

Politics and War

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A Historical Analysis of Strategic Decision-Making

While this article won't delve into strategy, it's crucial to establish a foundational understanding using Colin Gray's concept: "Strategy is simply the bridge that connects military power to a political goal." Emphasizing strategy in discussions about politics and war is essential to avoid ambiguity. At this stage, our focus is on understanding how politics perceives, manages, or neglects war as a tool.

Throughout history, war has consistently been a political act, embedded within a political context across all societal developments. The motives driving political entities—be they ethnic, national, religious, territorial, economic, or humanitarian—hold significant sway. Political decisions drive the initiation, conduct, and form of wars, including the choice to refrain from military conflict.

Without the dominance of politics over war, our understanding of conflicts would drastically shift. As Clausewitz states, "War is an act of violence aimed at compelling the enemy to submit to our will." Stripped of its political dimension, war devolves into mere criminality. Without political sanction, warfare risks descending into sheer brutality, akin to animal slaughter.

Throughout history, spanning ancient Egyptian pharaohs, Greek agora, churches, emperors, kings, feudal lords, and various forms of governance, whether democratic or autocratic, war has consistently served as a potent political tool—a weapon wielded by states across diverse social systems.

Wars, categorized as strategic, tactical, global, regional, interstate, civil, conventional, asymmetric, or otherwise, maintain a steadfast reliance on political influence. Despite their diverse classifications, the importance of politics in shaping the course of war remains unwavering. The outcome of any conflict, regardless of its nature, hinges more on its political dynamics than on sheer military might. The clarity, consistency, strength, and appropriateness of the political decisions surrounding a conflict play a pivotal role in determining its trajectory and ultimate results.

In examining the price of political objectives and decisions, it becomes evident that they profoundly impact the military aspects of war. This exploration focuses not on the direct military strategies or tactical maneuvers employed in warfare but rather on the overarching influence of political goals and decisions on the conduct and outcomes of conflicts

Truman's Reflections on "World War III"

The echoes of ancient conflicts resonate through history, as seen in Xenophon's account of the inconclusive battle of Mantinea between Thebes and Sparta in 362 BC. He observes, "Neither side gained any advantage, territory, city-state, or influence. Instead, Greece fell into greater disorder and chaos following the battle." Xenophon's analysis of Mantinea finds parallels in Truman's assessment of the Korean War, occurring over two millennia later.

In Korea, the specter of a potential World War III loomed large. Truman's contemplation on preventing such a catastrophic global conflict mirrors the gravity of Xenophon's observations. Truman's pivotal decision-making during the Korean War reflects his awareness of the stakes involved—a sentiment deeply rooted in the historical context of conflicts and their ramifications.

Truman's historical juncture was profound. In 1945, amidst the aftermath of World War II, he stood at the precipice of reshaping the world order. His decisions then reverberate through subsequent generations, shaping not only his era but also ours

During the 1945 Potsdam Conference, Truman disclosed mankind's most guarded secret to Stalin—the successful creation of the atomic bomb. Truman, anticipating leverage over Stalin with this groundbreaking weapon, privately informed him of its completion. However, Truman's expectations of influencing Stalin's actions through the possession of this super weapon were not realized. In his memoirs, Truman reflects, "The Soviet Premier's response was notably indifferent; he merely expressed satisfaction at the news and encouraged us to use the nuclear bomb effectively in Japan."

Truman faced the stark reality that he could not leverage the situation to indirectly impact the Soviet Union via Japan. Moreover, he realized that striking Japan would likely hasten the Soviet Union's development of similar weapons. The Soviet Union pursued atomic weaponry for two primary reasons: the desire to possess such arms and an entrenched drive to match, if not surpass, Western technological advancements. For Stalin, nuclear armament was a matter of prestige, evident in the deliberate pace of subsequent production. Even after the Soviet bomb's creation, only a scant few bombs remained in inventory for an extended period.

Despite the clarity of the situation, Truman's decision to proceed with a nuclear strike on Japan appears unjustified. Instead of leveraging nuclear power in the context of the looming confrontation with the communist regime, Truman hastily authorized the attack, which had an effect inversely proportional to its intended impact on the Soviet Union. The ongoing debate surrounding the nuclear strike on Japan continues to revolve around moral considerations, while military expediency remains a contentious issue.

Several factors merit consideration. The primary argument in favor of dropping the bomb centers on the potential saving of thousands of American soldiers from death. However, this argument loses weight when considering that Japan's capitulation at the time did not necessarily demand such sacrifices. Despite Japan's entrenched military resolve and tradition of fighting to the last, indications of imminent surrender were evident. At the Potsdam Conference, Stalin informed Truman that Japan had twice sought surrender terms through the Soviet Union, which the Russians rejected. Furthermore, Japan actively pursued surrender conditions that precluded the presence of occupying troops on its soil. Given these circumstances, Japan's surrender seemed imminent, rendering the nuclear strike morally and strategically questionable.

