, adapt, bargain and sometimes obstruct one another. Strategy cannot be a fixed sequence of actions because the act of applying

pressure changes the system being pressured. Plans matter most when they improve decisions after resistance exposes the first assumptions.

Time is unequal. A stronger power may need a quick, cheap result while a weaker one needs only to remain undefeated. Armies culminate when they can no longer continue their current form of operation, often after advancing faster than supply, repair and replacement can follow. Political coalitions can culminate too, as consent, finance or allied access runs out.

Battles therefore matter through campaigns and systems. Manoeuvre and attrition are methods, not rival faiths. Movement seeks positions that make destruction, isolation or coercion easier. Attrition changes the balance by consuming something the opponent cannot replace or politically accept losing. Intelligence, command, combined arms, joint action, sustainment and learning connect local violence to the larger purpose.

Then comes the neglected part: stopping. A government or movement must recognise when enough has been achieved, secure terms and build an order able to survive the withdrawal of exceptional force. A war can be brilliantly opened, competently fought and strategically lost in its ending. Victory also has a distribution: one institution may gain security while civilians inherit displacement, debt or repression. The desired condition must say whose interests count.

Define the peace, build the power, test the conversion and design the ending before choosing the campaign.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

A flag over a capital is one of war's most convincing false endings. Napoleon entered Moscow in September 1812 and found no Russian government waiting to concede. German forces occupied Paris in June 1940, yet Britain remained in the war and the conflict widened. American troops reached central Baghdad in April 2003 within weeks of invasion, while the political struggle that followed lasted for years. A city can fall while the opponent's forces, alliances, identity, administration or will remain beyond the occupier's control.

That gap explains why strategy matters. It is where public purposes meet people carrying weapons, where budgets become campaigns, and where a clean instruction meets opponents who have read the same map. Without it, discussion of war alternates between moral slogans and hardware catalogues. One side wants peace, another wants security, a third points to a new missile. None has explained how the desired condition will be produced, what sustains it or how opponents may frustrate it.

Strategic claims arrive in political language. Restore deterrence. Degrade a threat. Hold the line. Break the enemy's will. Create a safe zone. Support an ally for as long as it takes. Each phrase can conceal different objectives, costs and stopping rules. Strategy begins by forcing that vagueness into a causal chain whose weak links can be named.

It also exposes how power is made. States do not fight with gross domestic product or equipment catalogues. They fight with organisations that recruit, train, supply, command, repair, replace and learn. Movements turn different resources into force: social networks, local knowledge, sanctuary, belief, coercion and external support. Alliances multiply access and capacity while adding negotiation and friction. A military balance compares conversion systems, not national totals.

Strategy exposes organisations as well. Armies, ministries, parties and coalitions divide responsibility, move information through hierarchies and reward some reports over others. Failure may come from a bad concept, but

it may also come from incentives that keep bad news below the level where policy can change. Success requires learning faster than opponents without mistaking activity for progress or compliance for durable control.

This changes how military news reads. Territory is evidence, but its value depends on terrain, population, supply, fortification and political meaning. Casualties matter, but their effect depends on replacement, cohesion, legitimacy and unequal tolerance. A weapon's range matters, but so do targeting, maintenance, stockpiles, training and countermeasures. A successful raid may have little strategic effect. A retreat may preserve the force that later decides the campaign. The visible event is rarely the whole explanation.

The subject matters beyond professional soldiers because states ask civilians to fund wars, accept risks, endure shortages and judge claims of progress. Democracies need a public able to distinguish a difficult theory from no theory and a necessary secret from an empty claim of expertise. Strategy cannot remove uncertainty. It can reveal which assumptions carry a decision, who controls the required resources and what evidence should trigger revision.

There are limits. No framework turns war into engineering. Evidence arrives late or corrupted. Chance matters. Human beings resist being reduced to preferences. Political leaders may choose unjust purposes, and military competence does not cleanse them. A well-designed campaign in service of aggression remains aggression. This book explains how organised violence connects to political outcomes, not when violence is lawful or morally defensible.

The reward is a sterner form of clarity. Instead of asking who has the better army, ask what each side needs and how usable power is generated. Then ask how force is meant to change the choices of opponents, allies and populations, whose clock is running faster and what condition would permit the killing to stop. Those questions make triumphal headlines less persuasive and apparent stalemates more legible. They reveal why some victories survive the parade and others begin to decay before it. Once seen,

the difference between defeating a force and securing a purpose becomes difficult to ignore.

The Core Ideas

Define the peace before choosing the war

Military victory is often defined by what has happened to the enemy: its army is broken, its capital occupied, its fleet sunk. Strategic victory is defined by what condition now exists and whether it serves the political purpose. Hannibal's victory at Cannae in 216 BCE destroyed a Roman field army on a scale that made the Senate's refusal to bargain extraordinary. Much of Rome's central Italian alliance held, and new armies appeared. Hannibal had produced an immense military effect without the political decision he needed.

The first strategic question is not how to defeat the enemy. It is what the enemy, the territory and your own society must look like when organised violence can stop. The answer might be narrow: restore a border, reopen a shipping route, protect an ally, prevent a renewed attack. It might be demanding: remove a regime, disarm a state, occupy territory, destroy an organisation, transform institutions. Each added condition expands the work required and the opportunities for resistance.

A political purpose must become an end state: conditions rather than a picture of triumph. "Security" is not a condition. Security from which threat, for whom, for how long and enforced by what arrangement? "Defeat terrorism" is not a condition unless the organisations, behaviours, territories and acceptable residual risks are specified. "Victory" cannot do the work because it names the desired judgement rather than the world that would justify it.

Victory also has a distribution. A government may preserve a frontier while destroying the towns behind it. A coalition may remove a threat while handing one partner a new dependency. A state may gain control through methods that leave its population poorer, less free or permanently

mobilised. These outcomes may still be chosen under pressure, but they should not be smuggled into one word. Strategy needs an account of whose interests count and which costs are acceptable.

An end state must describe a relationship, not a photograph. An army standing on a line today may leave tomorrow. A signed document may lack enforcement. A disarmed organisation may retain finance and recruitment. Conditions become durable through incentives, institutions, control and the credible prospect that violation will fail. In a civil war the condition may also depend on which local commanders, communities or external sponsors accept it. Agreement by one headquarters does not bind every armed actor.

Clear ends do not require a rigid prediction of the peace. War changes information and opportunity. New threats emerge, allies gain leverage, atrocities alter public demands and early assumptions fail. The answer is disciplined revision. Leaders should know which conditions are essential, which are desirable, which would trigger escalation and which would justify compromise. Otherwise every gain creates a reason to demand more, and success moves away as the army approaches it.

A defined end state creates a stopping rule. Without one, commanders can always identify another target, officials another risk and politicians another promise that would make the settlement safer. Complete safety is unavailable against an organised opponent. The practical standard is a political condition strong enough to endure at a cost lower than continuing the war. That judgement belongs at the beginning because it determines every later choice, including the forces required, the allies needed and the peace that must be built.

Strategy is a causal theory under scarcity

Once the desired condition is stated, strategy explains how available power is expected to produce it. That explanation is a theory of victory. It links actions to military effects, military effects to changes in an opponent's capacity or expectations, and those changes to a political decision or controllable condition. If any link is missing, the plan contains activity rather than strategy.

The familiar staff formula asks about ends, ways, means and risk. Ends are the conditions sought. Ways are the broad methods. Means are the resources and authorities available. Risk is the danger created by mismatch, uncertainty and enemy action. The formula is useful because desire usually exceeds resources. It is incomplete unless the "ways" contain a causal claim. Bombing, blockade, manoeuvre and training an ally describe methods. They do not explain why the relevant actors will concede, collapse, become unable to resist or remain constrained after the operation ends.

Suppose a state intends to stop attacks by striking launch sites. The immediate military logic may be sound: destroy equipment and reduce the next salvo. The theory of victory must go further. Can the sites be found and reached repeatedly? Can the opponent disperse, replace or import the system? Will attacks fall enough to change political behaviour, or will strikes increase recruitment and outside support? What prevents the threat returning when the campaign pauses? The answers may support the action. They may instead show that the action buys time, which is valuable but different from solving the problem.

Coalitions sharpen the test. Partners can share a declared purpose while wanting different wars. One seeks territorial restoration, another regime change, another alliance credibility. Their forces may operate together while their stopping rules diverge. A viable strategy identifies the overlap, allocates burdens and avoids methods that destroy the political basis for cooperation.

Scarcity forces priority. No state or movement has enough people, money, attention, access and political patience to secure every interest against every danger. Strategy decides where strength will be concentrated, which risks will be accepted and what will be left undone. A plan that calls everything decisive has avoided the decision. So has a plan that assumes future recruits, allied consent, industrial output or local compliance without assigning responsibility for producing them.

The distinction among policy, strategy, operations and tactics helps locate decisions. Policy states the purpose and the terms a government can accept. Strategy allocates power and connects it to that purpose. Operations arrange campaigns and major actions across time and space. Tactics employ forces in engagements. The levels overlap and feed back. A tactical innovation may open a strategic option. A political restriction may remove an efficient operational method. An operational failure may reveal that the theory was wrong.

The 1991 campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait illustrates the advantage and cost of bounded purpose. A large coalition assembled overwhelming force, isolated the theatre, defeated much of the occupying army and restored Kuwaiti sovereignty. The war did not remove Saddam Hussein, settle regional security or prevent later confrontation. That was partly because the authorised aim stopped short of those tasks. The campaign succeeded against its central stated condition while leaving a wider political problem that broader aims would have made harder, bloodier and less consensual.

