IN AN ERA OF SIGNIFICANT FISCAL CONSTRAINTS AND MULTILATERAL RESPONSES TO EXTERNAL THREATS, DOES THE UK HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR STRATEGIC ACTION?

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July 2010
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Strategy has become a term so widespread that it has virtually lost all value. Its meaning has expanded so that it no longer applies solely to the application of military power. Even for those who seek to apply the discipline of strategy to matters that affect national, regional or even global security, the impact of transnational factors and the increasing imperative to act as part of a coalition or alliance suggest that strategic theory is increasingly different from practice. Multilateral responses challenge the clear articulation of *ends*, *ways* and *means*, and the act of intervention changes the context in ways that are often impossible to anticipate. This paper explores oblique decision-making, and its role in addressing complex problems for which scientific processes seem ill-suited. It challenges the assumption that shortage of resources and inadequate analysis of the theatre of operations are at the heart of our difficulties with strategy. Greater problems result from failures to clearly articulate the purpose for which we are employing military, and other instruments of power, and from identifying *ends* for which the prescribed *ways* and *means* are mismatched.
INTRODUCTION

The word strategy has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning and left it only with banalities\(^1\).

Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other policy possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political\(^2\).

1. Clausewitz’s recognition that clarity of political purpose lies at the heart of effective strategy remains true today. Yet the UK, along with her mainly Western liberal democratic allies, finds it increasingly difficult to develop clear strategies that effectively combine all the levers of national power to address the challenges that we have faced in the past decade, and the one we face in Afghanistan today. By comparison, strategies to counter military challenges, such as the restoration of the territorial integrity of an ally\(^3\) or an overseas territory,\(^4\) appear more attainable. This paper examines the key components of effective strategy and the relationship between strategy and security. It differentiates strategy from policy; national interest from the aspiration to be a ‘force for good’; and trends that separate national interest from national security. Drawing from historical examples, it explores how Britain’s international responsibilities and capabilities might shape strategic design and ambition.

2. The adoption of the term strategy into ever-greater use, and the increasing acceptance that strategy is not only about the use of military force; that governments may employ means other than, or additional to, military power in the pursuit of UK’s security objectives are two factors that have affected the development of effective strategies in the past decade. The dependence of developed states on critical global resources to maintain the prosperity of their people, and the impact of technology on knowledge systems and trade makes modern nations increasingly inter-dependent. UK National Security Strategy (NSS) acknowledges this, and makes a compelling case for adopting a broad definition of

\(^3\) As was pursued in the First Gulf War in 1991 – UK Operation Granby – to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.
\(^4\) Such as the liberation of the Falkland Islands in 1982 – UK Operation Corporate.
national interests, which may require intervention at a distance\textsuperscript{5}. It recognises, too, that where intervention may be required, UK will look to do so as part of an international alliance or coalition in which she is a supporting nation – rather than leading\textsuperscript{6}. However, identifying the ends, ways and means necessary to achieve policy goals are the prerequisites of operational design. These can be hard to achieve when acting alone - the challenges multiply with numbers in a coalition.

3. Yet interventions are costly, and the overheads required of military forces to be capable of projecting power at a distance are much more than those required for purely defensive roles. Cornish and Dorman have suggested that intervention capabilities may be up to 6 times more expensive than maintaining forces for home defence\textsuperscript{7}. This provides a challenge to any government that has international obligations and interests, and aspires to play a global role. A crisis of global credit and national debt merely compounds it.

4. This paper is primarily concerned with the development of strategy for the employment of military, and other instruments of power, for a campaign that is not seen as a matter of national survival by national leaders, or the public. This is a highly demanding strategic environment in which to operate. Most UK research and doctrine focuses on unilateral strategies. This paper’s focus extends to alliance and coalition operations in which UK is allocated, or chooses, a supporting role\textsuperscript{8}. Such operations have been characterised in part by the challenge they have presented to leaders of western liberal democracies, who have recently struggled to develop clear objectives and a compelling strategic narrative.

5. It will go on to suggest that a theory of change is necessary, based on a wide-ranging analysis that is likely to include cultural, anthropological, economic and political factors. This theory should then be linked to a clear and enduring strategic narrative. It recommends that, as well as developing the means to better achieve comprehensive effects, UK needs to understand the characteristics and limitations of multilateral responses.

\textsuperscript{5} The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom (NSS), Security for the Next Generation, HMSO June 2009, 4.22 – 4.27.
\textsuperscript{6} ibid – chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{8} Often referred to as wars of choice or discretionary operations in the widely-accepted shorthand of current commentators.
Finally it makes observations about the role of leadership, understanding and trust in the development of strategy and offers ideas designed to better frame the development of UK strategy. All this is set in the context of our probable role as a supporting partner in any multilateral response to international challenges that affect UK’s national responsibilities, interests and values. While advocating structures to better enable strategy development is beyond the scope of this paper, it will describe some characteristics of effective institutions, taken from historic examples.

WHAT IS STRATEGY?

6. In the 1940s, Edward Mead Earle – the prominent US strategist who was at the heart of a revival of western analysis of strategy during the inter-war years, and part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s war-time administration – advocated the study of strategy because ‘knowledge of the best military thought will enable … readers to comprehend the causes of war and the fundamental principles which govern the conduct of war.’ He was representative of academics and strategic practitioners alike who argued that the unique complexity of war demanded a thorough review of its characteristics, and the role of armed forces in achieving international objectives. So, to his generation the term strategy meant the application of military power, although they recognised that it may require coordination with other national instruments of power. Yet over the past sixty years, academic study of strategy and its precepts has been broadened to apply to a range of activities that include military, political, commercial, business management and sport.

