

THE TRANSFORMATION OF STRATEGY

We live in an age of profound upheavals. Under the stimulus of technology, the tempo of historical evolution has been abruptly accelerated. In almost all fields, the old formulas are losing their value and we are forced to invent new ones. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the game of confrontation between human collectivities, where the changes have been so profound that players and observers find themselves baffled by the new and subtle forms of modern conflicts, just when important and urgent decisions must be made at every moment. The appearance of nuclear arms and the development of mechanized warfare on one hand, and the effectiveness of primitive forms of combat in the “wars of liberation” on the other, create a contradictory situation which seems so much the more without historical precedent that our notions about armed conflicts remain largely determined by the recent experiences of the two world wars. A radical revision of these notions is absolutely essential.

To achieve this, it is necessary to re-examine what the conflicts between nations represent objectively, in order to discover the

Translated by Ruth Prelowski.

logic which governs them, and thus to find the path of strategy again.

This need has made itself increasingly felt over the last twenty years, especially to all those who have attempted to unravel the tangle of problems raised by the existence of atomic weapons—at first the Americans, and then more recently the Europeans. Various institutes of strategic studies have been created, and slowly the surprising features of the new strategy are being worked out.

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These features are surprising only because the tradition of strategy had been lost. Since the beginning of history, strategy had been progressively developed; at the beginning of the twentieth century, under the aegis of Napoleon and of Clausewitz, it reigned uncontestedly over the art of war. However, when transposed from experience to formulas, strategy ended by being enclosed in an extreme doctrine of markedly Prussian influence, which saw in war the supreme test of nations, in which the verdict had to follow from a bloody confrontation, drawn out to its paroxysm. It was under the aegis of this exacerbated strategy that the war of 1914 developed. The resulting experience was more than deceptive: instead of a swift victory, the war became bogged down in the trenches; the “decision by battle” was found to be impossible and, as at Verdun, was transformed into a gigantic case of mutual attrition. The conclusion drawn by the French side was that “strategy” had failed and that, in our century of industrial development, it was necessary to approach war in terms of the tactics permitted by the new materials. “Strategy” was then rejected as an obsolete science; its elements became strictly subordinated to tactics. Military art thus took on the characteristics of an engineer’s specifications: in order to defend oneself, one had to have a given number of automatic weapons to the kilometer; to attack, one had to unload a certain tonnage of shells per square kilometer. Starting from these premises, in France an extremely rigid concept of war developed; one should form a continuous defensive front; in order to do this, one would need a large number of divisions (a hundred),

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entailing a very significant mobilization of the country. The enemy would not be able to break this front, which was to be supported by the fortifications of the Maginot line. We ourselves would not be able to break the enemy front, reinforced by the Siegfried line, before having assembled the powerful materials necessary, this is to say, before at best the second year of the war. In the meantime, the enemy would be subjected to the pressure of a blockade.

As is known, this plan was to collapse in a few weeks in face of the joint power of the armoured German divisions and the Luftwaffe. At the time, many still thought that it was a question of a purely tactical error: they under-estimated the effectiveness of vehicles and air-power, and reproached the deficiencies of our equipment—which, however, were less than was said. But as the war progressed, one could not help but realize that, beyond these problems of materials, undeniably important, one had to deal with considerable problems of a specifically strategic nature: the role of French North Africa, for example, the German errors in operational strategy in Russia, with its divergent aims, the choice between attacking Germany via the north of Italy and Vienna or via France and Belgium. The role of strategy was rediscovered, at least in the military field.

But other phenomena appeared, bringing into play new or seemingly new factors: the two bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, introduced into the military arsenal a destructive weapon out of all proportion to what had been known before; the Chinese guerilla war, which resisted a powerful Japan, the French resistance, and the Yugoslavian guerilla war, phenomena based on the will of men and antipodal to concepts based on the primacy of materials. Thus two contradictory currents manifested themselves; the first tending to an increasingly scientific and complex military technique, the second showing the possibility of holding machines in check by increasingly simple and even primitive methods. The French army, in its campaigns in Indochina and in Algeria, had to contend with the terrible effectiveness of these methods, which renewed and systematized the old guerilla wars.

