The Suitability of Grand Strategy for Today

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This paper deals not with maritime strategy and security directly, but rather with one of its progeny concepts—grand strategy, an important contextual idea for sea power. Grand strategy in a recognizably modern form was first implied and developed by maritime thinkers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Stafford Corbett, specifically because the maritime sphere enabled non-military instruments to have utility in a way which could not be the case in western Europe. As Mahan argued, "[t]he diplomatist, as a rule, only affixes the seal of treaty to the work done by the successful soldier. It is not so with a large proportion of strategic points upon the sea."[1] The influence of maritime strategy broadened grand strategy—a pre-existing term—from being purely a military concept to one with far-reaching responsibilities with the addition of non-military instruments. Yet, unlike the amorphous notions of grand strategy which were to come later in the twentieth century and whose value is arguable, this first broadened notion of grand strategy remained fixed on war and adversarial relationships between polities.[2] The focus of an inquiry into the suitability of grand strategy for today will focus on the utility of non-military instruments as independent executors of policy within adversarial relationships.

Implied by the broadened formulation of grand strategy as the employment of both military and non-military instruments for political purposes is the notion that military and non-military means obey the same logic and are equal in value and utility. This is not the case. Military power has the capacity to impose and control. This is most forcefully realized through land power, but less so with sea power, air power, and cyber power. These latter forms of military power may take control solely in their own domains but can only deny control in the wider context of the conflict as a whole.[3] Denial of control through military force is, of all military power, most similar in logic to that of the non-military instruments. Yet in general, military power has the capability to impose upon the enemy an ultimate situation in which the adversary must make a choice either for peace or for the continuation of war. This reverses

[1] Alfred Thayer Mahan. *Naval Strategy compared and contrasted with the principles and practice of military operations on land*. (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company 1911), 123.
[2] Lukas Milevski. *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought*. (Oxford: Oxford UP 2016).
[3] Lukas Milevski. "Revisiting J.C. Wylie's Dichotomy of Strategy: The Effects of Sequential and Cumulative Patterns of Operations", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/2 (April 2012), 223-242.

Lawrence Freedman's revision of the wars of necessity versus wars of choice distinction, changing it instead to obligatory versus voluntary decisions about war.[4]

The logic of non-military power differs substantially. "Coercive diplomacy needs to be distinguished from pure coercion. It seeks to *persuade* the opponent to cease his aggression rather than bludgeon him into stopping. In contrast to the crude use of force to repel the opponent, coercive diplomacy emphasizes the use of threats and the exemplary use of limited force to persuade him to back down."[5] Thus non-military power cannot take control, instead being a collection of instruments whose purpose is pure denial. The particular character of this denial depends on the specific non-military instrument employed. Denial through economic sanctions differs in its effect from information dominance and propaganda, which differs from diplomatic pressure, etc.

This denial of control is represented by the bloodless trends, which are interpreted through trends analysis and may require very long periods of time to manifest. Iran, for instance, had been under economic sanctions of ever-increasing pressure since 1995, a whole generation ago. It is possible to imagine the logical endpoint of a policy of economic sanctions to be, for example, the destruction of the citizenry of a nation unable to import the necessary food. Few sanctioning countries, however, would be willing to push their policies so far. Few policy-makers relish the notion of imposing a public, slow-motion massacre of innocents across an entire state. Thus most decisions made under non-military duress are usually voluntary rather than necessary.

The utility of both military and non-military power is necessarily contextual—to the manner in which it is employed, to the particular character and characteristics of the opponent, etc. Both military and non-military instruments are difficult to employ with the desired degree of success, and use of the military is not a panacea, as the American strategic experience of the past fifteen years only too readily testifies. Yet of the two, non-military power is arguably more susceptible to going awry due to context than is military force, because it cannot compel a polity in the same way that the military can. Non-military power must rely upon the opponent's own perceptions of his situation.

Thus, the sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s did not work. Relative to the policy goals the United States sought—Saddam Hussein's ouster and the termination of his WMD program—sanctions simply could not supply the required duress.[6] Similarly, Russia's political use of its energy dominance in Europe, particularly eastern Europe, has had mixed results and often failed to

[4] Lawrence Freedman. "The Counterrevolution in Strategic Affairs", *Daedalus* 140/3 (Summer 2011), 23.
[5] Gordon A. Craig & Alexander L. George. *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*. (Oxford: Oxford UP 1983), 189.
[6] John Mueller & Karl Mueller. "Sanctions of Mass Destruction", *Foreign Affairs* 78/3 (May-June 1999), 43-53.

alter the policies of even weak neighbors.[7] Thus far, the West's sanctions on Russia, even when combined with the much more significant collapse in the price of oil, have not yet triggered the desired change in Russia's foreign policy behavior, nor even in the behavior of Russia's proxies in the Donbas. With regards to the sanctions against Russia, however, it is notable that the West has not cut off Russian access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), an act which ultimately brought Iran to the negotiating table after 2013.[8]

Why is it that non-military instruments, having been first introduced into strategic theory at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (in broader historical terms, not so long ago), seem to be losing their apparent utility—albeit not their popularity? It is the context that has greatly changed from just over a century ago. When Mahan and Corbett wrote, the context in which they wrote and of which they wrote was peripheral but imperial. That is, maritime strategy could only be practiced on the edges of the European continent and across the expanses of sea between Europe and the myriad imperial possessions of European powers. Imperial possessions were rarely considered to be intrinsically important either as territory or for political consequences in Europe itself. Portions of empires could be traded or bartered in a manner unlikely to occur within Europe and there were few to gainsay such transactions, even in adversarial relationships.

Today, the old empires are mostly gone, replaced by successor states, many of which are nations. National states mean national territory and national policies. Many are ruled by authoritarian figures, some of whom rely upon national feeling to buttress their rule or their own popularity—such as Putin today. To surrender national territory or change national policies under duress, whether military or non-military, within an adversarial relationship would be deeply unpopular. It might spell the end of one's government, of the regime, perhaps even of the authoritarian figure's life should he be unlucky. Military force is generically more useful than non-military power because the necessity of obliging the enemy to make a decision is often required.

Yet this context remains largely unrecognized in the West, for whom non-military instruments are usually the first—and often only—one to be employed in a confrontation. This may be because, even as the world remains national and political, many states in the West are focusing increasingly on the market and on making money, particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Such market-states are "largely indifferent to the norms of justice, or for that matter to any particular set of moral values so long as law does not act as an impediment to economic

[7] Karen Smith Stegen. "Deconstructing the 'energy weapon': Russia's threat to Europe as case study", *Energy Policy* 39 (2011), 6511.

[8] On the Iranian success, see Daniel W. Drezner. "Targeted Sanctions in a World of Global Finance", *International Interactions* 41/4 (2015), 758-759.

competition."[9] This emphasis persuades Western political leaders to value non-military power above its real worth to effect actual change, because this is the set of instruments which seems best suited to applying pressure on Western powers.

The notion of grand strategy as the use for political purposes of all instruments, both military and non-military, requires revision if it is to be relevant today. Non-military instruments in particular appear to have lost utility as direct and independent executors of policy, but there *are* other ways in which they may be used to beneficial effect even in adversarial relationships and war.

[9] Phillip Bobbitt. *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*. (London: Allen Lane 2002), 230.