



General Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and commander of NATO's Allied Land Command, right center, discusses mission command execution with senior officers from NATO HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps during Steadfast Jupiter 23, October 18, 2023 (U.S. Army/Kyle Larsen)

Converting a Political- to a Military-Strategic Objective

By Milan Vego

Political objectives are usually achieved by using one's military power. Converting political objectives into achievable military-strategic objectives is the primary responsibility of military-strategic leadership. This process is largely an art rather than a science. There are many potential pitfalls because much depends on the knowledge, understanding, experience, and judgment of military-strate-

gic leaders. Most often, mistakes made are only recognized after setbacks or defeats suffered during the hostilities. Despite its critical importance, there is no consensus on the steps and methods in converting political- into military-strategic objectives. There is scant writing on the subject in either doctrinal documents or professional journals.

Political vs. Military Objectives

Any war is fought to achieve certain *political objectives*, which may be described as securing important national

or alliance/coalition interests in a certain part of a theater. When aimed to achieve national interests, a political objective is strategic in scale. Its accomplishment could have a radical effect on the course and outcome of a war. In his seminal work *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) wrote that “no one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is the political purpose; the latter its operational objective.”¹ He observed

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that “the political object—the original motive for war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”² Political objectives may be purely political. However, they are often combined with ideological, geopolitical, economic, financial, social, ethnic, and religious objectives.

A *military-strategic objective* is ending the enemy’s organized resistance and thereby achieving a major part of a given political-strategic objective. Yet the entire political objective is not accomplished unless military-strategic success is consolidated during the posthostilities (or stabilization) phase of a war. A military-strategic objective must *always* be subordinate to a given political objective. The British theoretician B.H. Liddell Hart cautioned that political leadership must make sure that political objectives of a war are achievable with military means that are currently or will soon be available. He warned that policy should “not demand what is militarily—that is, practically, impossible.” The “war aims must be adopted to limitations of strength and policy.”³

In the case of continent-size countries, such as the United States or the Russian Federation, or of the oceanic theaters (for example, the Atlantic or Pacific), the possibility exists of having a war in two or more war theaters. Then, for each of them, a single military-strategic objective must be determined. In World War II, the United States had two national military-strategic objectives: unconditional surrender of the Axis powers in Europe (Nazi Germany and Italy) and in the Pacific region (Imperial Japan).⁴ Then, in each theater of war, there would also exist two or more *theater-strategic objectives*—whose accomplishment would result in the destruction of a major part of the enemy forces and then set conditions for a posthostilities phase in a given theater of operations. Their accomplishment would have a radical effect on the course and outcome of a war in a given theater. It would also signify a major phase in a war. In a theater of operations with a large population and developed infrastructure (“developed” theater), such as was Western Europe in World War II

or the Iraqi theater of operations in 2003, the theater-strategic objective is subordinate to a given political objective (which, in turn, is subordinate to the national or alliance/coalition political-strategic objective) (see figure 1). In contrast, in a sparsely populated theater with little or no infrastructure (“undeveloped” theater), as were the Solomons, central Pacific, and Papua New Guinea in World War II, the theater-strategic objectives would be predominantly or exclusively military.

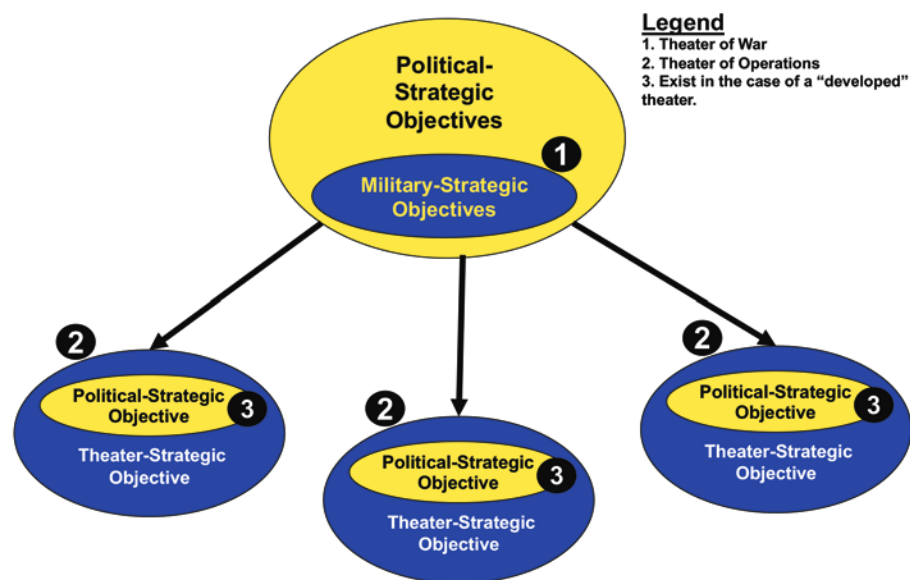
In the offensive phase of the war in the Pacific (after August 1942), the Allies had in the Pacific Ocean area three theater-strategic objectives: defending Alaska and the Aleutians, capturing the Solomons archipelago, and capturing the Japanese strongpoints in the central Pacific. In the Southwest Pacific area, the Allies had two identifiable theater-strategic objectives: capturing Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. The final theater-strategic objective for the Pacific Ocean area command was capturing/neutralizing the southern approaches to the home islands (Formosa, Iwo Jima, and Ryukyus) and then, jointly with the Southwest Pacific area’s forces, assaulting and occupying the home islands. This part of the theater-strategic objectives was made unnecessary after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