The nuclear attack on Japan, purportedly intended to intimidate the Soviet Union, ultimately served as a demonstration of force, suggesting that its impact on Japan had already been achieved. Air Force General Curtis LeMay devised an innovative strategy of strategic bombing that inflicted more casualties than atomic bombing. For instance, on May 23, 1945, 520 bombers simultaneously struck the suburbs of Tokyo, resulting in the destruction of 20 square kilometers within a mere 2 hours. The onslaught, comprising 4,000 tons of incendiary bombs, caused an estimated 100,000 casualties due to "firebombing," including women and children burnt alive. LeMay conducted similar strategic bombing campaigns across multiple cities, rendering the atomic bomb's effect on Japanese leadership redundant. Regardless of perspective, the indirect target of the atomic bomb remained the Soviet Union.

General LeMay's Massive Strategic Bombing Campaign in Japan

Truman's policy, employing warfare as a tool in this manner, failed to yield desired outcomes. It would be four years before the Soviet Union successfully tested its first nuclear bomb. Truman's political objective should have centered on preventing the emergence of additional nuclear powers and halting the spread of nuclear communism.

Achieving military objectives would have been relatively straightforward if backed by clear political goals. The Soviet Union's testing of its solitary nuclear bomb in the deserts of Central Asia incurred significant economic costs and encountered severe limitations in infrastructure for its development.

From a tactical standpoint, Truman's utilization of the atomic bomb would have resulted in fewer casualties, primarily confined to specialists working at the secretive facility. Moreover, had the Soviet Union refrained from contributing to the proliferation of nuclear arms, the global nuclear arsenal would have taken considerably longer to accumulate. Importantly, attempts to develop nuclear weapons would have been perceived as a *casus belli* by all parties involved.

However, Truman's policy did not view nuclear weapons through the lens of differing political ideologies, but rather as a trigger for conflict—an ideology in its own right, albeit a flawed one. This perspective became evident with the onset of the Korean War in 1950, illustrating Truman's mismanagement of the tools of warfare at his disposal.

The year 1950 marked the eruption of conflict in Korea, echoing the specter of Munich. Communist forces from North Korea swiftly invaded and nearly overran the South. For President Truman, this crisis represented a formidable challenge, far surpassing the magnitude of the Japanese threat in the preceding years. It also presented an opportunity to redefine America's global stance in a rapidly changing international landscape.

Truman's resolve to take action was unwavering, driven by both personal conviction and the pressing demands of domestic politics. Eighteen months after his reelection, his once-strong approval rating plummeted from 69% to a precarious 37%. With critical congressional and senate elections looming, Truman faced the prospect of significant losses. The Republican opposition, led by figures like Richard Nixon—later to confront challenges in wielding warfare as a policy tool—rallied against Truman. They accused him of weakness and inaction in countering the spread of communism, of capitulating to Stalin's ambitions in Eastern Europe, of negligence in safeguarding nuclear technology from Soviet espionage, and now, of allowing the unchecked advance of communism in Asia without resistance.

The events unfolding in Western democracies, coupled with Truman's own perceptions, drew a clear parallel to the Munich Agreement, prompting decisive action. The Soviet occupation of North Korea, the Berlin blockade, the coerced Sovietization of Czechoslovakia, the suppression of communism in Eastern Europe, the communist-backed Greek civil war, Soviet pressure on Turkey to control the Straits, Mao's communist victory in China, and the Soviet Union's successful development of the atomic bomb in 1949 collectively heightened the resonance of the Munich analogy. These occurrences fostered a prevailing fear that the errors of Munich could be replicated once again.

Munich – casus belli or?

In 1950, just 12 years had passed since the Munich Conference and the announcement of the British Prime Minister back home, who, with a copy of the Munich Declaration in hand, announced the “achievement of a dignified peace”.

Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier participated in the Munich Conference in September 1938. Hitler’s request to annex a part of Czechoslovakia, the “old German land” Sudetenland, to the Third Reich was discussed, and under such conditions that the Czechoslovak delegation did not even leave their hotel rooms to participate in the discussion of the issue, to say nothing of the Gestapo attached to them. By this time, it was already evident that Germany was not fulfilling its obligations as a result of the First World War. Germany had also left the League of Nations and had begun a massive rearmament program. The Rhineland was occupied by Germany, the Anschluss of Austria, Manchuria by Japan, and Abyssinia by Italy. Despite this, the leaders of Britain and France literally gifted the Sudetenland as Hitler’s last territorial claim across Europe.

The tragicomic political delusion of the Munich Agreement was not only perceived by Chamberlain as a diplomatic triumph, ostensibly averting the escalation of political tensions into war, but also garnered congratulatory messages from leaders of other democracies. These included American President Roosevelt, the Prime Ministers of Canada and Australia, who lauded the British Prime Minister’s efforts.

However, in stark contrast to Chamberlain’s perception, Czechoslovakia found itself completely occupied merely six months after the Munich Agreement. Subsequently, Poland was invaded six months later, precipitating Europe’s descent into World War II.