A theory of victory should produce measures tied to the causal chain. Sorties flown, targets hit and patrols conducted measure activity. Enemy replacement rates, freedom of movement, coalition cohesion, civilian compliance and willingness to bargain may say more about progress. Metrics become corrupting when organisations select what they can count and then redefine success around it. Strategy keeps asking whether the measured effect still leads to the desired condition.

Power must be generated and sustained

Armed force does not begin at the front. Before a unit can fight, an organisation must raise people, collect money, manufacture or acquire equipment, train leaders, build authority, secure routes and persuade allies or communities to cooperate. A country may possess a large economy and still fail to turn it into the type of power the war requires. A movement may lack factories yet create a durable force through local recruitment, outside sanctuary, taxation, smuggling and political organisation. Resources are potential. Strategy works with usable power.

Rome's answer to Cannae was power generation. The destroyed army did not represent the whole Roman system. The republic could levy new forces, draw on allied manpower, defend the political network holding central Italy and refuse the negotiation Hannibal expected. The battle was catastrophic. The organisation that produced armies survived it. That distinction between a force and the system that reproduces the force is one of the deepest in strategy.

Mobilisation is political before it is administrative. Governments decide who serves, who pays, which industries receive priority and how much disruption the population will bear. Conscription may produce numbers while damaging legitimacy. Volunteers may preserve consent while limiting scale. Taxation and borrowing distribute costs across classes and generations. Foreign support can extend endurance while giving the supplier leverage over aims and timing. The method used to generate power changes the political order being defended.

The same applies inside coalitions. Combined wealth is not combined power until partners agree on command, access, standards, burdens and risk. One ally may provide bases, another shipping, another the mass of ground forces. National restrictions can keep a unit from the task for which the campaign appears to count it. Different ammunition, repair systems and communications add friction. Coalition strength lies in complementary contributions and durable bargains, not in adding defence budgets.

Logistics turns generated power into presence. The combat unit seen at the front is the end of a chain connecting farms, factories, ports, depots, roads, railways, workshops, hospitals, data links and people who move and repair what others use. An armoured force offers speed and protection while demanding fuel, ammunition, recovery vehicles and maintenance. Aircraft depend on bases, munitions, trained crews, runways, spare parts and secure information. Naval forces carry supplies with them but need replenishment and long repair cycles. Every capability arrives with a consumption pattern.

Distance makes the chain both expensive and vulnerable. Napoleon crossed into Russia in 1812 with a vast multinational army and plans for a quick political decision. The invasion advanced through territory unable to feed or move it at the required scale. Horses died, wagons failed, roads deteriorated, formations dispersed and disease consumed strength before winter became the convenient symbol of the disaster. Russian retreat and resistance mattered because they denied the decision Napoleon expected while the invading system degraded.

Modern technology changes the chain without abolishing it. Precision weapons need targeting, communications and stocks. Drones need operators, components, frequencies, launch sites and replacement. Software needs power, networks and trusted data. Recruiting a person does not create a trained formation either. Units need leaders, specialists, collective practice and replacements who can enter without dissolving cohesion. Headline numbers conceal the loss of technicians, junior commanders and experienced crews.

Sustainment determines operational reach and culmination. A force culminates when it can no longer continue its current form of operation under existing conditions. It may have outrun supply, exhausted reserves, met stronger defences, lost access or spent its political permission. Momentum can hide the approach. Leaders then use the last reserve trying to recover a pace that the system can no longer support.

The strategic question is not whether logistics matters. Everyone agrees

once a convoy fails. It is whether the political aim, force-generation system and campaign have been designed as one proposition. If the desired end requires years of presence, the force must remain affordable, replaceable and politically supportable for years. If access depends on one port, community or ally, protecting that relationship belongs inside the strategy. The feasible menu is written by what an organisation can generate and reproduce under pressure.

The enemy gets a vote, but not with one voice

War differs from most projects because the object of the plan is planning against you. Opponents see some preparations, hide others, attack weak links, change methods, recruit partners and use your success to alter their story. Strategy is interaction, not optimisation against a passive problem. The best action in isolation may be poor once the likely response is included.

Clausewitz used friction for the accumulation of difficulties that makes war unlike its paper design. Roads fail, orders arrive late, maps mislead, units tire, weather closes in, fear narrows judgement and chance rearranges timing. Information is incomplete, contradictory and shaped by deception. Commanders act before certainty because waiting is also a choice with consequences.

An opponent's response may reverse the meaning of an action. Pressure intended to compel can convince leaders that compromise invites further demands. A siege may weaken civilians while strengthening the ruling group's control over food and information. Destroying conventional forces may push an opponent towards guerrilla tactics. Protecting every position may make a force predictable. A visible reinforcement may deter, provoke, reassure an ally or present a target, depending on interests and interpretation.

This is why copying a successful campaign is dangerous. The original enemy helped make it successful through its deployments, doctrine, mistakes and political limits. Germany's campaign in France in 1940 joined

operational skill, concentrated armour, air support, command initiative and an Allied move into Belgium that exposed the main thrust through the Ardennes. Broadly similar methods in the Soviet Union produced vast encirclements but failed to destroy the state, prevent mobilisation or solve distance and replacement. The opponent and setting were different, so the method produced a different war.

The word enemy can itself mislead. A state is not one mind. Political leaders, military commands, economic elites, local officials and populations may assess costs differently. Coalitions bargain internally. Armed movements can contain political leaders, local commanders, financiers, foreign sponsors and communities with conflicting tolerances. A strike that weakens one faction may strengthen another. A central negotiator may be unable to bind dispersed forces. In civil and revolutionary war, control of people and institutions can matter as much as destruction of units because the contest is partly over who can govern, recruit and claim obedience.

Mao Zedong's account of protracted war was written for China's resistance to Japan and should not be treated as a portable recipe. Its strategic insight was that a materially weaker side could use political organisation, base areas, local support and time to build military strength rather than wait to possess it. Guerrilla action, mobile war and later larger conventional operations were methods within a contest over authority and national survival. Later movements copied the vocabulary with mixed results because local society, outside backing and state capacity differed. The wider lesson is narrower: military power can be produced by changing political relationships during the war.

Interaction makes adaptation central. Units need authority and competence to exploit local information. Higher command needs enough control to concentrate scarce capabilities and prevent local success pulling the campaign away from political purpose. Too much centralisation delays response and filters bad news. Too little creates uncoordinated action and accidental escalation. There is no permanent optimum. The balance depends on communications, training, trust, mission, geography and the

cost of error.

Red teams, war games and alternative analysis put an intelligent opponent back into the plan before combat does it more expensively. They work only when dissent can change the decision. A scripted exercise in which the preferred concept always wins produces confidence without knowledge. The strongest challenge asks what each relevant actor values, fears and believes, then constructs responses that are rational from that position rather than convenient from ours.

A strategy is never validated by internal coherence alone. It survives while observed enemy behaviour, friendly performance and the political setting remain compatible with its causal theory. When evidence breaks the chain, loyalty to the original plan becomes another source of risk.

Time is a weapon, and the clocks are unequal

Military power is usually compared at one moment: soldiers, aircraft, ships, budgets. Strategy compares what each side must achieve before its position becomes intolerable. A weaker force can win by surviving beyond the stronger side's political clock. A stronger side can win by creating a decision before mobilisation, alliances or resistance mature. Time is one of the resources being contested.

The clocks differ because stakes differ. A government fighting far from home for a limited interest may value success but reject mounting losses, expense and distraction. A population fighting occupation may accept far more because the issue concerns rule, land or survival. This asymmetry does not guarantee the weaker side victory. It creates a possible theory: remain organised, deny a convincing end, impose recurring costs and wait for the opponent's coalition or public commitment to erode. The theory works only if the weaker side can recruit, shelter, finance and replace itself long enough.

Time changes material power. Mobilisation brings reserves into service. Factories expand output. Recruits become trained units. Allies negotiate access. Defences harden. A quick campaign may be designed to act before these processes mature. German planning before both world wars was

influenced by fear of fighting powerful coalitions over time. The pressure for early decision contributed to choices that widened the opposing coalition and helped create the prolonged wars Germany was least prepared to sustain. It was a pressure, not a mechanical cause.

Delay can be constructive. Fabius Maximus avoided the decisive battle Hannibal wanted after Rome's disasters in the Second Punic War, shadowing him, restricting forage and preserving Roman capacity. Retreat can exchange space for time, as Russian forces did against Napoleon while distance, hunger, disease, weather and attack eroded the invasion. Yet delay can also surrender allies, territory, legitimacy and resources. "Buy time" is not a strategy until the buyer states what useful capability the time will purchase.

Political time is shaped by institutions. Elections, budgets, conscription, censorship, casualties, elite rivalry and alliance commitments affect endurance. Authoritarian governments may suppress visible dissent but face hidden fragility and distorted reporting. Democracies may debate openly yet sustain long wars when purpose remains credible. Regime type alone does not set patience. Expectations, perceived fairness, leadership survival and the distribution of sacrifice matter.

Operational tempo is another clock. Acting faster than the opponent can understand and respond may generate shock and compound local advantages. Speed also consumes fuel, maintenance, sleep, ammunition and command attention. A force can move so fast that bridges, repair units and air defence fall behind. Tempo is useful when it creates decisions the opponent cannot repair. Motion without consolidation advances towards culmination.

