

COLIN S. GRAY

THE FUTURE OF STRATEGY





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Colin S. Gray

polity

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To the respected memory of  
Aleksandr A. Svechin (1878–1938)  
– the Russian Clausewitz

‘Rules are inappropriate in strategy.’

Svechin, *Strategy*, 2nd edn (1927; Minneapolis, MIN:  
East View Information Services, 1992), 64



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# Preface

I am most grateful to my editor and her team at Polity Press, Dr Louise Knight, who persisted in challenging me to write relatively briefly and intelligibly. Relative brevity I did achieve, but final judgement as to intelligibility I must defer to readers. I confess that I was somewhat surprised by my own argument, and conclusions, in this book. Specifically, although I have always been sure that strategy had a secure future in our history, I had not realized, prior to writing this text, just how overwhelmingly strong the argument for strategy in our human future has to be. Readers will discover that, although my subject here is forbiddingly diverse in historical detail, the true essentials of my argument about the future of strategy are actually quite simple and intellectually cohesive. I find that our human nature demands that we organize for security, which means that we require political process and need strategy. The logic is tight and the historical evidence in its support is overwhelming. Equally, the need for strategy is certain to be as strong in the future as it has been in the past and is in the present. The argument is clear and utterly compelling, once one has worked it out. I can thank Polity for obliging me to understand and explain the future of my subject.

In addition to the staff at Polity, I must thank my professional manuscript preparer, Barbara Watts, and my wife and daughter, Valerie and Tonia, for making it possible for me to complete this challenging project.

Colin S. Gray  
Wokingham



# Introduction

I am a strategist. For fifty years I have spoken, written and sought to advise governments about strategy. Because this is a relatively short book on what can be a large and often apparently diverse subject, it is necessary to start by bringing order to what otherwise can appear unduly chaotic.<sup>1</sup> The concept of chaos, meaning disorder and confusion, is important for our subject. Chaos always is either actively present in strategic history, or, at the least, ready in the wings threatening to become dominant in a current context. The discipline of strategy substantially is about attempts to prevent political urges from resulting in threats and violence that are not highly relevant to the motives for action. The core challenge of strategy is the attempt to control action so that it has the political effect desired. Indeed, strategy is all about the consequences of action that is tactical behaviour.

The beginning of wisdom for an approach to the understanding of strategy should be recognition of the sheer difficulty of the enterprise.<sup>2</sup> The challenges to the strategist are formidable wherever one looks. Scholars' text books are almost bound to simplify in the interests of clarity, but the attempted practice of strategy meets resistance that

often was unanticipated, and finds itself committed largely to the prevention of chaos. However, although ‘chaos rules’ more often in strategic history than one might like, fortunately it is possible to identify a handful of ideas that can be helpful in making an effort to make this vitally important subject more intelligible.

## General Theory

First and foremost, the entire, hugely diverse, strategic history of Mankind has been commanded fundamentally by the dicta of a general theory of strategy that applies to all times, places and circumstances. This general theory does what such a theory must, it explains the nature and basic functioning of its subject, without privilege or prejudice to particular issues. My personal preference for a general theory of strategy contains twenty-three items at present (see table 3.1). A secure grasp of this theory serves as education that should enable practising strategists to cope better with the specific challenges they face. I developed this version of theory in the course of my professional career as the result of a pressing need to understand how best to apply military force of many kinds in action or as threats. I have found this general theory suitable as an important aid for coping with challenges regarding arms control, nuclear weapons, landpower, seapower, airpower, cyber power, special operations and geopolitics. This theory, or variants of it, has to be the essential basis for the understanding of all strategic topics.

## Politics

As the general theory brings order to all aspects of the broad subject of strategy, so too does explicit recognition of the authority of politics. Strategy is not politics, but it

is always about politics. No matter the particular technical and cultural detail, strategy has to be ruled by superior political process. This is not discretionary. Violence, organized or other, always and everywhere has some political meaning. The outcome of warfare often is not what many people expected, but that does not negate the merit in this second theme. Journalists and scholars are apt to forget politics in the excitement or perceived impressiveness of policy and policymaking. But the making of policy is controlled by politics. Moreover, the dignity within which policy is wrapped can serve unhelpfully to bury from view appreciation of the politics that rule policymaking process.