Nature does not make jumps: our understanding of these things only came gradually.

During an initial phase, the nuclear phenomenon was considered as a new means of combat. In conformity with the positivist method born from the 1914-1918 experience, and according to the procedures derived from operational research used in Great Britain and the United States during the war, the Americans tried to resolve the various technical problems posed by atomic arms, which meanwhile had grown to thermonuclear size. They were thus led to formulate tactics for their use, and to organize their forces in light of these tactics. Strategic striking forces and tactical atomic weapons were accordingly established; they obviously possessed a great destructive power and they might have been utilized in the action of conventional forces if atomic arms had existed only on one side. Unfortunately, the potential adversary had also established similar forces, and thus an absolutely new problem presented itself.

Over the years, the specialists analyzed this problem in order to find solutions, in conformity with the idea that they had of war. The discoveries were rapid and striking. From the first it was perceived with terror that in this bilateral nuclear game, an essential and without doubt decisive, advantage would go to whoever drew first. It was a premium for aggression! The effort of tactical invention accordingly concentrated on the means of rendering an "atomic Pearl Harbor" less effective. It succeeded by the device of permanently maintaining in flight a certain number of planes carrying bombs, who would thus escape the first enemy onslaught. Other planes were kept on alert so that they could rapidly take off before the onslaught of the enemy. In order not to be taken by surprise, very costly systems of advance detection and of "alert" broadcasts were established. The "surprise attack" eventually lost a good part of its advantages. Alas, in remedying one danger, another had been created. All these armed or alert planes whose action had to be unleashed at the first warning created an enormous risk of war by mistake or by accident! Now, at the same time, statistical studies had

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been made to see what a heightened nuclear war would mean; it would be the equivalent of an earthquake like Agadir or Skoplie multiplied several thousand times. In the first day, losses would exceed a hundred million dead on each side. It projected a situation which was truly absurd.

It was then that Kennedy came into power, accompanied by a pleiad of intellectuals who had thought over these problems. Above all, it was necessary to avoid "war by error." Technology had appropriately contributed the nuclear submarine, undetectable, armed with Polaris missiles; a new rocket, the "Minuteman," was to be distributed on the ground in suitable numbers and protected by concrete silos. Consequently, the ability to reply to a first attack became practically invulnerable, and it would be so powerful (more than 2000 rockets were envisioned) that the adversary could not ignore it. Now, given the fact of its invulnerability, one would no longer be compelled to react to the very first "alert" warnings. Also, in case of an accident or error, there would be time to make a considered decision. The "hot line" would even permit a dialogue before action.

The danger of "war by error" had been curtailed, but a new situation was emerging, less terrible than the preceding one, but not without new risks: the Soviets had also provided themselves with an invulnerable force of reprisal; the certainty of a devastating response became bilateral with unthinkable possibilities (according to Mr. McNamara, a minimum of a hundred and twenty million dead on the American side!) Under these conditions, it became clear that nuclear war was becoming impossible, that all the extremely costly nuclear armaments could not be used to wage war, but to prevent it. It was no longer the positive dimension of action that had to be considered, but the negative dimension of dissuasion. The time had arrived for a fully conscious strategy of dissuasion.

But once again difficult new problems came to the fore; in order to dissuade by means of a threat, this threat must be plausible. Now since the mutual risks had reached such dimensions, the "credibility" of a nuclear response had lost all its logic. Then it fell to strategy to cultivate credibility. On the Soviet side, it was maintained by an attitude of calculated brutality: whatever

the consequences might be, the Soviet armies would be unleashed, the war would be terrible, but the USSR would win. The Americans, on the other hand, looked for an elegant solution. Couldn't one make the response plausible by declaring it limited and claiming to maintain nuclear war at an acceptable level of violence, dissuading the adversary from escalating by the threat of enormous reprisals? This is what McNamara has called "damage limiting" by the threat of "insured destruction," with its corollary of a "flexible response."