The strategic use of time therefore begins by identifying the clocks that govern each actor: military readiness, economic endurance, coalition cohesion, public consent, seasonal access, replacement and leadership survival. It then asks which actions protect your binding clock while attacking the opponent's. The weaker side's clock is not automatically longer, and the stronger side does not own speed. Time rewards the organisation that

understands what duration is doing to the whole contest.

Battles matter through campaigns and systems

A battle is a concentrated encounter. A campaign is a sequence of operations arranged to create a larger condition. Strategy connects that condition to political purpose. Confusing the three produces the oldest error in military history: treating destruction at the point of contact as though it must decide the war.

Battles can eliminate forces, seize a junction, open a sea route, protect mobilisation, expose a government's weakness, alter alliance expectations or demonstrate that an army can survive. Their strategic value depends on exploitation. A breakthrough that cannot be supplied closes. A captured city that does not control the country becomes a garrison demand. A destroyed formation matters if it cannot be replaced or if its loss changes political calculation.

Manoeuvre and attrition are often presented as moral opposites. Manoeuvre is supposed to be intelligent movement against weakness; attrition, dull killing against strength. In practice, manoeuvre seeks a position from which the enemy can be isolated, threatened or destroyed at better exchange. Attrition aims to reduce a resource the enemy cannot replace or accept losing. Most successful campaigns combine them. Movement without damaging effect may be evaded. Destruction without positional or political consequence may be absorbed.

Combined arms follows the same logic at a smaller scale. Infantry, armour, artillery, engineers, aircraft, electronic systems and air defence create problems that cover one another's weaknesses. Artillery suppresses positions but cannot hold ground. Armour moves and protects but is vulnerable without reconnaissance, infantry and recovery. Engineers cross obstacles. Air defence changes what aircraft can risk. Coordination creates temporary dilemmas in which the opponent cannot answer one threat without becoming exposed to another.

At operational scale, joint warfare connects capabilities across land, sea, air,

space, cyber and information. The labels encourage theatre when every domain is mentioned regardless of causal value. Integration matters when one action makes another possible: submarines restrict shipping, air defence protects ports, intelligence locates reserves, deception holds them in the wrong place, engineers open a route and logistics maintains the advance. The system is only as strong as the indispensable connection that fails under pressure.

Operational art is the work of arranging tactical actions in time, space and purpose so that they accumulate towards the strategic aim. It is neither a magic level of war nor a synonym for planning. Its problem is sequence. Which position must be gained before the next operation is possible? Where should pressure be simultaneous, and where successive? What must be preserved for exploitation? A campaign is coherent when its actions change the option set rather than merely fill a calendar.

Command decides how the parts are arranged and corrected. Detailed control may be necessary for timing scarce assets or preventing escalation. Mission command gives subordinates an understood purpose and freedom over method, allowing local adaptation when communications fail or opportunity appears. It depends on training, trust and a shared picture of acceptable risk. Delegating without preparation is abandonment. Centralising without timely information is delay wearing authority.

Intelligence reduces uncertainty but cannot remove it. Collection competes with concealment, deception and noise. Assessment after action is equally hard. Organisations may report targets struck while avoiding whether the enemy's system still functions. Commanders need indicators that reveal adaptation and failure, including evidence that contradicts the preferred story.

Campaign design turns these pieces into decisions. It sequences pressure, protects access, creates branches for enemy responses and preserves reserves. It asks what must be true after this phase for the next phase to work. Battles earn strategic importance when they close an enemy option, create a friendly one and are followed by the action needed to make the

change endure.

Winning includes ending

War termination is often treated as administration after the serious military work. It is where the political purpose is secured or lost. Relevant opponents must stop, be made unable to continue, be removed from control or be incorporated into an enforceable settlement. Friendly forces must know what compliance looks like. Allies must accept the bargain. Populations must be governed somehow. These are strategic tasks even when the heaviest fighting is over.

Different aims require different endings. Restoring a border may permit an armistice monitored by outside forces. Destroying an invading army may leave the hostile government intact. Regime removal creates immediate responsibility for security and political authority. Near-complete defeat and occupation allowed far-reaching institutional change in Germany and Japan after 1945, but those outcomes depended on exceptional military, political and administrative conditions. Demanding comparable submission in a limited war may prolong resistance because the opponent sees no survivable bargain.

Coercion works through alternatives. Leaders concede when the expected cost of resistance exceeds the expected cost of compliance, including the danger that concessions invite more demands or threaten their survival. Punishment may fail if the opponent cannot deliver the concession, values the issue more or believes endurance will divide the attacker. Denial, which blocks the opponent's military objective, can change expectations without relying on pain to produce obedience. Many strategies combine both.

Occupation exposes the difference between removing organised resistance and creating order. Baghdad fell in 2003 and the Iraqi government ceased to function, but the invading coalition then faced looting, institutional collapse, insurgency, sectarian conflict and the task of establishing political authority. Decisions about the army, administration, policing and transition belonged to the strategic problem, not a separate civilian epilogue. The rapid

campaign solved the problem it had been designed to solve and revealed that the political end required another design.

Withdrawal is also an ending, whether acknowledged or imposed. A partner force may appear capable while external air power, finance, contractors, intelligence and political assurance remain present. Remove indispensable supports and the observed institution becomes a different system. The collapse of the Afghan republic in 2021 resulted from a setting-specific interaction among external dependence, the withdrawal decision, Afghan leadership, local bargains, Taliban pressure and changing expectations. Measures of money spent and units trained had not established that the security system could reproduce itself alone.

Legitimacy affects the cost of enforcement. The word does not mean popularity or moral approval. It describes a relationship in which enough officials, armed actors and communities accept, obey or cease contesting a political order for ordinary institutions to carry more of the burden than emergency force. Coercion can produce compliance. An order that requires permanent exceptional violence has not become ordinary politics.

Settlements redistribute power and fear. A defeated actor may comply today while preparing revision tomorrow. Victors may disagree over borders, reparations, disarmament and influence. People displaced or excluded from the bargain can become the source of later conflict. In multi-actor wars, a settlement with the strongest faction may leave other armed groups outside it. No agreement eliminates politics. The aim is an order whose enforcement costs are bearable and whose central participants prefer continued compliance to renewed war.

This returns to the first idea. A government that defined the desired peace can judge whether military effects are bringing it closer, revise the aim when costs change and recognise when enough has been achieved. A government that began with a slogan discovers at the end that every remaining danger looks like unfinished business. Its victories expand obligations, its presence creates resistance and its departure appears to erase the purpose.

Wars are won through force, but force must survive a final conversion. The result may be a treaty, an occupation, a destroyed capability, a protected ally, a deterred return or a political coalition able to govern. It must persist when exceptional violence recedes. Otherwise the campaign has purchased an interval and mistaken the receipt for victory.

How It Actually Works

Before strategy had a name

Some of the oldest surviving works on war begin with a problem that has never left: how to make force serve rule rather than consume it. The Chinese text known as *The Art of War* took shape in an age of competing states, although its date and authorship cannot be reduced safely to one general called Sun Tzu. It treats war as an affair of calculation, deception, intelligence, organisation and political cost. The best result is gained before wasteful collision, by attacking plans, alliances and confidence as well as troops.

Greek historians supplied another route. Herodotus linked campaigns to geography, logistics, political systems and misjudgement. Thucydides examined the Peloponnesian War through fear, interest, honour, alliance discipline, domestic conflict and the changing purposes of belligerents. His account of the Sicilian expedition shows a democracy approving a distant campaign whose aims, intelligence and resources were contested, then reinforcing failure rather than abandoning it. The episode remains useful because the army's destruction was the end of a chain of political and strategic choices.

Rome left less abstract theory and more institutional evidence. Its strength often lay in raising new armies, holding alliances, building roads, founding colonies and absorbing defeat. Pyrrhus and Hannibal won celebrated battles but could not dismantle the system that generated Roman power. The relevant unit was larger than the legion on the field. It was a political network able to replace losses and keep partners from changing sides.

Machiavelli later recovered Roman examples for a world of Italian states, mercenaries and vulnerable republics. His prescriptions reflected his setting and often aged badly, but his governing question was sound: what military arrangements are compatible with the political order they defend? Armies were never external tools. Who armed, paid and commanded them shaped the state.

Napoleon makes the scale visible

The French Revolution and Napoleon expanded the European problem. Mass mobilisation, political zeal, improved administration and the corps system allowed armies to move in separated formations, support one another and concentrate for battle. Napoleon used speed, central position and the destruction of opposing armies to force political settlements. Campaigns at Ulm and Austerlitz in 1805 displayed how operational movement could create a battle under favourable conditions rather than wait for one.

The method depended on context. French forces could forage to supplement supply in rich, populated regions, but they still relied on magazines, transport and administration. Opponents learned, enlarged their armies and coordinated more effectively. Spain tied French forces to a costly occupation, guerrilla war and hostile population. Russia in 1812 denied the quick political decision, traded space and allowed the invasion's sustainment to collapse. Napoleon's repeated victories had helped create coalitions determined to remove the system that made another French settlement temporary.

The Napoleonic record fixed a recurring temptation: assume that one brilliant campaign can end a political contest whose participants can recruit new armies and allies. Operational excellence can compress time. It cannot choose how much defeat an enemy will absorb or whether third parties will enter to prevent domination.