Munich stands as a stark reminder that politicians sometimes fail to recognize the inevitability of war—as the continuation of politics or perhaps choose to turn a blind eye to it. The ongoing attempt to address the Ukraine crisis within the framework of the Minsk agreements mirrors this pattern. Here, both democratic and authoritarian regimes convene to discuss their often conflicting interests against the backdrop of war. Much like the Anschluss of Austria, which brazenly breached the red line drawn at Munich, the current Normandy format grapples with issues such as ‘self-determination through the Crimean referendum,’ with a ‘Revisionist Russia’ participating in negotiations akin to the ‘revisionist Germany’ of that era.

In 1950, Truman seized upon the Munich precedent as a call to action. The political response to North Korean aggression culminated in direct military confrontation.

Political goals of the Korean War

War “is controlled by a political goal, and the value of this goal must determine the sacrifices that are key to it, both in amount and duration” (Clausewitz).

Truman’s political objectives exerted a profound influence on the outcome of the Korean War and its subsequent ramifications. To comprehend the essence of these goals, it’s imperative to reflect on North Korea’s contemporary stance and the formidable threat it poses to both present and future geopolitical landscapes.”

General Douglas MacArthur led the military operations in Korea amidst a complex political landscape. While US forces in Korea operated under an international, UN-sanctioned mandate, the original vision of a limited war with defined objectives soon became blurred. Initially, the political goal was to repel aggression, yet it lacked clear criteria for achievement. Ideally, isolating the immediate source of aggression, Kim Il Sung, through military force could have been pursued, similar to later actions against figures like Noriega, Milosevic, and Hussein. However, Truman did not articulate such a focused political objective.

The successful military maneuvers, notably the Inchon landing, severed North Korea’s supply lines, offering Truman the opportunity to redefine objectives. Initially aiming for the unification of Korea, Truman shifted focus to deterring aggression due to the threat of Chinese and Soviet intervention. Eventually, an ambiguous goal emerged: the protection of the security of military forces, devoid of clear political significance. The Korean War thus became a semantic tautology, lacking a coherent purpose.

General MacArthur’s dismissal stemmed from his dissatisfaction with the vague political direction of the war. His vision of complete victory through Korean unification and the dismantling of North Korea’s regime underscored a pragmatic approach. MacArthur recognized the Clausewitzian center of gravity and the military capability to address it, but lamented the lack of aligned political vision.

A similar challenge arose in 2010 in Afghanistan, where tensions between General McChrystal and President Obama highlighted discordant political perspectives. In both cases, the potential success of military efforts was hindered by political goals that inadequately addressed the complex realities on the ground. Thus, the fate of war remainThe Discharge of US Armed Forces in Inchon marked a pivotal moment not only for the potential unification of Korea but also for the pursuit of broader political objectives. In the 1950s, the United States held unchallenged leadership in nuclear armaments, while the Soviet and Chinese militaries, perceived as major impediments to Truman’s policies, were notably weakened and depleted.

The Korean War was thus a calculated response, driven by a genuine fear of the Munich analogy. However, amidst the ongoing conflict, the ambiguity and fluctuation of political objectives yielded suboptimal outcomes. By deferring Korean reunification to an uncertain future following the “freezing of the war,” Truman inadvertently compounded future challenges, as evidenced by the current nuclear-aggressive stance of North Korea.

This historical context underscores the complexities and consequences of political decision-making during times of conflict, highlighting the enduring impact of strategic choices on future generations.

The Korean War, much like the Persian Gulf War with Saddam Hussein years later, exemplifies how politics can delay conflicts, deferring their resolution to the future. In both cases, the dominance of political considerations over military strategies is evident, albeit under vastly different circumstances and fears that shaped the conduct of each conflict.

During the First Persian Gulf War, also known as the Kuwait War, the shadow of the “Vietnam Syndrome” loomed large. The collective memory of the Vietnam War cast a long shadow over the global community, including the American populace and political leadership. There was a pervasive fear of protracted conflict, with many dreading the prospect of being embroiled in a prolonged engagement akin to the Vietnam experience in Asia. Consequently, the Bush administration’s primary objective during the Kuwait War was to expedite the end conflict, with Saddam Hussein, the true casus belli, relegated to a secondary concern.

The Kuwait War was shaped by the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, deeply rooted in the Vietnam syndrome, which sought to curtail political intervention in military affairs. As a result, the war in Kuwait achieved partial success, meeting its primary political objective of expelling Hussein from Kuwait with minimal casualties and swift resolution.

Subsequent political decisions deemed the expulsion of Hussein from Kuwait sufficient to declare victory. However, policymakers anticipated the need for further action, leading to a second war a decade later aimed at toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The annexation of Crimea stands as a modern example, echoing the Munich Agreement’s recognition of the inevitability of political warfare. Ukraine’s failure to employ military intervention in Crimea underscored the necessity of wielding military power to maintain political stability in Donetsk and Lugansk.

Similarly, the ongoing conflict in Syria mirrors the complexities of the Vietnam War, illustrating that military success hinges on clear and coherent political objectives. Military operations character, even those conducted by anti-terrorist coalitions through airstrikes, are dictated not solely by military exigencies but by political considerations and decisions.

In essence, war invariably remains an extension of politics, whether initiated or not. , military actions on the battlefield are inexorably intertwined with political imperatives, emphasizing the inseparable link between military strategy and political objectives