CSBA
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Regaining Strategic Competence

September 1, 2009 | **Barry Watts**, **Andrew F. Krepinevich**

Resources: Strategy & Policy

The ability of the US national security establishment to craft, implement, and adapt effective long-term strategies against intelligent adversaries at acceptable costs has been declining for some decades. Granted, US strategic performance since the late 1960s has not been uniformly poor, as the outcome of the Cold War testifies. US strategies such as offsetting Warsaw Pact numerical superiority with precision strike, increased US defense spending in the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, and the covert arming of mujahedin fighters to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan all contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, even if the more fundamental causes were economic decline and the loss of confidence in the Soviet system. And, while long overdue, the improvement in US strategy in Iraq since 2006 has also been impressive. Nevertheless, the overall trend in the strategic performance of American political and military elites appears to be one of decline.

Reversing this decline in US strategic competence is an urgent issue for American national security in the twenty-first century. The reason lies in the multi-faceted security challenges that the United States now faces. The three challenges most likely to persist and possibly grow more acute in coming years are: defeating both the Sunni Salafi-Takfiri and Shia Khomeinist brands of Islamist radicalism; hedging against the rise of a more confrontational or hostile China; and preparing for a world in which there are progressively more nuclear-armed regional powers than there were in the early 1990s. These challenges present the United States with a more complex and diverse array of security concerns than did the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Islamist radicalism and nuclear proliferation present challenges far different from the large-scale, high-intensity, non-nuclear (or “conventional”) warfare at which the US military excels. At the same time, the Chinese military appears to be systematically targeting weaknesses in the current American way of war, especially US power projection in the western Pacific and dependence on space systems.Why has US strategic performance been deteriorating? The deeper problem seems to be more a lack of understanding of what strategy is than structural or organizational defects in the United States’ national security establishment. Both public strategy documents from recent administrations and actual American strategic behavior suggest that US political and military leaders have been increasingly inclined to equate strategy with listing desirable goals, as opposed to figuring out how to achieve them.

As a practical matter, strategy is about making insightful choices of courses of action likely to achieve one’s ultimate goals despite resource constraints, political considerations, bureaucratic resistance, the adversary’s opposing efforts, and the intractable uncertainties as to how a chosen strategy may ultimately work out. Competent strategy focuses on how one’s ends may be achieved. In this vein, strategy is fundamentally about identifying or creating asymmetric advantages that can be exploited to help achieve one’s ultimate objectives despite resource and other constraints — most critically the opposing efforts of one’s adversaries and the inherent unpredictability of strategic outcomes.

How important is it to strive to do strategy well rather than poorly? Why is a concerted effort to do strategy well preferable to merely muddling through in response to unfolding crises and events? If the threat to use military force, or its actual use, is to be justifiable, then strategy appears to be necessary. Without strategy the use of force is merely random violence.

This being the case, is effective strategy feasible? Might strategic competence be merely an illusion given the unpredictability of strategic outcomes? The various objections of academic strategists to the possibility of strategy are grounded in a Western standard of rationality that demands the explicit maximization of benefits relative to costs. In other words, unless strategies and their implementations are optimal in the sense of utility maximization across costs, benefits and risks, then strategy is an illusion. But while one might wish that strategies could meet this standard of rationality, in reality it is an impossibly high desideratum. As the Nobel laureate Herbert Simon noted in the 1950s, humans lack the complete information and computational capacity required to make optimal choices. That is why strategic choices are, as strategist Richard Rumelt has observed, ultimately heuristics or guesses subject to the indeterminacy and contingency of ultimate outcomes. As for the option of merely muddling through in response to events, that too is a strategic choice. But it is unlikely to be the wisest one.

If strategy is both necessary and possible, are there historical cases in which strategic choices by the side that ultimately prevailed appear to have played a significant role in the outcome? One of the most extensively researched and documented instances is that of Anglo-American versus Nazi Germany strategic performance during World War II. British and American grand strategy was largely crafted by four men: President Franklin Roosevelt, General George Marshall, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Field Marshall Alan Brooke. German grand strategy, on the other hand, was mostly dictated by one man, Adolph Hitler. The contrast in strategic performance between the two sides is striking. Whereas the Allies avoided major strategic missteps, Hitler was guilty of numerous blunders, some of which were repetitions of the same mistake.

The first major choice that the British and Americans agreed upon in January 1942 was a “Germany first” strategy. This decision was based on the insight that defeating Germany first would make Japan’s surrender a matter of time, whereas defeating Japan first would not materially weaken Germany, especially if the Germans succeeded in conquering Russia. The next strategic decision the four Allied leaders faced was how to defeat Nazi Germany. George Marshall argued from the beginning that Germany’s defeat would require a cross-Channel invasion of northern France followed by a direct advance into Germany to confront the German army head on and, by capturing the Ruhr and Saar, deny Nazi forces the ability to fight on indefinitely.

