Why Graduate Education in International Relations Could Benefit From Strategic Studies

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/03/31/why-graduate-education-in-international-relations-could-benefit-from-strategic-studies/

MICHAEL H. CRESWELL, MAR 31 2024

In many political science programs with an international relations (IR) or security studies subfield, academic strategists often find themselves on the sidelines, in part due to methodological differences with most of the scholars in these fields. These differences mean that many political science programs with an IR subfield do not have a single faculty member trained as a strategist. Yet, strategists have much to offer to graduate students of IR. Building on Joshua Rovner's description of the divide between security studies and strategic studies, this article makes the case why the study of strategy will improve graduate education in IR in the United States by identifying the importance of what strategists bring to the table.

What Do Strategists Study and Why Does It Matter?

Strategists are primarily concerned with how wars begin and how to win them. They focus on the relationship between policy, which is the end goal as decided by civilian leaders, and strategy, or the ways and means by which one attempts to reach that goal. Among the first principles of strategy is the vital need to ensure a proper policy-strategy match, as a mismatch can put one at a severe disadvantage, even against a materially weaker opponent. A key ancillary concept of strategy is operations, which is the physical manifestation of those strategic decisions. These elements taken together constitute the foundation stone for strategists.

Hiring a strategist will not duplicate the efforts of a political scientist or a historian or an economist. The strategist differs from these other scholars in a few key areas. While many strategists embrace theory, they generally avoid IR theory. Strategists are instead more practical in their approach: how can we achieve our objective? This difference will force IR students to view the world from another perspective. While strategists rely heavily on history, they differ from historians. The field of history has long been shifting away from traditional diplomatic and military history, even though these subfields remain popular with students. And many of the diplomatic and military historians who remain in academia focus on more recent concerns, such as the environment, race relations, and gender.

Although strategists consider the economic factors that govern war, they do not replicate what economists and international political economy (IPE) scholars do. The main common theme for strategists and economists/IPE scholars is that they all deal with choice, under constraint and uncertainty, among alternative uses of scarce resources. It could be argued that the main contrast is that the latter two groups concentrate more than strategists on "positive sum" situations; how both sides of an interaction can "win." But strategy, or at least military strategy, is more about zero sum situations. Most often, one side wins and one side loses. And even in the case of a draw, both sides can walk away in a severely diminished condition. The strategist Carl von Clausewitz recognized that even victory can come at a heavy price. Here we note a difference between strategists and economists. Both military strategists and economists employ rational choice, which assumes that actors make choices that align with their interests. But strategists are more tuned to psychological dynamics than most practitioners of the dismal science.

The authors of the two most fundamental texts of classical strategic theory emphasize psychological factors. Both Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote *On War*, and Sun Tzu, the author of *The Art of War*, stress the importance of psychological or non-rational factors in both war and peace. Sun Tzu in particular strongly advocates taking

psychological advantage of the enemy. Their key insights can offer IR students a new way to view the world.

Having both strategists and economists/IPE scholars in the same department could be mutually beneficial. Despite some strategists' use of game theory language, game theory itself has been of limited use in the study of strategy (except, some would argue, for nuclear strategy). In terms of the two mega-concepts of strategy that Bradford Lee has highlighted—interaction and rationality—economists offer relatively little illumination on the "interaction" mega-concept; but strategists could learn much of value if they engaged more closely with what economists have said about the "rationality" mega-concept (both in its cost-benefit and instrumental forms). Very few economists have exhibited good intuition about what the right strategic choice is in a given situation in the military arena, while very few strategists are steeped in economics. Both the economist and the strategist could learn from each other, and IR students would benefit from this exchange.

Where do Strategists Turn for Insight?

Strategists draw insight from the writings of theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mao Zedong, and David Galula, all of whom focused on ground warfare, including insurgency. The study of strategy also incorporates the works of strategists who account for economic factors. This list includes Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett, two distinguished naval strategists, as well as air power theorists such as Giulio Douhet These classic works fuel many of the assumptions that undergird strategic studies. They help the strategist make sense of the interrelationship between the realms of policy, strategy, and operations.

Because of their heavy reliance on great thinkers and practitioners, strategists are sometimes caricatured as martial aesthetes who treat the works of these theorists as if they were biblical texts. However, this portrait is a gross oversimplification. While the masters of strategy still have much to offer, their advice is not applicable to every contemporary situation. Good strategists do not just apply the ideas of great theorists. Current strategists have shown few qualms about disagreeing with them. The classical theorists are intended to stimulate thought, not to tell you what to think or do.