The Europeans, Germany first and then France, were not pleased to see the establishment of a strategy of dissuasion, which was based on assuring the limitation of conflicts. Would it not admit the possibility of a war which would involve only all or part of Europe? This hypothesis was disquieting in that it could incite the adversary to attempt limited actions which could only have very grave consequences for Europe. They instinctively preferred a complete dissuasion from conflicts by the threat of total catastrophe. It was in this spirit that France declared her intention to reply strategically, like the Soviets, and the Germans demanded the deployment of tactical atomic arms along the Iron Curtain—to emphasize to the possible aggressor that, from the very beginning, the war could be nothing but nuclear. Thus, by means of abstract declarations, the degree of credibility which would assure dissuasion was maintained, in spite of the extreme stabilization of the nuclear situation.

This degree of abstraction was to become outdated. The grave Cuban crisis provided the first heated experience of a manoeuvre of dissuasion in the nuclear age. After emotions had cooled and the phenomenon was analyzed, it became evident that dissuasion was a procedure whose failure would be marked by the beginning of the use of nuclear arms. The manoeuvre of dissuasion was to be executed *before* war, i.e. *in times of peace*. It consisted in exploiting threats of nuclear intervention by an appropriate use of political declarations and of military measures (in the case of Cuba—a general alert, calling-up of the reserves, preparing a landing force, and a maritime blockade). *It was essentially a manoeuvre of a psychological order.*

Thus, gradually disengaging itself from its positivistic past,

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strategy rediscovered its true nature, that of knowing how to use and combine means of *all kinds* appropriate to achieving its end, namely, the acceptance by the adversary of the political conditions that one wants to impose on him.

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I have given this rapid (and incomplete) survey of the evolution of nuclear strategy¹ in order to show how, apart from material problems, it has been indispensable to rediscover in modern form, the ancient truths which have always prevailed in human conflicts: in the first place, the pre-eminence of the psychological element, the source and condition of all decisions; then, the necessarily total nature of phenomena, that is, encompassing political, economic and diplomatic factors as well as military ones. According to the particular case, military factors may play a preponderant role, or a secondary, and simply auxiliary one. Thus conflicts will ensue whose features may be very different, but whose internal logic is the same: to attain the capitulation (or the dissuasion) of the adversary.

This conclusion which, it must be added, has not yet been clearly recognized throughout the world, has likewise been slowly drawn from the generally deceiving experiences of conflicts where regular forces have had to combat with guerillas.

There it was no longer a question of scientific armaments and the threat of a nuclear catastrophe, but rather the situation of a lion attacked by mosquitoes. The regular forces had the military advantage in arms and in terrestrial and aerial mobility; they could move almost anywhere without fighting, and suitably defend the positions they chose to occupy, but the imperceptible adversary continued to exist. The fact is that guerilla warfare, under the influence of the Soviet revolution, had made spectacular intellectual progress. Its theory, partially discovered by Lawrence of Arabia, put into slogans by Mao Tse-tung, and codified in the rules taught at Moscow, was now well-defined and its formulas highly assured.

¹ Which I have studied in more detail in *Dissuasion and Strategy*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1964.

Rule no. 1: never to accept combat except in a situation of overwhelming superiority. Rule no. 2: to attack the enemy only when sure of destroying him (generally by ambush or surprise attack.) Rule no. 3: to ensure the silence and the support of the population by terrorism, propaganda and the impression made by small, well-executed action. Rule no. 4: to force the powerful adversary to disperse, by attacking and destroying everything which is not guarded. Rule no. 5: to aim for psychological and not material returns from actions. Rule no. 6: to live off the population and to arm oneself off the enemy. If these rules are well-applied, one can fairly quickly paralyze the effectiveness of an important adversary, which has dispersed to protect a large number of positions; the guerillas then enjoy a rather large freedom of action. They can slowly organize more and more significant forces; after the stage of "sections" will come that of "companies" and then "battalions." At the end, with solid foreign support, "regiments" can be established (as in Vietnam at the moment), and even "divisions" (as in Tonkin in 1951). The initial guerilla war then gives way to a larger scheme which permits undertaking a general offensive by means of which the adversary will be destroyed or expelled. This is the optimum target, that envisioned by Mao Tse-tung and Giap, which was successfully attained in China against the Nationalists, and which achieved some important results in Tonkin in 1954.