Clausewitz, Jomini and the argument after catastrophe

Two officers turned the Napoleonic experience into rival intellectual inheritances. Antoine-Henri Jomini emphasised lines of operation, decisive points, concentration and the geometry of campaigns. His work offered officers a teachable language for moving armies. It could make war look more regular than it was, yet staff education needed categories, and Jomini supplied them.

Carl von Clausewitz wrote a more difficult book because he thought difficulty belonged to the subject. War was an instrument of policy, but also a violent interaction driven by emotion, chance and political purpose. Its character changed with the society, government and forces involved. The enemy reacted. Friction separated real war from plans. Defence was strong because it could use ground, time and popular support, while attack weakened as it advanced and approached culmination.

Clausewitz's famous abstractions were diagnostic rather than a field manual. His "centre of gravity" was not a universal target list. It identified the concentration of power or cohesion relevant to a particular enemy, such as an army, capital, alliance or leader, and later doctrine has often stretched the phrase beyond that use. His distinction between limited purposes and the theoretical pull towards extremes warned that political aims set the scale of effort.

He died in 1831 with *On War* unfinished. Marie von Clausewitz prepared the manuscripts for publication. The unfinished state matters because readers can extract opposing Clausewitzes: an advocate of decisive battle, a theorist of political limitation, a philosopher of uncertainty. The strongest reading keeps those elements together. Force seeks decision, but the kind of decision and effort required come from the political contest.

Command at the political boundary

The growth of professional staffs created a permanent question about who directs strategy. Civilian leaders possess political authority but may lack military knowledge. Commanders understand forces and operations but may define the problem around the instrument they control. Neither side can hand the connection to the other.

Abraham Lincoln learned this during the American Civil War. He had to find commanders able to destroy Confederate armies while holding border states, sustaining elections, working with emancipation and applying pressure across several theatres. George McClellan built a formidable army but treated its preservation and his own operational judgement as claims against the administration's urgency. Ulysses S. Grant proved more useful because simultaneous campaigns and sustained pressure connected military action to the Union's wider purpose.

Later wartime governments built committees, cabinets and combined staffs to manage the boundary. Political leaders chose priorities and accepted coalition bargains. Military chiefs translated them into feasible options and warned about costs. The system worked badly when civilians prescribed movements without understanding force, or when commanders concealed political choices inside claims of professional necessity. It worked better when disagreement was explicit, advice was candid and authority for the final risk remained clear.

Industry turns campaigns into systems

Railways, steamships, telegraphy, mass literacy, conscription and industrial production enlarged what states could mobilise and what headquarters could attempt. Prussia's General Staff developed peacetime planning, mobilisation timetables, railway coordination and a professional process for preparing commanders. Helmuth von Moltke the Elder accepted that no plan could remain intact through contact, so detailed preparation had to coexist with subordinate initiative.

This system helped Prussia win short wars against Austria in 1866 and

France in 1870 to 1871. Success encouraged a dangerous inference: modern mobilisation and encirclement could manufacture political decision on schedule. Before 1914, plans became tied to railway sequences and fears that delay would leave armies exposed. Germany's western deployment assumed that France had to be defeated rapidly before full Russian pressure developed. The invasion of Belgium widened the war, the advance failed to gain the needed decision and the conflict became the prolonged coalition struggle the plan was meant to avoid.

Industrial firepower strengthened defence, but armies did not remain tactically frozen. They learned artillery survey, aerial reconnaissance, counter-battery fire, infiltration, tanks, communications and combined arms. The deeper problem was operational. A breach had to be supplied and reinforced across wrecked ground before reserves restored the front. Success required sequences of battles, rail movement, replacement and pressure across theatres.

Russian and Soviet thinkers developed the language of operational art to bridge tactics and strategy. Deep battle concepts sought to disrupt enemy systems through simultaneous and successive attacks rather than expect one front-line rupture to decide everything. The ideas suffered from purges, institutional upheaval and uneven application, then became part of a larger wartime learning process. The term endured because modern armies needed a level for arranging campaigns beyond one engagement.

Sea power and access

The sea produced a different strategic problem because control was rarely a matter of occupying every mile. Fleets protected movement, threatened coasts, carried armies, blockaded trade and denied the opponent the same uses. Alfred Thayer Mahan stressed concentrated battle fleets and the relationship among maritime commerce, bases and national power. His influence travelled through naval establishments that were already competing for ships and status, which made his emphasis on decisive battle especially welcome.

Julian Corbett offered a more political account. Maritime strategy usually served a wider war. Command of the sea could be local, temporary and disputed, sufficient to move a force or protect trade without destroying every enemy ship. Because armies decided control on land, naval power often worked by enabling, restricting and connecting. This made limited war possible for an offshore power, provided the political aim, continental partners and access remained aligned.

The two world wars showed that sea control depended on systems beyond battleships. Mines, submarines, aircraft, merchant shipping, escorts, ports, intelligence and shipbuilding shaped whether armies and economies could be supplied. Germany's submarine campaigns sought to cut Britain's maritime lifeline rather than defeat its army ashore. Convoy, routing, air cover, codebreaking and replacement turned the contest. The strategic effect of a ship therefore lay partly in what could move because it sailed, or could not move because it threatened.

Air power and the promise of bypass

Aircraft appeared to offer escape from armies, trenches and geography. Interwar theorists such as Giulio Douhet argued that bombers could reach cities and industry directly, break civilian morale and make long surface campaigns obsolete. The promise was strategically seductive: attack the political centre without first defeating the forces guarding the route. It also rested on hard assumptions about accuracy, defences, industrial vulnerability and how populations behave under attack.

The Second World War did not yield one answer. Bombing damaged production, transport, oil supply and urban life, forced diversion into air defence and supported campaigns on land and sea. It also killed civilians on a vast scale, consumed immense resources and often failed to produce the rapid political collapse predicted. Effects varied by target system, timing, intelligence, enemy adaptation and the ability to exploit disruption. Morale proved neither infinitely strong nor mechanically breakable.

Air power became more effective when integrated with other instruments:

protecting shipping, isolating battlefields, moving forces, striking reserves, gathering information and denying the opponent freedom of action. Later precision improved the ability to hit selected targets, but it did not settle whether destroying them would change policy. The recurring error was to confuse access to the target with access to the desired political decision.

Coalition war at global scale

The Second World War made strategy an exercise in connecting theatres, production and allies. Germany achieved rapid operational victories in Poland and France. Its political and economic position worsened as Britain remained undefeated, the invasion of the Soviet Union failed to destroy Soviet power and the United States entered. Axis partners shared enemies without building an integrated system equal to the Allied coalition.

Allied advantage was potential before it was performance. American industry had to produce ships, aircraft, vehicles and munitions, then move them across oceans. Britain provided bases, shipping, intelligence, finance and an existing imperial network while becoming increasingly dependent on American power. The Soviet Union moved factories, raised armies and bore the main continental struggle against Germany. China tied down large Japanese forces over years. Coalition strategy meant disputes over priorities, shipping, command, the Mediterranean, a cross-Channel invasion and the war against Japan.

No partner received everything it wanted. That was a sign of a working coalition rather than strategic purity. Combined boards allocated production and transport. Conferences linked political leaders and military staffs. Command arrangements gave some theatres unified direction while national governments retained ultimate authority. The coalition survived disagreements because the shared danger outweighed them and because resources made compromise possible.

Campaigns worked as systems. The Battle of the Atlantic protected the movement of people and material. Strategic bombing imposed costs and diverted defence while producing severe civilian destruction and contested

military effects. The Soviet offensives destroyed and displaced German forces in the east. Amphibious operations in the Mediterranean, Pacific and Normandy connected naval control, air power, deception, engineering, logistics and land combat. Victory emerged from repeated conversion of superior resources into coordinated pressure, not from one master stroke.

Limited war under the nuclear shadow

Atomic weapons changed the possible cost of direct great-power war. They did not remove strategy. They made escalation, signalling, alliance assurance and limitation central. The ability to destroy did not automatically create usable political leverage. Threats had to be credible, controlled and connected to interests strong enough to justify risk.

Thomas Schelling's work on coercion examined the bargaining power created by the threat of future harm, the manipulation of risk and the difference between taking something and making an opponent choose to give it. His framework influenced nuclear strategy, but its deeper value was to separate brute force from coercion. A destroyed bridge cannot decide. A government deciding whether the next bridge, city or army will be lost can.

Korea showed a limited war fought under wider danger. United Nations forces prevented the conquest of South Korea, advanced north after the initial reversal, then faced Chinese intervention. The war settled near its starting line after costly fighting and negotiation. The result looked indecisive beside unconditional surrender in 1945, yet it preserved the central defended condition. Expanding the aim had enlarged the war; narrowing it made an armistice possible.

Vietnam exposed the difficulty of using superior conventional power to sustain a distant political order. American forces often prevailed in large conventional engagements and inflicted heavy losses, but body counts and operations did not establish a durable South Vietnamese state or destroy the opponent's political and military capacity to continue. North Vietnam and its allies were prepared to accept enormous costs over a longer horizon. American leaders faced domestic, alliance and escalation limits. Military

performance and political outcome separated in public view.

Insurgency, intervention and control

Irregular and civil wars put politics close to the surface. Armed groups may avoid holding ground, embed in social networks, use sanctuaries and seek to make government protection look absent or predatory. The state often possesses more firepower but must identify opponents among civilians, maintain administrative reach, protect infrastructure and manage partners whose interests differ from its own. Every use of force can produce intelligence, fear, compliance, grievance or recruitment.