Prerequisites

Among the main requirements for determining a realistic military-/theater-strategic objective are sufficient military capabilities, sound prediction of the duration of a war, accurate strategic intelligence, and realistic political/military assumptions. The accomplishment of a military-strategic objective is predicated on having sufficient military capabilities. The greater one’s numerical/qualitative superiority, the more ambitious the military-strategic objectives that might be accomplished. For German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Sr., the main requirement for a war was numerical superiority of the Prussian armies. This was achieved by general conscription. Moltke’s aim was to defeat an enemy army in a “single powerful blow.” At the same time, the importance of numerical superiority should not be overstated. Experience shows that in many cases, superior numbers are of no avail.

In evaluating overall strength of friendly and enemy forces, a great deal of attention must be paid to intangible elements, such as morale and discipline, will to fight, skills of the leaders, and soundness of doctrine. These factors are often more critical than numerical strength. Sometimes, the spiritual strength of an army may balance other

Figure 1. Military Theater-Strategic Objectives



deficiencies. The influence of a single personality may also greatly enhance the capabilities of the entire army and even the entire state.⁵ Experience shows that numerically weaker forces could often defeat a much larger force because of the better quality of their leaders and the better training, morale, and discipline of their troops. In Germany's invasion of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in May 1940, for instance, the ratio of attacker to defender was 0.7 to 1, or 3,740,000 Allied soldiers (including 2,240,000 French troops) facing 2,760,000 Germans. The Allies had a 3-to-2 superiority in artillery pieces. However, France had only 3 armored divisions (plus 1 more created during the campaign) against Germany's 10 panzer divisions.⁶ The German success in that campaign was due more to much higher quality of leadership, doctrine, combat training, and morale/discipline than to materiel.

In some cases, as the war on the Eastern Front in 1941–1945 illustrates, the sheer number of troops, tanks, guns, and aircraft is simply overwhelming, no matter what the skills of the commanders and rank and file, morale and discipline, or training and soundness of doctrine of the opposing force. The Germans had assigned 145 divisions (including 19 panzer divisions and 14 infantry motorized divisions) with 3.2 million men (out of a total 3.8 million) for the invasion of Soviet Russia in June 1941.⁷ They also had a small contingent of Romanian and Finnish forces, but the effectiveness of their equipment and combat was well below that of the Germans.⁸ The German Eastern Army (Ostheer) was superior in combat experience to the Red Army. Except for nine security divisions (Sicherungs-Divisionen),⁹ all other German divisions were fully equipped with modern weapons. The training and confidence of the German troops were high. German leadership, especially at the operational level, was superior to leadership of the Red Army.¹⁰ The German high commanders were experienced in maneuvering large, motorized forces, and the individual German soldier was self-confident. The Germans

believed that the element of surprise in launching the invasion would probably compensate for some of the German numerical inferiority.¹¹