For example, in the curriculum taught at the U.S. Naval War College, home to one of the country's few academic department devoted solely to strategy, readings from these theorists are generally paired with each other in order to show contrasting approaches to the planning, conduct, and termination of war. Moreover, the classic texts are read in conjunction with the histories of various conflicts to determine if the major actors in those conflicts performed in ways that were strategically sound. The masters are not meant to be followed dogmatically. They inform but do not dictate. Rather than soak up their wisdom like a sponge, students can be taught to think for themselves and selectively apply aspects of theory creatively in today's challenging world.

In addition to studying and reflecting on classic as well as current texts of strategy, strategists study past wars in an attempt to identify alternative courses of action which, if taken, could possibly have led to either greater success or the same level of success at a lower cost in blood and treasure. This counter-factual approach is known as critical analysis, another key tool of the strategist. Unlike IR scholars, many traditional historians avoid using the counter-factual approach, though this may be changing.

Along with many other conflicts, strategists today study the Peloponnesian War, the Wars of German Unification, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. These conflicts present recurring problems that contemporary civilian and military leaders must face, including how to engender and maintain public support; whether, when, and where to open a second front; how to master interaction; when to terminate a conflict; and when to press an advantage. Strategists are not limited to the study the past, however. They also pay attention to current events, such as the war in Ukraine, or to potential conflicts, such as a clash between the United States and China. The past is thus studied to better understand the present and to prepare for the future.

This, in a nutshell, is what strategists do. In this sense they are, as David Betz has contended, polymaths who wear multiple hats: part historian, part geographer, part economist, part political philosopher. This eclectic approach to questions of war and peace is one of the strategist's main strengths.

Expanding the Audience of Security Studies

Strategists can improve graduate education in IR in several ways. One way is by appealing to a diverse audience. The discipline of strategic studies is a large tent that can offer something valuable to both policymakers and scholars of different intellectual stripes. The addition of strategists to political science departments with an IR subfield can attract students who might otherwise choose other disciplines. In particular, the many veterans produced over the past 20 years of war, men and women who can offer a valuable counter-perspective to the purely academic point of view, might be more willing to choose security studies if strategists were among the faculty. For this reason alone, security studies should put out the welcome mat for strategists.

Strategic studies are rooted in the study of history. The case for strategic studies is made largely by employing historical examples. As Stephen Walt and many others have argued, those who wish to understand international affairs must first know history. Strategic studies partners naturally with the study of diplomatic or military history. Therefore, political science departments with an IR subfield should seek to attract strategists.

One recommendation is that if political science departments hire strategists to teach in their IR tracks, the hiring and promotion standards for those scholars might need to be tailored to their specific subfield, though the basic departmental standards should apply (a book, several articles, etc.). In many instances, political science departments might be a better fit for strategists than a history department. As noted above, many modern academic history departments are not especially welcoming to military and traditional diplomatic history. Having at least one scholar of strategy on the faculty could be in the interest of these political science departments with IR programs, as it could enhance the attractiveness of security studies programs for those who wish to study history, and who might be deterred from entering programs which have no historians on the faculty.

The addition of strategists to security studies programs could also make the curricula more appealing to government officials, both civilian and military. Strategists could broaden the appeal of IR programs for officials from security-related agencies which currently fight for limited slots in the various staff and war colleges. Much effort has been devoted to closing the gap between scholars and policymakers. Yet, to gain greater relevance to the makers of foreign policy and military planners, security studies must be able to speak to their concerns in a language they understand.

As Paula Thornhill and Rachel Whitlark have stated, military planners are more comfortable relying on history than political science. Because many strategists are trained as historians, security studies programs that include them in their ranks would thereby make themselves more attractive to the U.S. military establishment, which sends many of its officers to civilian academic institutions to obtain advanced degrees. Hiring strategists would also increase the likelihood that civilian policymakers, who have less appetite for IR theory or quantitative methods than do academics, would turn to IR programs to earn advanced degrees. Like military planners, makers of foreign policy would benefit from having a deep acquaintance with strategy. By its very nature strategy is focused on policy, which is about defining the political ends you want to achieve, and strategists are useful in determining which ends are indeed feasible. Strategy itself is subordinate to policy. If political science departments with IR programs want to have a greater impact on policy, the inclusion of strategists on the faculty might attract policy professionals who might not otherwise be exposed to the quantitative methods popular among IR scholars.