7. The very ubiquity of the term strategy, and the trend to juxtapose the word strategic (high-level, over-arching – usually by implication good) with tactical (in the weeds, low-level – often disparaging), can detract from a clear view of its role and function. Few government departments, large military headquarters, companies or professional sports teams now lack a strategic planning cell. The result is a profusion of strategic terms and descriptions, and a dilution of the focus that Edward Mead Earle and his colleagues

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brought to it. This is largely a post-World War Two development, which has followed the export of strategic terms from the military into commerce and from there into mainstream academia. However much the military community may desire the return of former clarities, it seems likely that this trend is irreversible.

8. The experience of recent interventions worldwide has been the catalyst for new thinking that affects strategy. This leads to two significant deductions that influence strategic design and implementation. First, where instability and insecurity threaten access to vital economic and energy resources, or other national interests (such as overseas territories or the security of allies) then national governments may decide to respond, most likely as part of a coalition. Second, an effective strategic response demands action that is integrated across all lines of national power appropriate to the nature of the instability. So strategy demands comprehensive design and implementation. These ideas will be explored later, after describing the relationship of strategy with policy, and with security, and examining the place of strategic leadership and the indirect approach or obliquity.11

9. Strategy and Security. UK’s NSS lays out a broad approach to defining national interests, making clear that maintenance of the international rules-based system is at the heart of UK’s approach. The Prime Minister’s forward links strategy, security and stability: ‘in this global age, instability anywhere in the world can affect our interests and ultimately our security more quickly and in more fundamental ways than ever before. So we need global responses to global problems.’12 The recent UK defence doctrine for security and stabilisation reinforces this approach; making the case that security is an essential prerequisite for stability:

The rules-based international system relies upon stability. Security is the foundation on which stability is built. In a crisis, it may have to be fought for. At the heart of contest for security may be a bloody insurgency. However, defeating an insurgency is merely treating the symptom. For real, long-term success, you must address the root causes of instability, and that requires an approach that

12 UK NSS, op cit, p 3.
combines economic, governance and security measures; a comprehensive approach.\textsuperscript{13}

National strategies are likely to lead to policy choices to intervene in unstable regions where the lack of stability affects UK’s national interests.

10. In the context of this paper, national interests can be divided into three categories; \textit{possessional interests} – the area within the nation’s borders, and her overseas territories as well as her expatriate communities, and national assets (which will include, for example, key elements of the nation’s industrial base). Next are \textit{vital national interests} – which, if threatened, risk the failure of the state. These include access to energy, critical natural resources and could include national access to the means of maintaining a state’s trade. Finally there may be \textit{common interests} – those interests that are shared with one of more other states, and may comprise, for example, reliance on the international rules-based system, collective access to trade routes and the freedom to exchange goods and services without undue constraint. This paper is mainly concerned with \textit{vital national interests} and \textit{common interests}; those interests for which a strategy is likely to be challenging to define. This paper will examine below the implications of the requirement for \textit{comprehensive approaches} to strategy development below.

11. \textbf{Policy}. If we accept the premise that strategy is both a term, and a discipline, applied increasingly to matters of national, local and commercial activity as well as the application of military force, it is as important as ever to distinguish between policy and strategy. At its simplest, policy is a course of action pursued by government. It therefore describes political direction given in pursuit of national or collective values and interests. Policy will describe the \textit{ends} to be achieved and it typically also defines those constraints that are imposed in pursuit of those goals – by circumscribing the \textit{means} available, be it in terms of time, money, capabilities (or all of these).\textsuperscript{14}

12. Thus, a sound policy will establish the goals to be achieved and describe any constraints that are imposed in the fulfilment of those goals. This is, of course, a political

activity. There can be no doubt that political direction lies at the apex of the hierarchy between policy and strategy, which was true in Clausewitz’s time\(^ {15} \) and remains so today. The role of government is to determine how to integrate and resource the levers of national power, and that of her armed forces is to achieve the ends defined in policy. However, even a clearly articulated policy may not provide the focus required to enable the integration of all levers of national power. One may not always flow directly from the other. Carl von Clausewitz identified that, in some cases ‘the political objective will not provide a suitable military objective. In that event, another military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose’.\(^ {16} \)

13. **Strategy.** UK capstone doctrine assumes a unitary National Strategy, which ‘directs the coordinated application of the instruments of national power (diplomatic, economic and military) in the pursuit of national policy aspirations.’\(^ {17} \) This is significant for two reasons; not only does the only UK official document that describes the design and development of strategy mandate an approach that integrates all the levers of national power, it also envisages a single strategic level, where many students of strategy see a more complex environment, with different levels of strategy. Basil Liddell Hart for example, whose ideas about strategy and the indirect approach have had such a positive influence on the evolution of British strategic thought, defined strategy as ‘the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy.’\(^ {18} \) Therefore, strategy related directly to the application of a single lever of national power (although Liddell Hart would not have recognised those terms) – the use of military force. From this it followed that strategy was the responsibility of military planners, and principal amongst them was the Chiefs of Staff (COS) committee, which is described in more detail at paragraph 35 *et seq* (below).

14. **Grand Strategy.** Liddell Hart went on to differentiate between levels of strategy, and implicitly made clear the distinct roles of participants in both the government and military; ‘The role of grand strategy is to coordinate and direct all the resources of the nation, or the band of nations, to the attainment of the political object of the war.’\(^ {19} \) This

\(^{15}\) See footnote 2.