However, this theory cannot always be applied. In the majority of cases, the guerilla forces are unable to develop sufficiently in order to overcome the opposing regular forces. During the last war, in China against the Japanese, in Europe against the Germans, it was the victory of classical armies that permitted the final triumph of the partisans and the *maquis*. The French military effort in Algeria had restricted the guerillas to a precarious defensive stand. It was then that a very subtle strategic concept which Mao Tse-tung had first formulated came into play—the theory of the "prolonged war." According to this concept, war did not seek a military victory, because it was impossible to attain. It only sought to make the conflict continue for the longest possible time, long enough to make the adversary weary of the interminable struggle and willing to abandon his political objec-

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tives. It was a *manoeuvre by wearying*, of which the Algerian war is perhaps the best example, but which seems to have developed in Vietnam under different forms.

The manoeuvre by wearying points out the essentially psychological nature of strategy, and it consists of a series of procedures which place the adversary under maximum psychological stress, planning the strategy so that it can be maintained for as long as necessary. Starting from this idea, local conflict held to a plane of relatively minor violence “escalates” rapidly to a world-wide plane. The fact is, in short, that exploiting world-wide psychological forces can have infinitely more potent results than exploiting those forces only on the local level. Now, the object is to strike at the authority of the opposing government; the main goal will thus be to create an influential public opinion contrary to the government, and this opinion will be formed by means of world opinion. If the manoeuvre succeeds, not only will the adversary’s will be undermined at home, but its freedom to act militarily will be greatly limited by the restrictions imposed through the pressure of world opinion. It was in this way that the French in Algeria were hindered from intervening against the FLN bases installed along the Tunisian and Moroccan borders, and that the bombardment of Sakiet alone raised a storm of general protest. These psychological results have another favorable effect; they persuade the *maquis* and the population, who have undergone great hardships because of the war, that they have the support of world opinion, and consequently sustain the *hope* necessary to be able to continue the struggle indefinitely. Paralyzing the enemy and sustaining hope are the two essential expressions of the manoeuvre. On the local military level, it is enough to survive, even in a precarious way and to indicate this survival by some actions which may be small but striking enough from a psychological point of view. On the local political level, one can obtain the complicity of the population, already strongly conditioned by the hard discipline of an implacable terrorism, by working up a political theme which is well-suited to their basic desires (independence, prosperity, redistribution of land, etc...). Since, on the other hand, the stakes are usually very unequal psychologically, as the guerilla wages his all, while the

opposing party is defending only relatively marginal interests, one can hope that after a certain time (seven long years for the Algerian war) the latter will finally accept a *compromise* with the rebels.

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This description of the unilateral aspect of the manoeuvre by wearying has to be partly modified when one comes to deal with the bilateral aspect of the conflict. It is this which we see today in Vietnam. In fact, one cannot help being struck by the evolution undergone by the American side in this instance, an evolution parallel to that of France in Algeria, but with important differences, resulting from the very different means used by France and the United States, as much with respect to military forces as to their international actions.

In an initial phase, the United States, which counseled and supported the South Vietnamese government, relied on a socio-political strategy based on the creation of “pacified” areas in the country. They had been encouraged to rely on this formula by the success of the British in Malaya, thanks to a policy of controlling the population, and a system of organization within the villages to insure their self-defense. The theory itself may have been excellent, but it had certain limitations (which the French did not always recognize clearly in Algeria), and above all, it could not be well-applied elsewhere. For one reason, in Malaya the guerilla was Chinese and consequently it was a question of two opposing races, and secondly, the guerilla in Malaya could not be supported from nearby bases as in Vietnam. For all these reasons—and others—the strategy of “pacification” was a semi-failure, all the more because it had contributed to immobilize important South Vietnamese offensives, and consequently to leave uncontrolled vast tracts of forest and marshes where the Vietcong could gradually organize themselves with impunity to the point of establishing camps, bases, and of forming combat units on the level of battalions. The population had not been truly rallied behind the South Vietnamese government (for want of an appropriate political theme) and the military situation degenerated,

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particularly as the frequency of *coup d'états* at Saigon tended to shatter the unity of the South Vietnamese army.