Strategists could also introduce IR students to additional levels of analysis. As Richard Betts notes:

Scholars of political violence [i.e., violence used by states to achieve political ends] readily delve into policy and strategy but seldom below those levels of analysis. They usually consign concern with operations and tactics to military buffs. As Carl von Clausewitz argued, however, strategic success depends on and is ultimately reducible to tactical success. So predicting how military success or failure affect political and strategic outcomes in war is naturally driven to the operational and tactical levels.

But operations and tactics are not the only areas largely ignored by IR scholars (one exception is the Security Studies Program at MIT). And though the role of the individual leader in affecting international affairs has been generally

downplayed in IR, it is now garnering attention. While during the 1980s and 1990s many IR scholars saw the international system as all-important, the Teaching, Research & International Policy data on IR scholars shows that realism (and really any "ism") is in decline in favor of less grand theory and more empirics.

For the strategist, however, strategic leadership and operational command are key concepts. Yet strategists are careful not to focus exclusively on wartime, as operational command in peacetime is crucial to shaping the international environment, which can in turn prevent conflict. Examining the leadership and actions of important admirals, generals, and civilian policymakers opens a window onto the persistent difficulties that leaders face in fashioning strategies and designing operations in both wartime and peacetime. Enemy behavior, even before combat begins, often shapes the range of strategic and operational courses of action available to wartime commanders. The decisions made by strategic leaders in peacetime can similarly shape the options available in the event of hostilities.

Success in wartime also requires that leaders and planners overcome the problems of uncertainty and friction that hinder the execution of operations. Successful leadership at the strategic and operational levels of war requires an understanding of the dynamic interaction between politics and strategy and operational realities. This fact is why strategists are equally concerned with what happens in peacetime. As Clausewitz famously wrote, "War is the continuation of policy by other means." By stressing the political nature of war, Clausewitz demonstrates the value strategic theorists bring to developing ways to shape the security environment. By engaging the strategist's concerns regarding strategic leadership, security studies programs would become more relevant to a broad cross section of current and future leaders.

Today some members of the security studies community debate whether the United States' international primacy can endure and whether the county should focus instead on maintaining stability. From a strategist's viewpoint, efforts to shape the broader security environment might serve to preclude the need for kinetic options, or at least render them so risky that the enemy will be deterred from resorting to arms. As Sun Tzu put it, "To win without fighting is the acme of skill."

Sustaining Intellectual Vibrancy

Having an atmosphere that embraces diverse disciplines is important because no community can remain intellectually vibrant if it walls itself off from challenges and new ideas. That is a recipe for staleness, and IR scholars should take this to heart. Most security studies scholars focus on nuclear weapons, air power, and ground power. Relatively few concentrate on sea power, though there are exceptions. This is an important omission for several reasons. Most of the globe is covered by water, and if you seek to project power globally, you need a navy to get there from here. If the United States were ever to engage China militarily, basic geography dictates that most of the burden would fall on the U.S. Navy.

War termination is one area that IR scholars have begun to emphasize, which resonates with strategists, who devote great attention to it. The United States, for example, has fought many wars, but it has, arguably, never adequately considered war termination sufficiently in advance, which has in turn led to long-term problems. Clausewitz advises strategists that it is imperative "not to take the first step without considering the last." A strategist would help IR scholars drive home this important point.

There are other areas in which IR theorists can find common cause with strategists. While creating new theory has taken a back seat in international relations, it remains an important tool in the kit of those who would study international affairs. Strategists also employ their own theories and concepts to cut through the fog of war. These include the theory of victory, which concerns how one translates military action into the desired political result, and the concept of strategic interaction, which posits that any course of action against an adversary is bound to be unpredictable. You simply cannot know how the enemy will react in any given situation. International relations scholars and their students would benefit from adding these theories and concepts to their intellectual arsenal, to help spur the creation of new theory in international relations.