\(^{19}\) Ibid, p 54.
definition is significant for two reasons. First, it clearly envisages strategies that integrate all the national levers of power in pursuit of national interest and to achieve policy goals. And furthermore, it is focused on waging war.

15. Since Liddell Hart updated his seminal work on strategy and warfare, the UK (in common with other Western nations’ approaches\(^{20}\)) has extended the definition of strategy to encompass national activity in pursuit of ‘national policy aspirations.’ The effect has been to broaden the span of strategy and reduce its focus. Contemporary thinking assumes that strategy is no longer concerned only with the conduct of war. As an example, the NSS is concerned with ‘security’, which is defined broadly. It includes ideas that underpin currently accepted concepts of human security, national security, physical and personal security, and encompasses such latent challenges as stabilisation; competition for vital resources; access to trade; climate change; nuclear proliferation; weapons of mass destruction and terrorism:

‘...security is much broader.... Global poverty and weak or fragile governance creates instability, and sometimes conflict, which can impact on the overall stability of individual regions which are strategically important to the UK and our interests. Competition for energy, which will be exacerbated over the coming decades by the impact of climate change, is a further driver of instability. Climate change increases the risk of disruptive, high impact events in other countries and even within the UK itself. Moreover, those who threaten global stability – be they other states, ideologically motivated terrorists or serious trans-national organised crime syndicates – can use more sophisticated means to pursue their objectives, for example through the use of cyber space.’\(^{21}\)

This begs the question – who should be responsible for the implementation of such a broad-based strategy, and how can **ends, ways and means** be aligned?

\(^{20}\) See, for example, the US statement on strategy contained in the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, DoD Publications, Feb 2010. “Consistent with the President’s vision, the United States will advance these interests by strengthening our domestic foundation and integrating all elements of national power, engaging abroad on the basis of mutual interest and mutual respect, and promoting an international order that advances our interests by reinforcing the rights and responsibilities of all nations.” (QDR 2010, Executive Summary page iv. The same idea is to be found in the preface to the French Livre Blanc.

\(^{21}\) NSS 2009, *op cit*, para 206.
16. Gordon Craig, who collaborated with Earle in the development of US strategic thinking during and after WW2, identifies two further characteristics of grand strategy; vision, and the absence of scientific proof and predictability: ‘…the art of grand strategy is to foresee the outlines of the future and be prepared to deal with it.’22 Here he refers to Churchill’s foresight in 1942 after the battle of Stalingrad, to identify the momentum of war in the east shifting to the Soviet side. Churchill began to apprehend the excessively large Soviet presence in post-war Europe and to consider plans to limit it by border agreements or mutually recognised (and thereby limiting) spheres of influence for the Soviet and western Allies.

17. **Military Strategy.** Levels of strategy are frequently used to describe its complexity (grand strategy; military strategy and operational level, for example). In the context of this paper, military strategy is defined as the application of military force to achieve the objectives of grand strategy. Yet increasingly, our national strategic objectives require the integration of effects across a broad spectrum of activity – often described as the *comprehensive approach*. Two challenges emerge; first, as Colin Gray pointed out, ‘government[s] have proved vulnerable to the temptation to leap from policy selection to military operations, without attention to the essential levels of grand strategy and military strategy.’23 Decision makers have neglected the truth that clearly articulated policy may provide a goal, but the action of adversaries, the geography, culture and conditions (to list just a few factors) may render that meaningless to those responsible for ‘policy in execution,’24 as Basil Liddell Hart also described strategy.

18. Second, if other levers of national power are as important as the military in the achievement of strategic ends, then equivalent strategies (should they be *development*, *economic*, *information* strategies?) should be developed, then coordinated to ensure that their execution is aligned. Yet there is no equivalent of doctrine to guide the application of complex planning and execution processes in civil government, nor is there a tradition of cross-government education in strategy or integrated execution of agreed plans. Indeed it is notable that there is more inter-agency representation on military planning courses aimed

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24 Liddell Hart, *op cit*,p 335.
at the execution of strategy (the Higher Command and Staff Course, at the Defence
Academy in Shrivenham, is routinely attended by FCO, SIS, DfID and GCHQ staff),
whereas the RCDS course, whose mission is ‘to prepare … future leaders from the private
and public sectors for high responsibilities in …, by developing their analytical powers,
knowledge of defence and international security, and strategic vision’ has only occasional
national government representation from outside Defence. This suggests that action across
UK government has not changed to reflect this broader definition of strategy. This review
raises a question, which is beyond the scope of this paper: is military strategy applicable
solely to wars of national possession, in which military leaders may be given the freedom
to pursue solely military objectives?

19. Setting aside the proliferation of strategies for every aspect of national and
corporate life, the accepted meaning of strategy is broadening to encompass a wide
interpretation of national security. Currently the UK, like many of her traditional western
allies, faces no direct military threats to her sovereignty. So this presents the challenge of
being ‘at war in a time of peace.’ The national imperatives that necessitated a sharp
focus on strategy and its implementation during war time are less clear-cut today, and the
accepted view is that national security threats demand an inter-agency, or comprehensive
approach. Yet there has been no coordinated effort to either expand the discipline of
strategy design and implementation across Whitehall, or to develop those structures that
can replicate the functions that, for example, the Chiefs of Staff and their planning staffs
carried out during WW2. Therefore, there is a critical dialectic required between those
responsible for policy and those responsible for determining the strategic objectives.
Without accurately aligning the ends, ways and means, the risks are high of committing to a
military deployment without the resources to complete it, or of focusing on an objective
that it is tangential to the required outcome.