## Prudence

I must emphasize prudence as the foremost quality that should discipline strategic behaviour. The reason for this unexciting-sounding argument is because all strategy has to be about the consequences of threat and action. The concept of prudence pertains to what lies at the very heart of what should be meant by strategy. Tactics is all about action, doing things, while strategy is about the consequences of the preceding tactical behaviour. The achievement by force of desirable and intended tasks, selected as policy goals by political process, is an exercise liable to hindrance and even failure as the result of the many difficulties that may assail even the competent strategist. Of all the 'laws' that often seem to harness the strategist, the law of unintended consequences is probably the one most often cited. Surprises happen, especially to the overconfident strategist! Of course, it is one thing to praise the virtue of prudence, but it can be quite another to practise it. How prudent can one be when there is no way to know what the future will bring? The future is not foreseeable, regardless of the promises of gullible or devious politicians and of ambitious generals.

## Legitimacy and Justice

This book does not shrink from recognizing the repeated realities of the grimmer aspects to strategic history, but the argument here is distinctly friendly to the linked concepts of legitimacy and justice. Of course the precise meaning of these high-sounding words varies considerably with context, but nonetheless they have universal relevance to our enduring political story. Contrary to the argument advanced by adherents to an 'offensive realist' persuasion, it is my belief that, although great powers can never afford to be indifferent to apparently adverse trends in a balance of power, neither are they condemned to seek hegemonic superiority and domination.<sup>3</sup> In strategic matters, as in many others, sound argument tends to become dangerously unsound when it is taken too far. It is only prudent to be somewhat conservative over issues of national security, but it can be imprudent to demonize current state antagonists when there is little convincing evidence of serious misbehaviour. This is not to condone, let alone by implication tolerate state misbehaviour that, if unopposed, is almost certain to create an imbalance of power injurious to reasonable understanding of the requirements of world order. Strategists cannot afford the luxury of primary devotion to ideals of legitimacy and justice, if necessary, at the expense of an imbalance in military power. That said, it is essential that strategists should not become so fascinated with calculations of relative military muscle that they fail to understand the potency of moral beliefs about legitimate governance and just behaviour.

## Historical Context

Readers need to be alert to the importance attached here to the idea of historical context. Although my first-hand experience in analysing strategic issues has been



contemporary, often even future looking, my view of the subject of strategy is a timeless one. What this means is that I have grappled long and hard with this topic of temporal context, and with arguments about the relationship between change and continuity in history.<sup>4</sup> To avoid getting ahead of myself, I will confine my argument here to affirmation of belief in the essential unity of my subject. That subject is strategy and I believe it should be regarded as thought and action in a great stream of time, with no discernible beginning and no predictable conclusion. A principal challenge in regard to this belief is the need to identify plausibly, and distinguish between, what changes over time and what does not. The benefit to belief in the unity of strategic experience through all of history is that it has to mean that all historical strategic experience comprises potential evidence about the same subject. While seeking to avoid anachronism, this means that one should be able to consider strategic behaviour of all kinds in the light shed by a reasonably consistent functional view.<sup>5</sup> Historical context has altered dramatically as a consequence of both revolutionary and cumulative change. But, in functional terms, Greek and then Roman needs for security, and the manner in which those needs were or were not met, can be viewed in the light shed by a general theory of strategy. Such a theory is as able to cope with oar-rowed galleys and lethally pointed *gladii* as it is with the precision conventional and nuclear weapons of today. I believe that strategy can and should be studied as an inclusively united theme running through all of history.

## Motives

Finally, the view of the motives for the subject of strategy underlying this discussion is, I confess, heavily indebted to that of the great history of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides. Suffice it to say for now that motivations for the strategic theme throughout the course of history have