In *On Protracted War* in 1938, Mao Zedong described a weaker force surviving a strategic defensive and building political and military capacity through a prolonged middle phase. It would then seek the conditions for counter-offensive. The scheme was written for China's war against Japan and cannot be lifted out as a law of insurgency. Its durable insight is narrower: a movement can treat organisation, taxation, intelligence, recruitment, base areas and relations with civilians as machinery for generating power over time. Guerrilla action was one method inside that larger political-military process, not a substitute for it.

Counterinsurgency theories have offered population protection, political reform, intelligence and restrained force as an alternative to enemy-body arithmetic. These ideas can improve practice, but they are not a universal recipe. Outside forces may lack language, time, local knowledge and authority. The partner government may pursue interests that conflict with reform. Protecting one district can shift violence. Building institutions during war can create organisations dependent on foreign money and support.

The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan made the phase problem visible. United States-led campaigns removed the ruling regimes quickly. The political task then changed from defeating organised forces to securing populations, reconstructing authority, managing factions and developing partner institutions. Structures designed for invasion had to improvise occupation and state support. Later strategies changed troops, methods

and objectives, sometimes improving local security, without resolving every national political bargain.

In Afghanistan, the republic's forces and finances remained heavily dependent on external systems. Once withdrawal was set and support contracted, battlefield expectations, elite choices, local bargains and Taliban pressure interacted. The collapse in 2021 was faster than many official assessments anticipated. The lesson is not that training never works or that local allies lack agency. It is that a strategy cannot claim self-sustaining success while the system being measured still rests on inputs scheduled to disappear.

Planning as repeated judgement

Contemporary joint doctrine turns the old problem into a formal process. Political direction is translated into objectives, an end state, courses of action, resources, risks, phases, decision points and arrangements for transition and termination. Sustainment is planned with operations. Culmination, branches and alternative outcomes are considered before commitment. Assessment is meant to compare observed change with the theory behind the plan.

Planning also has to cross institutional boundaries. Finance ministries control money, diplomats maintain access and coalitions, industry supplies equipment, intelligence agencies frame uncertainty and elected leaders decide acceptable risk. Military staffs may identify the efficient campaign while lacking authority over the conditions that make it possible. A strategy review is therefore a political bargain about priorities and burden, not a technical document handed upwards after the answer is complete.

The process is valuable because it forces questions into the open. It can also generate documents that simulate control. A thick plan cannot rescue an incoherent purpose, an unavailable ally or a false belief about the enemy. Planning works when it creates shared understanding, allocates responsibility and supports revision. Its product is better judgement under pressure, not obedience to the first diagram.

How we know

Military strategy is reconstructed from an uneven record. Governments preserve plans, orders, budgets and official histories, while failed assumptions may vanish into oral discussion or self-protective memoir. Commanders explain choices with knowledge of the outcome. Victors open archives on different schedules from defeated states. Irregular groups and civilians leave thinner records than large ministries.

The classic texts are also unstable guides. *The Art of War* has disputed authorship and layers of composition. Thucydides shaped speeches and selected events. Clausewitz left an unfinished manuscript edited after his death. Later readers translated concepts into institutions he never saw. Doctrine records what organisations intend to teach, not what every unit does.

The strongest conclusions therefore combine plans with performance, logistics, enemy records, political decisions and lived consequences. Numbers such as casualties, production and territory help only when their definitions and causal meaning are controlled. Strategic history cannot provide a law guaranteeing victory. It can show recurring mechanisms, failed conversions and the conditions under which a claim worked once. That is enough to test the next plan more seriously.

What People Get Wrong

“Win the battles and you win the war”

Battles create effects, not automatic political decisions. Hannibal’s victories did not break Rome’s alliance system. Napoleon’s occupation of Moscow did not force Alexander I to negotiate. American forces could remove the Iraqi government faster than they could establish a secure political order. The mistaken model survives because battles have dates, maps and visible outcomes, while coalition endurance, replacement and bargaining are spread across years.

The correction is not that battles are unimportant. Some destroy irreplaceable forces, open routes or break confidence. Their value depends on what follows. A turning point is an event whose effects alter future options and are then exploited. When an army cannot convert battlefield success into control, bargaining advantage or durable denial, the scoreboard is recording the wrong unit. Conversely, a battle can decide a war when the enemy's political system cannot replace the loss, allies defect or the defeat opens direct control of the objective. Leaders who expect one decisive clash may therefore underfund the campaign and peace that must follow it.

“The stronger side should win”

Strength is conditional. A larger economy, army or technological base supplies potential. Strategy asks how much can be mobilised, transported, coordinated and sustained for the purpose at hand. It also asks what result each side needs. A distant great power may require a quick settlement and broad domestic consent. A weaker local opponent may need only to preserve organisation and make the cost recur.

The stronger side still has advantages, and romanticising weakness is foolish. Small forces can be isolated, infiltrated, deprived of sanctuary and destroyed. Yet raw totals hide access, readiness, alliance limits, replacement and unequal stakes. The better comparison is between each side's usable power and its required political task over time. That ratio can favour the side with fewer resources. After France fell in 1940, Britain had lost its principal continental ally and much of the army's equipment, yet survival preserved a base and future coalition. North Vietnam possessed far fewer aggregate resources than the United States, but its leaders fought for reunification across a longer political horizon and accepted costs American leaders judged unacceptable for their own limited objective. Aggregate strength predicts little until it is attached to place, time and purpose.

“Strategy is the plan”

A plan sets out intended actions, timings, responsibilities and branches. Strategy explains why those actions should create the desired political condition despite resistance. The difference appears when the timetable survives on paper and the causal theory fails in the world. A force can reach every phase line, strike every listed target and still leave the opponent's essential choices unchanged.

The confusion persists because plans are visible. They have maps, annexes, milestones and owners. A strategy may fit into a few contested sentences about purpose, power, the opponent and time. Organisations prefer the document because its detail looks like control. They can then revise the schedule without confronting the possibility that the intended effects were never connected to the political result.

Plans remain necessary. They coordinate scarce people and resources, preserve options and prepare decisions. Their danger begins when precision conceals dependence. The first operation may assume an ally grants access, a population stays passive, a partner force holds together and the opponent reacts on cue. Those are strategic claims, not planning details. Once evidence contradicts them, faithful execution becomes a method of protecting error. A plan can be completed while a war is being lost. Strategy is the argument that tells leaders whether to continue, alter the method, narrow the aim or stop.

“Technology makes old strategy obsolete”

New weapons change range, speed, visibility, cost and vulnerability. They can overturn a tactical balance and create new forms of access. They do not remove political purpose, enemy adaptation, sustainment or termination. The telegraph increased control and reporting while encouraging distant headquarters to interfere. Aircraft bypassed front lines but did not make populations surrender on schedule. Precision weapons improved targeting without proving that the chosen target held the enemy's political system together.

The myth returns with each innovation because demonstrations show what a system can hit, not what the opponent will do afterwards. Strategic assessment asks about production, training, maintenance, countermeasures, scale and conversion. A weapon is revolutionary when institutions and concepts use it to create a new political possibility, not when its brochure contains a new performance figure. Even then, the advantage invites imitation, dispersal, hardening, deception and new defences. Early success often measures the opponent's unpreparedness rather than permanent dominance. Procurement can then become a substitute for deciding what behaviour the purchased capability is meant to change, while integration costs disappear from view. A platform may perform as advertised while communications, doctrine, stockpiles or legal authority prevent the larger system using it. Technology changes the strategic question, then waits for organisations and opponents to answer back.

“Manoeuvre is clever and attrition is stupid”

The contrast flatters movement and mistakes attrition for mindless frontal assault. Manoeuvre seeks advantage by changing position, threatening communications, isolating forces or presenting several dangers at once. Its strategic value usually depends on what the position permits the force to destroy, deny or compel. Attrition seeks to reduce something the enemy cannot replace or politically tolerate. It can be designed badly or well.

Most campaigns mix both. An encirclement is manoeuvre used to impose severe attrition. A blockade wears down access through positional control. Repeated limited attacks may fix reserves while pressure elsewhere opens movement. The useful question is which enemy resource is scarce and how a positional change affects it. Treating one method as virtuous encourages commanders to rename losses rather than explain their causal purpose. Allied offensives on the Western Front in 1918 succeeded through improved fire, movement, logistics and repeated pressure, not a bloodless route around resistance. Pacific island campaigns manoeuvred across oceans while imposing and accepting attrition at selected points. Strategy judges the exchange against replacement, time and political value, not against an

aesthetic preference for arrows.

“Good generals should be free of politics”

Politics sets the purpose, scale and acceptable cost of war. A general free of politics would be free of the reason for fighting. Civilian leaders must decide which interests justify risk, what allies are promised and which settlement can be accepted. Military professionals contribute knowledge about feasibility, force and consequence. The relationship should contain argument, not separation.

The myth grows from real failures: politicians can micromanage tactics, conceal aims or demand impossible results. Generals can also present military preferences as necessity, narrow the problem to what their organisation can do or seek victory conditions that exceed public consent. Healthy civil-military relations make disagreement candid and authority clear. Political control does not mean political infallibility. Professional advice does not transfer sovereignty to the adviser. Lincoln’s search for generals during the American Civil War was political because armies had to defend the Union, hold border states, sustain elections and connect military pressure to emancipation. Operational skill detached from those requirements could not be sufficient. Otherwise both sides evade responsibility: politicians blame execution, and commanders blame the purpose they never forced into clarity.