20. Operation Husky – the allied landings on Sicily in July 1943 and the first instance
of successful opposed Allied amphibious operations during World War 2 – illustrate the
importance of, for example, a common understanding of the unifying statement of the

26 A phrase arguably coined in 2002 by the American commentator on international relations; David
Halberstam in his book of the same name about the impact of the Cold War on US international interventions
in the latter half of the 20th Century.
objective. In many respects the operation was a clear victory. The seaborne landings were successful, despite strong winds spreading much of the airborne forces and gliders across the sea and south coast of Sicily, and German and Italian forces on Sicily were defeated. Yet the broader strategic purpose of the operation differed in the minds of the key participants leading to a failure to prevent General Huber achieving the withdrawal of the majority of XIV German Panzer Corps and 60,000 men across the Straits of Messina between 10-17 August with most of their equipment, enabling them to fight again during the long and ultimately inconclusive Italian campaign.

21. In the minds of the US commanders, the invasion of Sicily was the first step in taking the fight to German-occupied Europe – they envisaged subsequent campaigns in the European theatre – although the objectives were not yet selected. For FM Brooke, Alexander and the other British commanders however, the goal was to open the sea routes in the Western Mediterranean to Allied shipping which was critical to the Allied war effort. Peter Paret amplifies the point:

_The military objective is dependent on the political purpose, but also on the enemy’s political and military policies, and on the conditions and resources of the two [sic] antagonists, and should be proportionate to those factors. ... From the struggle of a few soldiers to the clash of armies and the intellectual and emotional battlefields of grand strategy and ultimate political decisions, the network of purpose, objective, and means determines events, and should guide the thinking and behaviour of the antagonists._28

22. **Analysis and a Theory of Change.** The development of effective strategy will always include analysis, from which objectives can be derived. Strategic analysis will take into account enduring cultural, historic and economic factors; personalities; and the nature of the current situation. If it is to be effective, the process of analysis will start the strategic planning process, and it should then persist – it will be refined as greater understanding, fidelity and cultural awareness is developed. From this analysis a _theory of change_ should

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28 Peter Paret, _op cit_, p 207.
be developed; that is, the vision for altering the situation in a manner that is consistent with achieving the strategic goals. 29 ‘A shared understanding of the context …, between … immediate partners is essential to provide a basis for focused and coordinated action, known by some as a Theory of Change.’ 30 Any common understanding of the ends to be pursued depends on a strategic idea that is robustly tested and agreed between participating agencies and nations.

23. **Understanding and Trust.** To gain agreement on the fundamental idea; the analysis and theory of change, can be challenging to achieve even in the context of a clear-cut national imperative. It is much harder to achieve amongst government departments with different priorities, and international partners whose sense of ownership of the problem varies, because each participant has a different perspective. Colin Gray captures the complexity of multi-agency decisions: ‘when security communities exercise strategic choice they do so not with a completely open, or blank, mind on strategic ideas, but rather with values, attitudes and preferences through which they filter new data, and in terms of which they judge among alternative courses of action.’ 31 So a study of the context of any strategic choice needs to include review of the perspective, motivation and preferences of our colleagues and allies as well as that of the security challenge for which a response may be necessary.

24. **Leadership.** It is notable that the compelling examples of effective strategy, such as that developed by Pericles for the Peloponnesian War, and the Combined COS during World War 2 was forged in a small group, and tested in rigorous debate. The active participation of those who hold responsibility for the strategy leads to best results. As Eliot Cohen describes, using examples taken from the American Civil War to the Arab-Israeli Wars, 32 successful strategy should not be the responsibility of military staff alone, but is ideally created out under the strong and engaged leadership of statesmen who have developed mutual trust with their military leaders. Trust that is built on confidence and

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29 The concept of an _theory of change_ is described more fully in JDP 3-40, chapter 4, section 5 (paras 451 et seq).
personal relationships, usually best forged through shared experiences and experience in taking decisions collaboratively. It is this aspect of understanding and trust that merits emphasis in this short section.

25. Effective relationships between strategic leaders require investment and time. Arguably the first imperative is to recognise that they are engaged in a process in which the questions are critical – and time needs to be devoted to develop both the understanding of the nature of the strategic challenge, as well as each other. Eisenhower’s model for strategic leadership in peacetime provides a notable example, which is examined in paragraph 53. In order to develop the necessary understanding and trust, opportunities must be taken to practise leaders in their roles, either by regular strategy discussions – as enabled by the US NSC and Planning Board – or by exercises, such as the NATO CRISEX model, used throughout the Cold War but abandoned since 1989, designed to present opportunities for leaders to develop their understanding of critical strategic decision making.

STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING

So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one had in mind to do. 33

26. Obliquity. The complexity surrounding most strategic decisions and the range of participants who would wish to influence them, has pushed decision-makers to increasingly sophisticated analysis and planning techniques. The military campaign planning doctrine34, for example, is a book of several hundred pages and the draft Stabilisation Unit guide Integrated Stabilisation Planning – Structures and Processes35 provide a model of inter-departmental processes. Both are examples of attempts to capture key components of strategic decision-making and, despite the caution of their authors, are drawn towards a scientific approach to complex problems.