Churchill and Brooke, however, ever mindful of the limits the First World War had imposed on Commonwealth resources and of the superior fighting power of the Germans, were inclined to pursue peripheral objectives in the Mediterranean. The campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy eventually deferred the Allied landings in Normandy until June 1944. In hindsight, these peripheral campaigns were not major strategic mistakes. By mid-1944, the Allies' campaigns in the Mediterranean had given US forces, commanders, and staffs needed battle experience and had also tied down substantial German forces in Italy. In addition, the Combined Bomber Offensive had placed increasing stress on Germany's war economy; the Allies had achieved air superiority over Western Europe; and the German disasters at Stalingrad and Kursk had kept Russia in the war while further weakening the Wehrmacht and limiting Hitler's capacity to move forces from the Eastern Front to Western Europe. Churchill and Brooke were undoubtedly right to oppose a cross-Channel invasion in 1942 and even in 1943, but Roosevelt and Marshall were right to insist on one in 1944.

Hitler's major decisions, by contrast, were rife with strategic blunders. He began World War II without fully mobilizing the German economy. He attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 without fully appreciating the resources that defeating Russia might ultimately require. He pursued counterproductive objectives as exemplified by his racial policies in Russia and his obsession with Stalingrad as a prestige objective.

Time and again, Hitler's "no retreat" decisions wasted resources Germany could not afford to waste. His contempt for the productivity of the US economy and the fighting power the Allies would eventually bring to bear against Germany reflected a lack of understanding of his adversaries. Thus, German grand strategy during World War II was prone to repeated blunders whereas Anglo-American grand strategy was not.

What conclusion about the importance of strategic competence can be drawn from this case study? The temptation to attribute Allied victory exclusively, or even mostly, to superior Anglo-American strategic performance must be resisted; the causes of Allied victory were many. Allied air power, for example, did not win World War II for the Allies by itself, but it was a critical weakness on the Axis side and perhaps the greatest single advantage enjoyed by the Allies. The Allies gave greater priority to air power, particularly to heavy bombers, than did the Germans and, as World War II unfolded, the Allies took full advantage of their strength in the air. By contrast, the Luftwaffe's failure to gain air superiority over the Royal Air Force in 1940 precluded a German cross-Channel invasion of England and turned Hitler's thoughts toward invading Russia instead. Thus, one cannot attribute Allied victory to any single cause, including superior strategy. Nevertheless, Germany's strategic blunders together with the absence of major mistakes on the Allied side were surely contributing factors in the ultimate outcome.

If strategy is necessary, possible, and important, it is nonetheless difficult.

Evidence of ill-conceived, inadequately thought-through, poor, or counterproductive strategies abounds. Building on the list of "common strategy sins" Richard Rumelt has culled from his long experience with business strategy, one can identify at least ten recurring pitfalls that can undermine competent strategic performance.

1. Failure to recognize or take seriously the scarcity of resources.
2. Mistaking strategic goals for strategy.
3. Failure to recognize or state the strategic problem.
4. Choosing poor or unattainable strategic goals.
5. Not defining the strategic challenge competitively.
6. Making false presumptions about one's own competence or the likely causal linkages between one's strategy and one's goals.
7. Insufficient focus on strategy due to such things as trying to satisfy too many different stakeholders or bureaucratic processes.

8. Inaccurately determining one's areas of comparative advantage relative to the opposition.
9. Failure to realize that few individuals possess the cognitive skills and mindset to be competent strategists.
10. Failure to understand the adversary.

In World War II Hitler fell pray to most of these pitfalls, whereas the British and American leaders mostly avoided them due to the collegiate process by which Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Brooke argued out their strategic choices. Hitler could, and did, override his generals, whereas none of the four Allied grand strategists could override the other three, and the occasions when they split two-against two usually resulted in compromises that also avoided outright blunders.

The persistent recurrence of these strategy pitfalls argues that deciding in whose hands to place US strategy in the twenty-first century is a critical issue. The fact is, however, that few individuals — regardless of intelligence, education, credentials or experience — possess the necessary cognitive skills and insight to be competent strategists. The insight to see more deeply than one's opponents into the possibilities and probabilities of a competitive situation is rare. Strategy may be a game anyone can play, but the evidence is strong that very few can play it well.

Thus, identifying individuals with the mindset and talents to craft strategy competently is one step the United States will need to take to regain strategic competence.

What other steps might the US security establishment consider taking to begin regaining a modicum of strategic competence, especially at the national level? First, a reversal of the adverse trend in US strategic performance is unlikely unless the president takes strategy seriously enough to invest time and energy into the crafting and implementation of American strategy. Two presidents who did take strategy seriously were Abraham Lincoln and Dwight Eisenhower, and their examples remain worthy of study and emulation. Second, while process and organizational remedies do not go to the heart of the matter, there is merit in recreating entities similar to the Eisenhower administration's Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board. The former helped Eisenhower and his key advisors develop effective strategies and the latter ensured that the government implemented them.

The central argument of this report is that, in light of the complex and intensifying security challenges the United States now faces, the nation can no longer afford poor strategic performance. The time to reverse the decline in US strategic competence is long overdue. The first task is for American political and military leaders to develop a clearer understanding of what strategy actually is, and what cognitive skills are necessary to craft and implement good strategies.