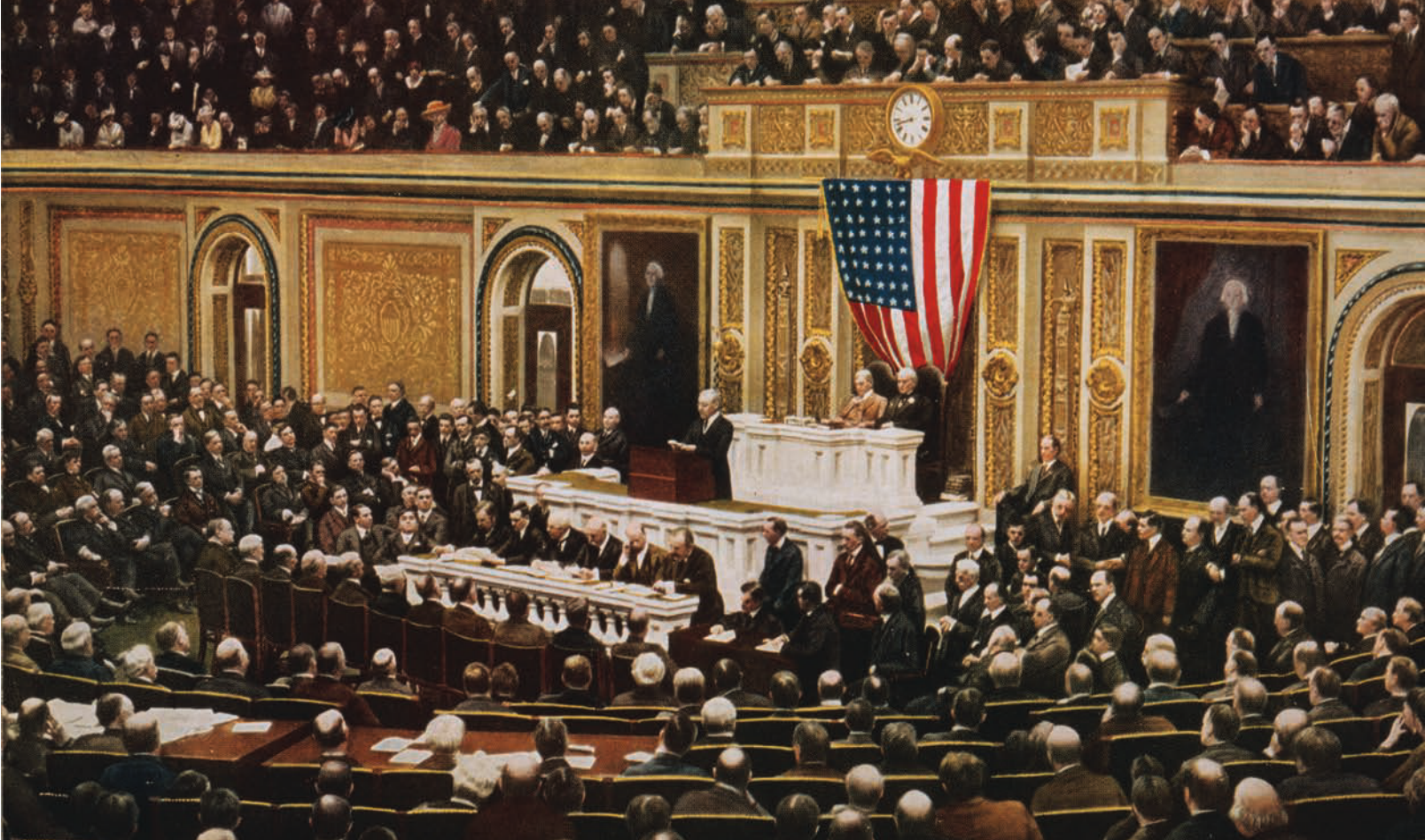
In their invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russians mobilized between 150,000 and 190,000 men.¹² They faced initially a 250,000-man Ukrainian army.¹³ The Russians employed seven combined arms armies and elements of two others plus one guards tank army. They also deployed airborne, naval infantry, and Spetsnaz light infantry around Ukraine's borders.¹⁴ The Russians not only had numerically inadequate forces to defeat and effectively control Ukraine—a country covering some 233,000 square miles (600,000 square kilometers) and with a population of about 41 million (in January 2022)—but they also grossly underestimated the Ukrainian ability to use skillfully their smaller but better trained and highly motivated forces both in defense and on offense.