34 Joint Doctrine Publication 5-00, (2nd Edition), Campaign Planning. DCDC 2009.
35 The July 2009 draft paper has yet to be published in final form.
27. It seems that politicians, military strategists and their advisers share the impulse to define the limits of a problem and to identify the factors that are likely to affect the outcome. The same traits apply to commercial strategies; this prompted Charles Lindblom – a political science professor from Yale University writing in the middle of the last century – to analyse decision making in government and large companies.\textsuperscript{36} His aim was to identify whether the best decisions by government policy-makers were based on the skills taught at business school and the techniques advocated by strategic analysts. He observed that effective practical decision-making, in the face of complexity and ambiguity, is necessarily oblique. Indeed the rationalisation for making a decision is often made in retrospect to justify a decision that has already been made.

28. Complex decision making is often characterised, Lindblom suggests, by one of two related approaches – a scientific approach (which he called the rational, comprehensive approach) that identifies all the available factors and influences and seeks the optimum, rational outcome based on their analysis. The alternative is a simplified approach, described below. ‘Franklin’s Rule’ is an example of the rational approach. He advocated a process that would be familiar to strategic decision makers today\textsuperscript{37}:

\begin{quote}
Divide half a sheet of paper by a line into two columns, writing over the one Pro and the other Con. Then, during three of four days’ consideration, I put down under the different heads short hints of the different motives, that at different times occur to me for or against the measure. When I have got them all together in one view, I endeavour to estimate the respective weights … I have found great advantage for this kind of equation, in what may be called moral or prudential algebra.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Yet, despite the rigour that Franklin proposed as the basis for complex decisions of strategy, we sense that he understood intuitively that this process was, in part, an intellectual fig leaf; a rationale to be applied retrospectively to support a judgement that he had arrived at by another more intuitive approach.

\textsuperscript{37} For a description of Franklin’s Rule see John Kay, \textit{op cit}, chapter 9.
\textsuperscript{38} John Kay, \textit{op cit}, p 89.
29. Alternatively (or maybe additionally) Lindblom saw that complex factors are simplified to enable them to be comprehensively analysed. Yet the practical implementation of supposedly rational approaches is often quite different to that expected. He observed that, although the rational school of strategic thought was in the mainstream of academic thinking on policy formulation and strategy, this was not what policy makers did in practice. Subsequent research in the fields of business strategy revealed that there is often separation between the design of strategy and its implementation. The tools designed for decision-making were not being used by those who were confronted with the complex, intractable problems that face politicians and multinational corporations. Those responsible for strategy design were frustrated when there guidance was not implemented, and those responsible for implementing complex plans complained that those suggested by the strategists were not implementable. Lindblom had identified that the scientific or rational processes that had been refined constantly to better match the demands of complex problem solving were rarely used for strategic decisions. He also warned that the process of simplification, too, was a poor alternative.

30. It is, perhaps, the impulse to simplify the complexities of strategy – and also to create broad theories of conflict – that prompt the creation of what Hew Strachan refers to as meta-narratives. These ‘seek to tie the loose ends of history’ by describing broad sweeps of activity, but can blind leaders and strategists to the particular realities of conflict – not least by reducing the role of personality and accident in the conduct of war, and reducing war to a political science. The dynamic, open human systems in which strategy is evolved differ from those in which the variables are controllable – closed systems which lend themselves to measurement and some degree of prediction.

31. Lindblom’s solution was to propose a science of ‘muddling through’ – a process of ‘initially building out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees.’

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39 Ibid, p 60-64.
40 Walter Kiechel, as well as Peters and Waterman published articles in 1980s US political science journals about corporate strategies that were never implemented. They revealed a mismatch between the work of strategy departments and the subsequent actions of the governments, departments and corporations. See Mintzberg, Ahlstram and Lampel, Strategy Safari, (Harlow, Pearson Education Ltd 2009) chapter 8.
42 Examples of such meta-narratives are Philip Bobbitt’s Shield of Achilles 2002, and Niall Ferguson’s The War of the World, 2006. These impressive books identify broad themes in the development of both international relations and war.
43 John Kay, op cit, p 59.
The misleading name hides the realism and rigour of an approach that is based on a clear understanding of high-level objectives, intermediate goals and base principles. However, the approach limits each step of a near-constant analysis to a limited set of alternatives in which comparisons are made, rather than a comprehensive analysis of all available actions. In this approach, the policy *ends* will be reviewed (the high-level objectives), with a clear understanding of doctrine and operational best practice (the base principles of Lindblom’s analysis) combined with a realistic understanding of what is achievable on the ground, in the circumstances in which the commander is executing strategy. This is likely to require relatively short-term strategic objectives, selected in confidence that the *indirect approach* first advocated by Basil Liddell Hart over 50 years ago, will require strategists to be comfortable with obliquity.

32. Not only are decisions on policy and its supporting strategies not often made on the basis of analysis and assessment, but as John Kay observes, that the dynamics of group decision-making tends to focus on the *ways* and *means*, rather than the *ends* in their deliberations. ‘The test of a good policy is typically that various analysts find themselves agreeing on a policy (without agreeing that it is the most appropriate means to an agreed objective).’ Cass Sunstein, a modern US legal scholar, calls this ‘an incompletely theorised argument’. The insight is that decision making in politics, strategy, business and everyday life is often based on a common view of what to do, which does not require a common view of the reasons for doing it, and so the *ways* and *means* receive greater attention and agreement than do the *ends* of strategic decision making. UK Cabinet Office decision making processes have been amended to address this, at least in part, by capturing the underlying, tangential motivations each recommendation. These may have little direct relationship with the factors that have been identified for consideration, yet, in practise, may affect decision making.