Faced with this increasingly disquieting situation, and under the pressure of minor incidents, such as the bombarding of the base at Bien Hoa, the Americans chose to intervene directly. Their reaction, conforming to the logic of their methods and to their tendency to rely on arm-power, was to undertake a campaign of planned bombardments of North Vietnam, the accused supporter of the Vietcong. The threat of an extension of the bombardments to the industrial complexes of North Vietnam was intended to force the latter to come to terms. As is known, it did nothing of the kind. This failure could be foreseen for two reasons: the first is that this psychologically debatable action could only serve to stiffen the resistance of the North Vietnamese; the second and more subtle, is that an overly-controlled threat showed the "reasonableness" of the United States, i.e. that they were already too inhibited to be able to put their threat completely into effect. But at the same time, this military escalation entailed a considerable political escalation; China took up North Vietnam's cause in clamorous manifestos, the USSR intervened in a limited manner by delivering anti-aircraft weapons. Because of these two results, the *hopes* of the Vietcong were reinforced. In addition, North Vietnam, which up to then had only supplied a more-or-less clandestine and limited aid, openly sent regiments to South Vietnam. The aerial escalation had been met with an escalation in the guerilla ranks. The situation became grave.

The United States had no choice then but to carry the escalation a step further in sending significant American land forces to Vietnam. The indirect method of pressure on North Vietnam gave way to a direct struggle against the Vietcong using powerful means. When this decision was taken, a wave of hope spread across the United States: there would be a military victory. However, the initial results were surprising and deceptive. In spite of the use of the most modernly-equipped troops, in spite of extremely powerful air support, the battles (particularly Plei-Me) showed that the enemy could combat fiercely and administer defeats to the American forces. After several months of various experiences, the situation became clear; the military situation had

been greatly improved, but the possibility of a total and decisive military victory became more and more problematic. For both sides, there was nothing else to do but to turn to the manoeuvre by wearying.

This state of affairs confirmed the lessons learned by France in the Algerian war: the conflict between regular and guerilla forces turns into a mutual inability to obtain a final outcome. Because one cannot *impose* a solution by military means, it becomes necessary to *induce* the adversary to accept a compromise. At that point, the more powerful party takes the initiative of making a "declaration of peace" aimed to show the pacific nature of their intentions to the world, at the same time inviting the adversary to accept negotiations. The less powerful party, on the other hand, refuses to negotiate since it has not obtained its essential political objectives. In order to make it reduce its demands, military pressure is increased so as to make him fear that his position will deteriorate if he does not accept a compromise. Thus opens the *phase of negotiation*, the culminating moment of the battle, when military actions and political declarations are combined with a view to opening formal negotiations. An international diplomatic campaign accompanies this effort. Normally, this phase ends sooner or later in a conference, but if one recalls the precedents of Pan Munh John and Geneva, the military operations as such do not cease. On the contrary even, unless it has been a stated condition for a conference (as the North Vietnamese demand at the present), this is the moment when military successes can prove most valuable (as was the case with Dien Bien Phu.) One is dealing, then, with a phase full of upsets and dangers which leave the outcome of the struggle and the terms of compromise pending uncertainly until the final agreement has been made.

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The preceding considerations show how much the strategic notions of our modern world have been transformed.² The irruption of

² See my forthcoming *Strategy of Action*, to be published by Armand Colin.

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science and technology into the military sphere has endowed force with extraordinary dimensions and a capacity for destruction which far surpasses the stakes in most imaginable political situations. Accordingly, this exorbitant force tends to neutralize itself and to impose defined and precisely limited forms on action, so much the more because the evolution of ideas following on the two great world wars increasingly tends to reject the unleashing of mass bloodshed.

In this graded use of force, strategy, whose essence is more psychological than material, becomes an indispensable discipline for understanding and directing the events which are produced by conflicts between peoples. In one part of the world, using the nuclear threat where it is plausible, it imposes peace by dissuasion. In the rest of the world, it plays a subtle role which seems completely new, in which force is only one of the elements of a complex game which involves all means of action and extends world-wide, in order to resolve conflicts through compromises whose nature depends, after all, on the degree of persuasion that can be brought to bear on them.

We are thus very far from Clausewitz.