“The war ends when the shooting stops”

A ceasefire, surrender or battlefield collapse ends some violence. It does not decide who governs, how forces disarm, whether refugees return, who monitors compliance or what happens when fear revives. These questions determine whether military success becomes an order or a pause.

The false ending is persuasive because combat produces an obvious before and after. Political authority changes more slowly. Germany and Japan after 1945 underwent occupation, administration and institutional reconstruction after comprehensive military defeat and surrender. Kuwait in 1991 required a narrower restoration. Iraq after 2003 showed that regime removal could

dissolve the authority needed to manage the next phase. Termination must be designed with the campaign because the force that breaks an order may inherit responsibility for replacing it. An armistice can last for decades when deterrence, monitoring and interests support it. A signed peace can decay when enforcement and legitimacy are absent. The strategic ending is therefore a maintained relationship among power, rules and expectations. The last shot is evidence that one phase has ended, not proof that the desired condition exists.

Use It

Write the condition, not the victory word

Take any strategic claim and replace its headline noun with observable conditions. “Restore deterrence” becomes an account of which actor must stop which behaviour, what response follows a violation and why the actor will believe that response. “Secure the border” becomes specified control over routes, crossings, populations and enforcement over a stated period. “Defeat the organisation” becomes a judgement about leadership, armed capacity, finance, recruitment, territorial control and ability to regenerate.

Then identify what need not be achieved. This prevents a limited purpose expanding quietly into total safety. A condition should be demanding enough to matter and bounded enough to recognise. It should also state who bears its costs. When the desired world cannot be described without the word victory, the strategy has not yet reached its first sentence.

Draw the causal chain backwards

Begin at the desired political condition and move backwards. What must the opponent decide, lose or become unable to do? What military or non-military effects would create that change? Which actions can produce those effects? Which access, authorities, mobilisation, forces, intelligence, logistics and allies make the actions possible? Who can release those resources, and what keeps them available? Where does the chain rely on a belief about human behaviour rather than a physical mechanism?

Write each link plainly. Destroying launchers reduces attacks only if enough launchers can be found, replaced slowly and used less effectively after dispersal. Training a partner creates self-reliance only if the partner can recruit, pay, command, supply and politically sustain the force after outside support changes. A chain does not prove the strategy. It reveals where evidence and contingency live, which is far more useful than confidence spread evenly across the plan.

Give the enemy a second move

For every proposed action, ask what a competent opponent does next. It may harden, hide, disperse, retaliate elsewhere, change the political story, use civilians as protection, recruit an ally or offer a partial concession designed to divide the coalition. Then ask what you do after that response and whether your first action has improved or narrowed the available options.

Do not choose only the most aggressive enemy reply. A restrained response may be strategically harder because it weakens support for continued pressure. Nor should the enemy be treated as one mind. Identify factions, local commanders, sponsors and populations that may respond differently. The exercise becomes valuable when it changes the course of action, preserves a reserve, adds a branch or reveals that the desired concession cannot be delivered by the actor being targeted.

Find the binding constraint and the faster clock

Plans contain many shortages, but usually one or two govern the next phase: ammunition, trained crews, air defence, shipping, political consent, allied access, maintenance, intelligence or time. Find the constraint that cannot be replaced quickly, identify who controls it and test what happens if consumption, loss or delay is worse than expected. A force with thousands of vehicles may be constrained by recovery equipment or a bridge. A coalition with large budgets may be constrained by one partner's basing permission. A movement with recruits may still lack a secure route, trusted organisers or the authority to turn support into disciplined force.

Then compare clocks. Which side needs a decision before reserves arrive, weather changes, an election occurs, public support falls or an ally defects? Which side becomes stronger through delay, and what capability is delay buying? “Maintain pressure” may consume the attacker’s scarce clock faster than the defender’s. The side that appears static may be winning time. The side moving rapidly may be spending it.

Separate activity, effect and outcome

An activity is what friendly forces do: patrols, sorties, strikes, training days. An effect is what changes in the military or political environment: movement becomes harder, attacks fall, units disperse, an alliance holds. An outcome is the condition relevant to purpose: a protected population, restored control, denied conquest, accepted terms. Reporting systems often climb no higher than activity because activity is easiest to verify and safest to own.

For every metric, ask which link it measures and what would falsify the assumed connection to the next link. A target hit may leave the system functioning. A decline in attacks may reflect preparation for a larger operation. Territory held may drain the force needed elsewhere. Combine numbers with enemy behaviour, replacement and political evidence. When a measure becomes a target for the organisation, inspect what people can improve without improving the war. Establish a baseline and a time horizon before celebrating change. A lower monthly attack total can coexist with wider territorial influence or better enemy recruitment. One indicator rarely carries the causal burden alone.

Build decisions and design the ending

A plan should identify points where new information changes the choice. What level of loss requires a pause? What enemy movement triggers a branch? What evidence shows that the partner can carry the task? What condition permits negotiation or withdrawal? Who has authority to decide, and how quickly can the decision reach the force?

This turns uncertainty from an excuse into design. Reserves remain available because their release has criteria. Alternative routes are prepared

because access can fail. Coalition disagreements are addressed before the crisis because national permissions differ. A decision point is useful only when leaders are willing to act on the evidence. If every possible observation leads to continuing the same policy, assessment has become theatre.

Write the termination sequence alongside the campaign. Who can agree terms, and can that actor bind the forces involved? What counts as compliance? Who verifies it? What happens to weapons, prisoners, displaced people, local administration and security after major combat? Which friendly forces remain, under what authority, for how long and at whose cost? What happens if the enemy complies partly?

The answers will change the opening. Regime removal requires plans for authority that restoring a border does not. A coercive strike needs a channel through which concession can be recognised. Supporting an ally requires conditions for reducing support without causing collapse. Designing the ending does not predict every detail. It exposes when the desired political condition demands capabilities, legitimacy and patience absent from the proposed war. It also reveals coalition fractures early. Partners willing to fight together may disagree over occupation, borders, prosecutions or withdrawal. An ending that depends on unity must explain how that unity survives success.

The limits

These lenses are diagnostic. They cannot tell a government whether its purpose is just, lawful or worth the lives required. They may show that an aim is feasible while saying nothing about whether it should be pursued. They also compress societies into actors and preferences. Real governments contain factions, institutions and private interests. Populations are not one will waiting to be broken or protected.

Causal chains can become too neat. Chance, emotion, incompetence, courage and sudden political change interrupt them. The opponent may choose something no model ranked highly. Metrics can be corrupted,

intelligence deceived and red teams domesticated. Historical analogy adds another trap: cases remembered as lessons were shaped by conditions that may be missing now. The search for a binding constraint can also narrow vision too far. Several weaknesses may interact, and a system can fail suddenly after appearing robust because one loss changes expectations elsewhere.

Use the framework to expose assumptions and organise revision, then return to evidence, law, ethics and people. A strategy that treats civilians as variables, allies as assets or soldiers as renewable inputs has misunderstood the political condition it is meant to secure.

The one thing to keep

Keep the contested conversion chain.

Whenever someone claims that a war is being won, ask how the action described changes the choices of the opponent and other decisive actors. Then ask how that change creates the promised political condition, what generates and sustains the required power and what permits force to stop. Do not allow a captured place, destroyed target, new weapon or impressive casualty ratio to answer a different question.

War rewards visible action and hides the long connections underneath it. Strategy is the discipline of making those connections explicit while they can still be changed. The permanent shift is from asking whether a side is winning the fight to asking whether the fight is producing a peace it can recognise, afford and keep. That question does not make war clean. It makes evasion harder.

Terms

Strategy

The contested conversion of political purpose into organised power and action. It connects desired conditions, methods, resources, other actors' responses, risk and termination across time, including the conditions for stopping.

Policy

The purposes and limits set by political authority. Policy explains why force is used, which interests matter, what settlement is acceptable and which costs the state will bear.

Grand strategy

The coordination of military, diplomatic, economic, informational and domestic resources for long-term political purposes. It includes war preparation and peace, but the term is used inconsistently across governments and schools.

End state

The set of political and strategic conditions that should exist when an operation or campaign ends. A useful end state is observable, bounded and connected to a feasible transition.

Theory of victory

A causal explanation of how proposed actions will change the enemy's capacity, expectations or choices enough to produce the desired political condition. It should state assumptions that evidence can challenge.

Ends, ways, means and risk

A planning frame linking desired conditions, broad methods, available resources and dangers created by mismatch or uncertainty. It organises questions but does not replace a causal theory or enemy model.

Operational art

The arrangement of campaigns and major operations so tactical actions create strategic effects. It bridges individual engagements and political purpose through sequencing, geography, sustainment and decision.

Campaign

A connected series of operations designed to achieve strategic or operational objectives within a theatre or problem. Campaigns give battles meaning by arranging what precedes and follows them.

Tactics

The employment of forces in engagements. Tactics concern how units fight, move and combine capabilities locally, although tactical outcomes can have immediate political or strategic consequences.

Centre of gravity

A concentration of power, cohesion or dependence whose loss would have major consequences for the contest. The term comes from Clausewitz and becomes misleading when treated as a mandatory target label.

Decisive point

A place, event, capability or decision that offers marked advantage towards an objective. It matters through the chain it changes, not because every plan requires one dramatic moment.