33. An example of such unstated motivations affecting strategic action occurred in 2005. The decision to commit UK troops into Helmand Province, as part of the expansion of the NATO mission in Afghanistan increased UK’s military commitment. It shifted the

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46 Idem.
48 Non-attributable onversation with senior MoD civil servant in the Cabinet Office. 17 Apr 2010.
locus from Masir e Sharif to the contested, Pashtun dominated south and changed the nature of the stabilisation task. Unstated factors in this decision included a military determination to shift UK military commitments from Iraq (an unpopular and increasingly costly conflict) to another, less contentious conflict that offered an alternative military commitment that might be preferable to the declining security of southern Iraq\textsuperscript{49}. This affected other judgements, including a key assessment of the course of action most likely to be welcomed by UK’s principal strategic ally – the US.

34. The ends of the strategic decision relating to the UK objectives in the Afghanistan region had become conflated with policy aspirations, and strategic goals that were unconnected with the strategic outcome in that theatre. UK had failed to separate a broad-based international security policy from the strategic decisions required to achieve clarity and decisive action in the theatre for which the strategy was designed. With hindsight, the observations of US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara as he analysed his own flawed US Vietnam strategy have resonance with UK national decision-making in 2006:

\begin{quote}
We misjudged then – as we have since – the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries... we viewed the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience ... our misjudgements of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

TURNING STRATEGY INTO ACTION

35. During World War 2 the COS committee was a principal instrument responsible for turning strategy into action. This mechanism, both for the design of strategy and conduct of war, had not been newly established, but was an evolution of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), chaired by the Prime Minister in peacetime as well as times of war, and largely the construct of its secretary for 26 years, Maurice Hankey.\textsuperscript{51} Both the

\textsuperscript{49} Non-attributable onversation with senior MoD civil servant in the Cabinet Office. 17 Apr 2010.
\textsuperscript{51} For a description of the construct and activity of the Committee of Imperial Defence see, for example, Williamson Murray, ‘The Collapse of empire; British Strategy 1919-1945’ pp 398-399, in Murray,
CID and COS mechanisms reflected the understanding that design and execution of strategy was to be a military responsibility, but one that required intimate engagement and direction from the Government, in both times of peace and war – one in which successive prime ministers contributed directly. Field Marshal Alan Brooke, who as CIGS chaired COS from 1942 until the end of the war, described the activities of the COS in his diaries, which serve to illustrate how strategy was designed and executed:

*It was up to the Chiefs of Staff to think out what theatres of war were necessary, what the allocation of forces should be for them, and to prepare plans for the operations of that theatre. All the work had to be done in close consultation with the Government, and Government approval had to be obtained for all major issues. Finally, it was up to the Chiefs of Staff to issue the actual orders or directives to the Commanders in each theatre. Where Supreme Commanders were concerned on inter-allied fronts, then the matter was carried up to the Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee for their decision, which again had to obtain the approval of their respective Governments.*

36. In UK, the Government maintained this central role for COS in the formulation of strategy throughout the Cold War. There was a tacit understanding that, while the UK faced an existential threat – such as that represented to Western Europe by the Soviet Union – or faced a direct military threat to the nation, dependent territories or alliance partners, then a military response may be necessary. For example, officials from FCO, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office attended those meetings of COS that related to the formulation and implementation of strategy in the Falklands War, and this process continued throughout 1991 and the First Gulf War.

37. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet threat saw a rapid change, both in the UK and internationally. After 1989, the UN showed greater willingness to mandate international peacekeeping missions and an evolution of thinking about...


52 The combined committee of US and UK Chiefs of Staff, chaired jointly from 1942 onwards by FM Alan Brooke and Gen George C. Marshall.

peacekeeping operations. There was ‘recognition of a need for an international, inter-
agency approach to which there is a military contribution’. In the US the slow extension
of strategy to include other levers of national power may have begun earlier. Hew Strachan
suggests that this may have begun as early as 1962. National Security Memorandum of
1962, introduced by Kennedy’s administration, advocated that US should ‘adopt a strategy
of integrating economic and political development along democratic lines with
counterinsurgency effects in order to enable threatened governments to eliminate the roots
of popular discontent and suppress guerrilla attacks upon their freedom.’ In the UK a
tacit understanding of a reduced role for COS has taken root, and the focus for Afghan
planning has moved to the Cabinet Office.

38. It follows from this analysis of strategy, and quick review of two instances of
mechanisms for strategic action, that strategy has two primary tasks. The first is to identify
the nature of the conflict and the second to manage and direct the execution of the strategy
– ‘to manage the war and direct it’. The first is complicated by the fact that what begins
as one sort of war can turn into another. Understanding the nature of war is, therefore, ‘a
constant interrogative process’ that requires consistent review of the strategic analysis,
and the ways and means to enable the ends. But the ends too, may need revision if the
conflict evolves unexpectedly.

39. The challenges of current operations to both the US and her allies have prompted
debate and analysis of the effectiveness of the response to the challenges of instability and
insecurity. Krepinevich and Watts, for example, have identified 10 common strategic sins
that are, in their opinion, preventing the US from achieving effective strategic action. From these, and the analysis of Strachan, Smith, Cornish, DCDC and others some guidance
for strategic action can be developed. These seven observations are expanded at
paragraphs 40 – 46:

54 JDP 3-40, op cit, para 220-222.
55 Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy and the Limitation of War’, Survival Vol 50, No1, p 49. The US NSS also
articulated a significant extension to its ambition, which led directly to involvement in Vietnam, and presaged
later US policy objectives in the Middle East and Central Asia: ‘This strategy might require US to strengthen
beleaguered governments – even reform them.’
56 Ibid, p 51.
57 Ibid, p52.
58 Andrew Krepenevich, and Barry Watts, op cit p 33-34.
- Each government has an imperative to understand the security environment in which it is committing national resources.