One of the most important factors in determining a military-strategic objective is to have a realistic assessment of the *duration of a pending war*. Ideally, this should be based on a consensus between military leaders and civilian security officials. Yet sometimes a single powerful ruler, as was Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin, and his inner circle might arbitrarily decide the duration of a pending war. Major pitfalls are the gross underestimation of the enemy's capabilities and the will to fight. In his decision to invade Soviet Russia, Hitler expected that the entire campaign would not last more than 8 to 12 weeks.¹⁵ The German high command shared these views. So it was not surprising that for the Germans, the Soviet abundance of natural resources, number of divisions, tanks, aircraft, and vast distances could be safely disregarded. Although the German generals might not have had full knowledge of the Soviet capabilities, they still should have known the limitations of their own forces. To achieve a decisive victory, they needed a much larger force in their Eastern Campaign. Yet the Germans started it with a force slightly larger than in their campaign in the West in 1940, especially in terms of numbers of panzers and aircraft.¹⁶

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian leadership made an incorrect assumption about the duration of the war. Russian intelligence assumed that there would be no serious Ukrainian resistance, that some units with a Russian-speaking population would refuse to fight, and that the Russian population in the eastern provinces would welcome Russian troops as liberators.¹⁷ A captured Russian document in March 2022 stated that by the 10th day of the invasion, the Russian forces would transit to stabilization operations. They would “proceed to the blocking and destruction of individual scattered units of the [enemy] Armed Forces and the remnants of the nationalist resistance units.” The Russian “special services” would be used for establishing occupation administration on the “liberated” territories.¹⁸

In other cases, military leadership was correct in its assessment about the duration of the war but decided to open hostilities because of the anticipated negative trend in the correlation of forces. In 1941, most of the Japanese high command assumed that a war with the Western powers would be long. Yet the longer Japan waited to initiate a war against the United States, the dimmer the prospects for success because of accelerated U.S. rearmament. This was especially the case in naval strength. In 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy had some 70 percent of the tonnage of the U.S. Navy. However, the U.S. plan for a two-ocean Navy in July 1940 called for a 70 percent increase in U.S. naval tonnage. By 1943, the ratio for Imperial Japanese Navy to U.S. Navy would be reduced to 50 percent, and in 1944 to 30 percent. The Japanese were not realistic in their assumptions that by quickly capturing the central and southwestern Pacific and then fortifying these positions, they would force the Americans into a protracted island-by-island slog. They also erroneously believed that the cost of the struggle would be beyond America's willingness to pay.¹⁹

Optimally, one should possess accurate, timely, and relevant intelligence on the enemy's military-strategic capabilities. This is often not possible because



President Woodrow Wilson asks Congress to declare war on Germany, April 2, 1917 (Library of Congress, colorized)

there are so many variables involved in intelligence assessment—and intelligence is rarely perfect. Both accurate and inaccurate, and sometimes wide of the mark or misleading, statements are part of the same strategic assessment. Exaggeration of friendly capabilities and underestimation of those of the enemy are common. The lack of good intelligence is often the reason for underestimating the enemy's military capabilities, as the example of the Russian military in the Far East in 1904 illustrates. Russian commanders had only the barest of information concerning Japan. They had inaccurate numbers of divisions and capital ship dispositions.²⁰ At the same time, Tsar Nicholas II and his inner circle had a strong belief that Japan would not dare take up arms against the all-powerful Russian army and navy. One exception was General Aleksey P. Kuropatkin, minister of war, who did an inspection tour of East Asia from May to July in 1903. He reported that Russian forces were in a good state but that the Japanese army was equally strong. Kuropatkin argued that war

with Japan should be avoided at all costs. At an important meeting in Port Arthur in early July 1903, Kuropatkin's views were endorsed. However, the war with Japan became inevitable after early August 1903, when Vice Admiral Yevgeni I. Alekseyev was appointed as a viceroy in the Far East with headquarters in Port Arthur. He maintained hard and unyielding policies during negotiations with Japan.²¹

During planning for the invasion of Soviet Russia, the Germans greatly underestimated the numerical strength of the Red Army in western Russia. The Supreme Command of the Army (Oberkommando des Heeres, or OKH)'s intelligence department estimated that the Soviets deployed 147 divisions plus 39 to 40 independent brigades. However, the Soviets deployed in four western military districts 180 divisions and 44 to 45 independent brigades.²² In January 1941, the OKH's intelligence estimated the Red Army's strength as 150 rifle divisions (including 15 motorized and 32 cavalry divisions and 36 motorized brigades).²³ After mobilization, the Soviets would

have a total of 209 divisions (107 rifle divisions in the first wave, 77 rifle divisions in the second wave, and 25 rifle divisions in the third wave).²⁴