Culmination

The point at which a force can no longer continue its current operation effectively. Supply, losses, resistance, distance, fatigue or political limits may cause attack or defence to culminate.

Legitimacy

The degree to which relevant people and institutions treat an authority, rule or settlement as binding, acceptable or preferable to the alternatives.

Legitimacy can reduce enforcement costs without removing coercion or disagreement.

Manoeuvre

Movement and positioning used to create advantage, threaten several options, isolate forces or attack vulnerability. Manoeuvre gains strategic value when the position produces denial, destruction or coercion.

Attrition

Reduction of enemy personnel, equipment, supply, cohesion or will through cumulative loss. Attrition is strategic when it targets a resource the opponent cannot replace or accept losing.

Combined arms

The coordinated use of capabilities such as infantry, armour, artillery, engineers and air defence so each creates opportunities and covers vulnerabilities that another capability cannot manage alone.

Joint operations

Operations integrating forces from more than one military service or domain. Joint action matters when capabilities create connected effects, rather than when each service merely appears in the plan.

Mission command

Command through clear intent, shared understanding and delegated freedom over method. It supports adaptation, but depends on competence, trust, communication and boundaries for risk and escalation.

Friction

Clausewitz's term for the accumulated difficulties that separate planned war from experienced war. Error, fatigue, terrain, weather, fear, delay and chance turn easy actions into hard ones.

Fog of war

A later shorthand for the uncertainty surrounding enemy position, intention and effect. More information can reduce some uncertainty while creating noise, overload and new opportunities for deception.

Logistics

The planning and movement of people, supplies, equipment, services and infrastructure. Logistics determines which forces can reach a theatre, operate there and recover after consumption or damage.

Sustainment

The wider maintenance of combat power over time, including logistics, personnel, health, engineering, finance, infrastructure and industrial support. It determines operational duration, intensity and freedom of action.

Mobilisation

The conversion of people, institutions and economic resources from peacetime status into organised war capacity. Mobilisation takes time and can create political pressure to act before an opponent completes it.

Force generation

The process of recruiting, training, equipping, organising and preparing usable forces. Headline personnel or equipment totals overstate power when people lack readiness, specialists, maintenance, discipline or collective practice.

Deterrence

Preventing an action by shaping the opponent's expectation of cost, denial or failure. Deterrence depends on capability, communication, credibility, interests and the opponent's interpretation and tolerance of risk.

Coercion

Using threats, limited force or imposed costs to make an opponent choose different behaviour. Coercion requires a concession the opponent can deliver and an alternative it prefers to continued resistance.

Denial

Preventing the opponent from achieving its objective rather than relying on punishment to change its mind. Denial can deter by making success look unlikely or constrain after deterrence fails.

Escalation

An increase or qualitative change in a conflict's intensity, scope, participants or stakes. Escalation may be deliberate, accidental or emergent through interacting attempts to gain control.

Armistice

An agreement to stop fighting under specified conditions. It may endure without a comprehensive peace treaty when monitoring, deterrence and the parties' interests make renewed combat unattractive, even without a final comprehensive political settlement between them.

War termination

The political and military process by which organised hostilities end and a new relationship is enforced or accepted and maintained. It includes bargaining, surrender, transition, compliance, withdrawal and possible occupation.

Go Deeper

Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Military Strategy: A Very Short Introduction*, second edition (2024)

Start here. Echevarria gives a compact account of strategy as the connection between military power and political purpose, then tests the major schools against limited war, irregular conflict and changing technology. It is short enough to read before committing to the classics and sceptical enough to prevent their slogans becoming doctrine. The emphasis is conceptual rather than campaign narrative, which makes it a useful map of the field but means readers should pair it with history. Its account of rival definitions is especially useful for seeing why strategic debate often begins with people using the same word for different tasks.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, revised edition (1984)

The foundational difficult book. Read Book One first, then Books Two, Three and Eight before deciding whether to continue. Clausewitz explains war as political interaction shaped by violence, chance, friction and unequal purposes. The manuscript was unfinished when he died, and later readers have extracted incompatible formulas from it. That is a warning and part of its value. Howard and Paret's translation is a widely used English scholarly edition, with an introductory essay that helps place the text after the Napoleonic wars. Do not hunt one sentence that settles the field. Watch how political purpose changes the scale, effort and meaning of military action.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Michael Nylan (2020)

Read this as an ancient composite text on calculation, deception, intelligence, command and political economy, not as a collection of quotations from one timeless genius. Nylan's translation keeps the strangeness of the work visible and supplies context without burying the brief chapters. It is an excellent contrast with Clausewitz because it foregrounds shaping, information and avoiding wasteful collision. The dating and authorship remain contested, so the introduction matters almost as much as the famous lines. Compare its preference for shaping and economy with the harder problem of opponents who cannot be induced to accept the desired order without prolonged force.

Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, second revised edition (2005)

The corrective most strategic reading needs. Iklé asks why governments plan intensively for fighting while neglecting the political mechanisms that stop it. He examines bargaining, domestic institutions, intelligence failure, expanding aims and the difficulty of recognising when continuation has become self-defeating. Some cases belong to the Cold War world in which the book was written, but the central problem has aged well. Read it after a campaign history and watch how often the apparent ending proves to be only the beginning of the strategic judgement. The book is strongest when read against confident operational histories, because it restores bargaining, domestic politics and the possibility that leaders cannot admit their original theory has failed.

Notes and Sources

Scope, terminology and current doctrine

This book uses strategy for the contested conversion of political purpose into usable power, military effects and an enforceable political condition. Policy, strategy, operations and tactics are treated as analytical levels with feedback rather than sealed institutional compartments. Antulio J. Echevarria II, Lawrence Freedman, Hew Strachan and Richard Betts provide the main modern debate over definition, feasibility and the danger of making strategy look more controllable than it is.

Current planning terminology was checked against NATO's *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, AJP-5, Edition B, Version 1, published in June 2026, and the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff's *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0, dated 1 July 2025. AJP-5 frames the end state as political-strategic conditions and treats ends, ways, means, risk, transition, termination and culmination. The 2025 JP 5-0 no longer uses *military end state* as a formal design term and places greater emphasis on transition. This book retains lower-case *end state* as broad analytical shorthand for the conditions sought, not as a claim that NATO and United States doctrine use identical terminology. NATO's *Allied Joint Doctrine for Sustainment of Operations*, AJP-4, Edition C, Version 1, supports the account of sustainment as a determinant of freedom of action, tempo, intensity and duration. Doctrine states what institutions intend to teach. It is not treated as proof that plans work as designed.

The phrase theory of victory is used in the established strategic-studies sense: a causal account of how action is expected to produce political success. The manuscript requires the generation of usable power, other actors' responses and the conversion from military effect to political condition to be stated. The seven misconception headings are synthetic labels, not quotations from named sources.

The Whole Thing in One Page and Why You Should Care

Hannibal's victory at Cannae is dated to 216 BCE. Polybius is the principal surviving analytical source for the Second Punic War. The claim retained here is narrower than the legend: Cannae destroyed a Roman field army, but did not cause Rome's main alliance network to collapse or the Senate to seek peace. The wider Roman recovery depended on recruitment, allies, finance, command and operations beyond any one battle.

Napoleon entered Moscow in September 1812 without gaining the political settlement he expected. Dominic Lieven and Martin van Creveld support the emphasis on Russian strategy, distance, supply, animal losses, disease and the failure to force Alexander I into negotiation. Winter intensified the retreat but is not presented as a solitary cause.

The German occupation of Paris in June 1940 and Britain's continuation of the war are used to separate the defeat of France from settlement of the wider conflict. Karl-Heinz Frieser, Williamson Murray and Allan Millett, and Phillips Payson O'Brien support the treatment of the 1940 campaign, coalition potential and the widening war.

The fall of Baghdad in April 2003 is used only for the distinction between regime overthrow and the creation of political order. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, official American histories and reconstruction investigations document the transition from invasion to occupation, the security vacuum and the emergence of insurgency. No single decision is made to carry the whole causal burden.

The Core Ideas

Define the peace before choosing the war

The distinction between military success and political victory is central to Clausewitz, Echevarria, Freedman, Iklé and modern planning doctrine. An end state is treated as a maintained set of conditions, not a ceremonial endpoint. The discussion of distribution is an analytical addition: a state or movement can achieve one security objective while imposing costs that should remain visible in the political judgement.

Cannae supplies the concrete counterexample to battle determinism. The text does not claim that Rome was immune to defeat or that Hannibal lacked a political strategy. It states that the military result failed to produce the required political collapse, and that Roman institutions and alliances were part of the explanation.

Strategy as a causal theory under scarcity

Ends, ways, means and risk follow contemporary joint-planning usage. Betts supplies the strongest sceptical counterweight: strategy seeks to control an interaction whose causal complexity and political uncertainty make consistent success difficult. The manuscript therefore treats a strategy as a testable claim rather than a formula.

The 1991 Gulf War account follows Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh. The coalition's central authorised purpose was the liberation of Kuwait. The manuscript does not claim that every coalition member shared identical motives or that later instability proves the campaign failed against that bounded purpose. It uses the case to show that narrower aims can improve feasibility while leaving wider problems unresolved.