- A constant eye is required on the relationship between the means allocated to strategy and the ways designed to achieve the identified ends.

- Policy goals must be converted into appropriate, achievable strategic ends.

- Understand the adversary, who is an active participant in the competition to achieve the stated goals. Anticipate, learn and adapt.

- A ruthless focus on strategy demands that it be a command lead process.

- Assess where one’s area of comparative advantage relative to the opposition lies.

- Identify those few individuals who are likely to possess the skills and mindset to be competent strategists.

40. The first and most important imperative of government is to understand the security environment in which they are engaged and the nature of the adversary. National approaches need to adapt to changing circumstances – for example changing the approach, civil and military force structures, national (and international) relationships and, ultimately both blood and treasure. As Hew Strachan observed in his 2005 review of US strategy in the Middle East: ‘The US had prevailed in Afghanistan (or so it seemed) without having had to formulate strategy. Action had generated its own results. … Planning for Iraq had displayable a comparable under-appreciation of strategy, although clearly the US armed forces displayed their competence at the operational level … [but] they determined that peace and war were opposites, not a continuum.’ 59

41. Constrained resources are a constant of strategy. The relationship between means, their associated ways and the strategic ends needs to be constantly assessed and re-

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balanced. Keen honesty is needed in making presumptions about the effectiveness of one’s competence and the probable causal linkages between strategy and the *ends* of policy. As Cornish and Dorman observe; notwithstanding UK’s £175Bn public sector borrowing requirement this year, and the debt of ~79% of GDP, ideas and policy *ends* should be the start point, for example, of any Defence and Security Review.\textsuperscript{60}

42. Policy goals must be converted into appropriate, achievable strategic *ends*. But these are not by themselves strategy. Strategy requires a constant dialectic between those whose role is to implement it, and the strategists. Here strategic goals of stable democratic governance in Iraq, or reconciliation in Afghanistan, are unachievable with the array of instruments at the hand of the coalition and alliance respectively.

43. Understand the adversary and anticipate, learn and adapt\textsuperscript{61} to the demands of the task. Rupert Smith reminds us – ‘the adversary has a free, creative part’ in the competition and is powerfully motivated by the prospects of defeat or death to achieve ends ‘directly opposed to one’s own.’\textsuperscript{62} So he reminds us to resist the hubris of advanced military states who imagine that they can shape warfare to match their own capabilities. The enemy gets a vote in the evolution of conflict, and a capable adversary will; they seek to exploit an opponents weaknesses and their own relative strengths, as we do too. Coalition forces’ failure to anticipate the rapid acceleration in improvised explosive devices as an instrument to negate western mobility and firepower first in Iraq, then in Afghanistan indicates that there is a contemporary obstacle to anticipating, learning and adapting in conflict.

44. There needs to be a ruthless focus on strategy, which should be command lead – balancing the danger of attempting to satisfy too many stake holders in the bureaucratic process. Leadership is critical to this process. The new UK Government’s National Security Council, chaired by the PM and comprising secretaries of state from the key ministries, is a welcome step towards creating clarity of strategic purpose.

\textsuperscript{61} Anticipate, learn and adapt – one of nine military principle for security and stabilisation. JDP 3-40, para 462.
45. Strategy requires a careful assessment of where one’s area of comparative advantage lies relative to the opposition. In complex security and stabilisation tasks it is frequently the case that the technological and information advantages that such forces would expect to have are negated by the ability of the adversary to become indistinguishable from the local population and the intervening forces’ lack of cultural sensitivity. It may be that rule of law, consistency and compassion offer the optimum sources of strategic edge in such demanding tasks.

46. Investment in those few individuals who are likely to possess the cognitive skills and mindset to be competent strategists is likely to pay dividends. It is worth assessing, however, whether individuals who have excelled at developing strategy in the past are suited by temperament and experience to the demands of the particular challenge. As Kitson observed in Kenya in the 1960s in the context of confronting a type of warfare that was new to troops; ‘not all commanders understand the context in which they were operating. Past performance became a poor indicator of potential.’

MULTILATERAL RESPONSES

47. Developing a national strategy in the context of an international response to common interests clearly complicates strategy development. The challenges of integrating inter-agency approaches are compounded by their increased number and variety. Global and regional security and development organisations (such as the UN, IMF, NATO, OSCE, MSF, for example) may operate alongside a variety of national agencies, all of whose activities should be coordinated. Recently, these factors have combined with ‘undue deference to a mighty ally [and a lack of] appetite for independent and robust thinking on strategy’ in UK. Committing UK forces as part of a coalition needs to be distinguished from the challenges of alliance operations, such as those led by NATO or UN. Although an alliance operation may provide established procedures for enduring functions (such as doctrine, logistics and communications and intelligence protocols), an alliance ensures a clear lead nation and a focus for the development of strategy which is currently lacking within the NATO-led Afghan theatre.

Furthermore, the commitment from supporting partners – those partners who have elected to participate in an international intervention without leading it –, whose common interests demand a multinational response, rarely matches that of the lead nation. Carl von Clausewitz identified this enduring characteristic of coalition campaigns; he describes the help that a senior partner may expect from a supporting ally: ‘One country may support another’s cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own. A moderately-sized force will be sent to its help: but if things go wrong the operation is pretty much written off, and one tries to withdraw at the smallest possible cost.’ Inevitably, the greater the national stake in an endeavour the greater the commitment is to a successful outcome. We should note that a state may be both a supporting and supported nation in the context of a single operation where, for example, the UK takes the lead as a framework nation for a geographic or functional component of a campaign, although neither is likely to share the commitment of the lead nation.