Strategists could also mitigate what some scholars see as a status quo bias in international relations. This bias is

said to be especially prevalent among realists, who contend that the highest goal for states is not acquiring power but security or self-preservation. Realism is also largely descriptive, explaining how great powers have acted over the past two hundred years and will act in the future. There are, however, at least two prominent international relations realists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who are prescriptive. Theirs, however, is a negative prescription which suggest ways for the United States to avoid losing its favorable geopolitical position. In some ways, they promote an academic rendering of President Obama's "don't do stupid shit" admonition.

Strategists see things differently. Instead of merely describing how the international system operates, or advising against self-defeating behaviors, strategists also think of ways for states to actively improve their security prospects. This mindset forces strategists to be highly prescriptive and not merely descriptive. One area in which strategists will have much to offer is that of strategic competition. This concept of competitive strategies, which, according to Thomas G. Mahnken, "focuses on peacetime interaction among and between defense establishments," will become increasingly important for the United States as it confronts a rising China.

Another area where strategists could broaden the horizons of IR scholars concerns the concept of power. For IR realists, hard power is the coin of the international realm and determines who dominates the international system. Strategists, however, also stress the non-material dimensions of state power, which include strategic communication, deception, information operations, and soft power. Sun Tzu, who perhaps best understood the connection between ideational forces and warfare, insisted, "All war is based on deception." Strategists' insights into the non-material factors of war can help international relations scholars explain how weak states can defeat powerful ones.

Where Have the Strategists Gone?

Security studies scholars who are convinced that bringing strategists into the fold is worthwhile should know that this will not happen on its own. There are formidable obstacles to such a project, hence concrete steps must be taken. One major challenge is that no current or recent strategist has achieved the towering stature of the classic theorists. There are no individuals whose names resonate across the scholarly disciplines or who are considered master strategists. Nor have there been any books produced in recent decades that come close to the stature of*The Art of War* or *On War*. And many strategists who are held in high regard, like James N. Mattis, are not academics. Some influential academic strategists, such as Colin Gray, have passed away, while others, such as Lawrence Freedman, have retired. But even absent giants in the field, there are nonetheless excellent current strategists who could make a big contribution.

As for top strategists, traditionally the best work had been done by military officers who became scholars. Until the middle half of the 20th century, the only exceptions were Sir Julian Corbett and Hans Delbrück. In the second half of the twentieth century, military officers failed to achieve the same level of prominence, displaced by academics with terminal degrees, largely through the installation of Robert McNamara's "Whiz Kids." The main exceptions were General André Beaufre and Rear Admiral J.C. Wylie. By the end of the 20th century, the most important writers on military strategy were three civilians: Colin Gray, Edward Luttwak, and Richard Betts. Betts's best work, however, was on how strategy had become impossible! Earlier, in the mid-20th century, Bernard Brodie was the outstanding civilian writing on military strategy.

In the 21st century, though many officers and academics write interesting short pieces on specific issues of strategy, the bulk of officers' writing is about the operational level of war and the bulk of academics' writing is on grand strategy. Among the latter, Hal Brands stands out. There is one academic who, though emeritus, still does excellent work on military strategy: Lawrence Freedman. In some respects, his writing on conventional military strategy is better than his original work on nuclear strategy. Among DC think tanks that deal with military strategy, the work of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments has been a cut above its competitors for a long time. What makes it so difficult to stand out as a contemporary writer on strategy is that one must have a foot in two camps: theory and history. To write effectively on strategy, one must understand rapidly evolving military technology, give serious thought to the political effects of military interaction, and take account of different political systems and cultures.

A final recommendation is that scholars of security studies and strategists co-write articles and attempt to place them in high profile security-oriented journals. We already have one excellent example of a counterfactual analysis done by a historian and a security studies expert. Success in this area will expose the security studies community to the potential benefits of including the strategic perspective in their work. Another possibility would be to sponsor writing competitions for student papers that incorporate strategy. In this way, students would begin thinking about strategy in a serious way at an early stage of their careers. IR departments could also invite strategists as post-docs or visiting scholars, which would not entail "losing" a tenure line. These recommendations will not require a huge investment of time or money. They only require a few committed and influential scholars to take the leap – and in doing so, success will be its own best advertisement.

About the author:

Michael H. Creswell is an associate professor of history at Florida State University, a former adjunct professor of strategy for the U.S. Naval War College's Fleet Seminar Program, and a graduate of the Committee on International Relations at the University of Chicago. He is the author of*A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* (Harvard 2006).