Power generation and sustainment

Polybius supports the account of Rome's capacity to raise new armies and hold much of its alliance network after Cannae. Van Creveld supplies the historical logistics spine, while AJP-4 supports the current description of sustainment as a determinant of freedom of action, tempo, intensity and duration. O'Brien, Murray and Millett, and Glantz support the account of industrial and coalition potential becoming effective only through production, shipping, mobilisation, bases, command and replacement.

The treatment of movements is deliberately bounded. Mao Zedong's *On Protracted War* supplies the three-stage theory at the level stated and was written in 1938 for China's resistance to Japan. Kalyvas and the insurgency literature support the wider point that armed organisations generate power through political control, information, recruitment, local institutions and coercion as well as weapons. No Chinese case is presented as a universal sequence for civil or irregular war.

Culmination follows Clausewitz and AJP-5. The term describes the point at which a current form of operation can no longer continue effectively. It is not treated as one measurable instant or a guarantee that commanders will identify it in time.

The enemy gets a vote, but not with one voice

Friction and uncertainty derive from Clausewitz, principally Book One of *On War*. The manuscript avoids turning friction into a synonym for all difficulty or "fog of war" into Clausewitz's exact phrase. Enemy adaptation, organisational learning and the limits of scripted exercises are supported by Biddle, Cohen, Freedman and military planning literature.

Kalyvas supplies the strongest correction to treating civil war as a duel between two coherent blocks. Coalitions, governments and movements contain factions, local commanders, sponsors and communities whose interests can diverge. The 1940 comparison follows Frieser's rejection of a single fixed "blitzkrieg" formula. Similar mobile and encirclement methods contributed to large German operational successes in 1941, but did not

destroy Soviet state capacity, mobilisation or the ability to continue the war.

Time and unequal clocks

Fabius Maximus and the Roman response to Hannibal are documented by Polybius and later Roman tradition. The manuscript uses delay without turning Fabius into the sole author of Rome's recovery. Lieven supports the interpretation of Russian withdrawal and endurance in 1812.

The claim that German leaders feared prolonged coalition wars before 1914 and again under Hitler is drawn from Strachan, Murray and Millett, and broader campaign history. It does not imply one unchanging German plan or erase political choice. The discussion of Vietnam follows Logevall, Herring and Echevarria on asymmetric stakes, political time and the gap between battlefield performance and a sustainable political order.

Battles, campaigns and systems

Biddle supports the emphasis on force employment and integrated tactics rather than equipment or numbers alone. Nolan supplies the sustained attack on decisive-battle explanations. O'Brien and Murray and Millett support the treatment of coalition capacity, air-sea power, shipping, production and repeated campaign pressure in the Second World War.

Manoeuvre and attrition are defined functionally. The manuscript does not claim that all movement aims at physical destruction or that every cumulative strategy is wise. It rejects the hierarchy in which one label proves intelligence and the other proves failure. Combined arms and mission command are described at general-reader depth; service-specific doctrine and technical employment belong to specialist works.

Winning includes ending

Iklé is the main source for the neglect of termination, expanding aims and the domestic difficulty of admitting failure. Schelling supports the distinction between brute force, coercive bargaining, punishment and denial. The wording does not assume that opponents calculate costs cleanly or that pain yields predictable concessions.

The treatment of Germany and Japan after 1945 is restricted to the conditions that made occupation and institutional change possible. It does not generalise that model to limited or civil wars. The discussion of post-2003 Iraq is supported by Gordon and Trainor, official histories and reconstruction reporting. Regime removal is separated from occupation, policing, state reconstruction and political legitimacy. No complete outcome is attributed to one administrative choice.

The Afghanistan passage relies principally on the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's 2023 evaluation, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed*, read alongside its 2022 report *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*. External finance, air support, contractors, logistics and political assurance were important dependencies. The report also stresses Afghan leadership, corruption, exclusion, local bargains, Taliban pressure and the psychological effects of withdrawal. The manuscript keeps that interaction and does not describe Afghans as passive recipients of outside decisions.

Historical development and practice

Ancient and early modern traditions

Michael Nylan's translation and introduction support the cautious account of *The Art of War* as a layered ancient Chinese text whose dating and authorship remain disputed. No biographical claim about a securely documented general called Sun Tzu is required by the argument.

The Thucydides passages draw on the Landmark edition. His speeches cannot be treated as transcripts, and his selection reflects his own analytical design. The Sicilian expedition remains secure as an Athenian decision, campaign and disaster whose political debate, reinforcement and command problems can be traced in his narrative.

Machiavelli's *The Art of War* supplies the civic-military question. The book does not endorse his specific prescriptions for infantry or militia as timeless rules.

Napoleon, Clausewitz and Jomini

Napoleonic operations and the corps system are supported by David Chandler, Gunther Rothenberg, Lieven and van Creveld. The manuscript rejects the claim that French armies lived entirely off the land. Foraging supplemented planned supply and worked differently across terrain, season and campaign.

Clausewitz's concepts are taken from the Howard and Paret revised edition, read with Strachan and Echevarria. "Policy" translates *Politik*, a word carrying both policy and politics; the manuscript therefore keeps political purpose and political interaction in view. Centre of gravity is bounded to the concentration of power or cohesion relevant to a particular contest. *On War* was unfinished at Clausewitz's death in 1831 and prepared for publication by Marie von Clausewitz.

Jomini's geometry, decisive points and lines of operation are treated as an influential teachable language, not a full summary of his work or a caricature of mechanical certainty. McPherson and Cohen support the treatment of Lincoln's wartime direction, the search for suitable commanders and the need to connect military pressure to the Union's political purposes.

Professional staffs, industry and operational art

Daniel Hughes's edition of Moltke's writings supports the combination of peacetime preparation, railway mobilisation and delegated judgement. Prussian victories in 1866 and 1870 to 1871 are retained as context, without claiming that staff organisation alone caused them.

The First World War discussion follows Strachan and modern operational histories. Railway plans and mobilisation compressed choices but did not operate automatically. Germany's invasion of Belgium was a political and military decision with alliance consequences. Tactical learning is described through artillery, reconnaissance, counter-battery work, infiltration, tanks, engineering and coordination, without claiming uniform progress across armies or theatres.

David Glantz supports the account of Soviet operational art and deep battle. The manuscript notes institutional discontinuity and uneven wartime application, avoiding a straight line from theory to victory.

Sea and air power

Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* and Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* provide the contrast between concentrated battle fleets and maritime control as a relative, political enabler of wider war. Their differences are compressed for a one-hour account. O'Brien and the world-war histories support the role of merchant shipping, convoy, submarines, aircraft, bases, intelligence and replacement.

Douhet represents the interwar expectation that bombers could reach political and industrial centres directly. The text does not claim that all air theorists agreed or that bombing had no strategic effect. It states that effects varied by target, intelligence, defence, adaptation, timing and exploitation, while rapid morale collapse did not occur as a general rule.

Coalition, limited and irregular war

The Second World War coalition account follows Murray and Millett, O'Brien, David Glantz and global histories. Allied material superiority is described as potential requiring conversion through shipping, production, bases, command and political compromise. China's contribution and the Soviet continental war are included so "Allied coalition" does not become a shorthand for Anglo-American action alone.

Schelling supplies the distinction between taking and coercing and the analysis of threats and risk under nuclear danger. Korea is treated as a limited-war example whose central defended outcome was the survival of South Korea, without presenting the armistice as resolution of the Korean conflict. Vietnam is used at strategic scale and does not replace a full political or social history.

Mao's *On Protracted War*, David Galula, Stathis Kalyvas and David Kilcullen inform the irregular-war discussion. Population protection, intelligence and

political reform can improve a counterinsurgency strategy, but evidence from one campaign does not establish a universal method. Local state interests, sanctuary, identity, external support and the legitimacy of foreign presence differ materially.

Current planning

AJP-5, AJP-4 and JP 5-0 were checked in their current official forms on 4 September 2026. AJP-5 Edition B, Version 1 was released in June 2026; AJP-4 Edition C, Version 1 was published in 2025; and the current JP 5-0 is dated 1 July 2025. The manuscript uses current doctrine to show formal planning questions, records the difference between NATO end-state terminology and the revised United States emphasis on transition, and does not claim novelty for ideas with older roots.

What People Get Wrong and Use It

The corrections synthesize the evidence already listed. “Strategy is the plan” distinguishes coordinated action from the causal theory that gives it political meaning. “The stronger side should win” is narrowed to usable power relative to task and time. “Technology makes old strategy obsolete” does not deny that technology can transform warfare. It denies automatic conversion from technical performance to political decision. “Good generals should be free of politics” follows Clausewitz, Cohen and civil-military history. Political control is distinguished from tactical interference, and military professionalism from a right to set national purpose.

The Use It section is an analytical toolkit, not operational advice for conducting violence. Its questions concern public reasoning, policy assessment and the structure of claims. It deliberately omits weapon employment, targeting procedures and technical tactics.

Terms

Definitions were reconciled against Clausewitz, Echevarria, AJP-5, AJP-4 and JP 5-0. Some terms vary among armed forces and scholarly schools. “Grand strategy”, “centre of gravity”, “operational art”, “mission command”, “legitimacy” and “culmination” are given bounded working definitions rather than represented as universally settled.

Go Deeper

Bibliographic details for the four recommendations were checked against Oxford University Press, Princeton University Press, W. W. Norton and Columbia University Press records. The Echevarria recommendation uses the second edition published in 2024. The Howard and Paret *On War* entry refers to the revised Princeton edition of 1984. Iklé’s recommendation refers to the second revised edition published by Columbia University Press in 2005.

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