So what does a supporting-nation strategy look like? Understanding and trust are at the heart of an effective relationship between the supported nation and any contributing nation. Yet operational caveats; parallel national chains of command; routine disregard for orders and a reluctance to empower deployed commanders who are subject to international command are examples of the characteristics of supporting command behaviour, from which the UK is not exempt. Indeed, the very existence of UK campaign plans for Iraq and Afghanistan indicates a reluctance to commit to a coalition or alliance lead in those theatres. The role of the COS and PJHQ merits re-examining to ensure that UK is prepared and equipped to effectively play the role of supporting nation to the NATO effort in Afghanistan – in which the key measure of our national effectiveness will be our willingness to meet the commitments that we have undertaken in NATO, and bilaterally with US.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES FACING A NEW UK COALITION GOVERNMENT

Although fiscal challenges are nothing new in security terms, the pressing need to reduce UK’s national debt brings defence spending under review. Although public

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65 Carl von Clausewitz, op cit, (Book 8, Ch 6) p728.
support for the Armed Forces engaged in conflict is high, the national strategic narrative for the enduring Afghanistan operation has been less convincing, leaving a suspicion that the strategic ends of the intervention are muddled, the justification unconvincing and the costs disproportionate to the benefit that may accrue. Accordingly, the temptation is great to make adjustments to Security and Defence that are based either on purely fiscal objectives (reducing spending and balancing the books), or by a review and reduction of existing Defence capabilities. It has never been more important to conduct any review from the start point of policy and ideas, ideally reviewing UK’s place in the world, prioritising our national interests, then determining how best to allocate limited means.  

51. An analysis of the emerging threats and evolution of conflict does nothing to reassure us that military power will not play a critical role in enabling UK to protect its national, and shared vital interests in future. Indeed, what Max Boot calls ‘transformation programs’, such as surveillance satellites, wireless networks and directed energy weapons may need to be balanced against a need for more infantrymen, and new capabilities to match emerging threats in space and cyberspace. There is no easy template to balance painful questions of prioritisation. He observes: ‘history indicates that the wisest course is to feel one’s way along with careful study, radical experimentation and free-wheeling war games. Paradoxically, revolutionary transformation often can be achieved in evolutionary increments.’

52. Military forces have been drawn into wider stabilisation tasks that go beyond the delivery of security, yet the mechanisms for effective stabilisation planning prior to deployment have been absent. If the forthcoming Defence and Security Review confirms that UK’s interests may depend on the use of military power, in conjunction with other levers of national power, in maintaining international order and stability, then there will be a pressing need for change. It is necessary to create those mechanisms that will enable the integration of activity in national and multinational strategy development, campaign design and execution so that the ill-defined concept of the comprehensive approach can be made a reality.

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66 This argument is well covered in Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman. ‘National Defence in the Age of Austerity’, International Affairs Vol 85: No 4 (2009), pp 733-753.
68 JDP 3-40, op cit, Chapter 2, para 222.
Although it is not the focus of this paper to prescribe processes to better enable strategic action, they are a component of strategic action. President Eisenhower’s initiative to establish the National Security Council in 1953 merits careful review. The new President established the mechanisms for developing national security strategy – and he played an active part in their meetings. The Planning Board was a key component. The department and agency heads, who attended the NSC, would generally be too busy running their own departments and agencies to do the sort of strategic long-term thinking that Eisenhower desired. The task of the Planning Board was to supply that thinking. Chaired by the National Security Advisor, its members were the principal planning officials for their departments. – Richard Bowie, a Planning Board member in the Eisenhower administration, observed:

It was the forum in which twice or more often each week officials of great “stature and calibre” interacted and collaborated with one ... and confront – explicitly – questions of means and ends. ... The members not only had full access to their own departments and agencies, but they could request memoranda, staff studies, and other pertinent data from others where appropriate.”

‘No President before or after Eisenhower ... ever received such a systematic and focused briefing on the threats facing the nation’s security and the possible strategies to deal with them.’

CONCLUSIONS - WHAT NEXT FOR UK STRATEGIC ACTION?

We have seen that the meaning of strategy has expanded so that it no longer applies solely to the application of military power. Even for those who seek to apply the discipline of strategy to national, regional or even global security, the impact of transnational factors and the increasing imperative to act as part of a coalition or alliance suggest that strategic theory is increasingly different from practice. Multilateral responses challenge the clear articulation of ends, ways and means, and both the act of intervention, and our adversaries, change the context in ways that are often impossible to anticipate. Scientific or rational decision-making approaches are challenged by the scale and complexity of the strategic response to the common interests in which we may be called to

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71 Ibid, p 127.
respond. A more limited, oblique approach to strategy may be better suited to the likely challenges, combined with a clarity of purpose that allows the purpose for which we are employing military, and other instruments of power, to be clearly articulated. This paper has identified seven guidelines for effective strategy and four areas of strategic focus for a new UK Coalition Government, all of which depend on a realistic and objective assessment of UK’s place in the world and her level of international ambition.

55. President Obama’s new strategy for Iraq and Afghanistan presents an opportunity for UK. The US has rejected the open-ended commitment to a ‘global war on terror’ of the former administration and has imposed limitations. ‘His strategy reflects a simple truth, that war is more likely to achieve closely defined objectives than aims that are vague, open-ended and viable. Britain has to deliver on its aims if military force is to retain its usefulness in the eyes of the government.’72

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