In the later phase of planning, the OKH's intelligence estimated that the Red Army deployed in western Russia 213 divisions (including 25 divisions against Finland and in the Transcaucasus). In the area between the Baltic and the Black seas, 204 divisions (133 rifle divisions, 24 cavalry divisions, 10 tank divisions, and 37 motorized divisions) were deployed. No estimates were made for the second wave of the Red Army's strength after mobilization.²⁵ The OKH's intelligence believed that from the Asian theater the Red Army could bring in 38 divisions (25 rifle and 8 cavalry divisions and 5 motorized brigades) of the third wave. Some of them could be used against the Germans after the nonaggression pact with Japan was signed in April 1941.²⁶ However, the Soviets had 303 divisions in June 1941, or 93 more than the Germans believed. The Germans estimated that the Soviets had some 10,000 tanks, but the real number was 23,100; the number of aircraft was



Brigadier General Courtney Whitney; General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command; and Major General Edward M. Almond observe shelling of Inchon from USS *Mount McKinley*, September 15, 1950 (U.S. Army)

estimated as 6,000 (5,500 frontline), of which some 3,300 were deployed in western Russia. However, the Soviets had some 20,000 aircraft in their inventory, including 9,300 in western Russia.²⁷

Another problem is the tendency to focus on the enemy's intentions instead of its capabilities. This has probably been the cause of more major military failures than any other intelligence deficiency. It is common to make an error in estimating the enemy's intentions because of one's inability to think from the enemy's frame of reference. The British made such an error in January 1940 regarding possible German landings in Norway. They firmly believed that the Germans would not intervene in Scandinavia if their iron ore imports were not endangered or if the Allies did not establish a naval base on the Norwegian coast.²⁸

In the absence of reliable information, military commanders and their staffs must make certain strategic assumptions that might be true or only partially true, or even entirely false.

Realistic military-strategic assumptions have a critical role in determining military-strategic objectives. Yet this is often not the case for a variety of reasons, such as wrong perceptions, racial prejudice, a sense of cultural superiority, or relying on suspect historical precedents. In 1941, the Germans believed that the Soviets had a limited reconstitution and mobilization capacity and that they would get little support from the Western Allies.²⁹ The German perception of the poor state of the Soviet military was based on its experiences with the Russians in World War I and the Freikorps (Free Corps) fighting in the Baltics in 1919. The Germans were also influenced by the information the Japanese shared about interrogations of a high-ranking Soviet defector (General Genrikh S. Lyushkov, the Soviet secret service chief in the Far Eastern Army, who defected to the Japanese in June 1938).³⁰ The German military was aware of Stalin's purges of the Soviet officer corps in 1937–1938, and that led them

(not unreasonably) to believe that the Soviet military was weak. The Germans also assumed that a surprise attack would lead to a swift victory. This wishful thinking led to a lack of planning for fighting in the Russian winter and for ignoring German logistical shortfalls.³¹ For his part, Stalin was well informed about the scale of the German buildup in the east but made a fatal error in believing that Hitler did not plan to attack.³²

In preparing for their invasion of Ukraine, Russian leaders made several false political and military assumptions. The Central Intelligence Agency director testified in early March 2022 that Vladimir Putin “was confident that he had modernized his military, and they were capable of quick and decisive victory at minimal cost.”³³ These assumptions possibly determined and imposed unrealistic objectives and timetables on the Russian military. The Russians also vastly underestimated the quality, morale, and determination of Ukraine's armed forces—a clear evidence of hubris.³⁴

The Process

Ideally, the process of converting a political objective to a military-strategic objective should consist of several mutually related and consecutive steps. It should result in determining the main and alternative military- or theater-strategic objectives. In a war, one's main strategic objective should not be too obvious. Liddell Hart observed that an alternative objective would provide "the opportunity of gaining an objective, whereas a single objective, unless the enemy is helplessly inferior, means the certainty that you will not gain it—once the enemy is no longer uncertain as to your aim."³⁵

The process should start by conducting a strategic estimate in a pending theater of war (see figure 2). That estimate is normally a part of the overall strategic estimate (that encompasses not only military but also nonmilitary aspects of a strategic situation). Normally, a military-strategic estimate should encompass a thorough assessment of friendly, enemy, and neutral forces, plus the effect of the physical environment (terrain, oceanography, climate/weather) on their employment in combat. For both friendly and enemy forces, their strengths and weaknesses/vulnerabilities should be

identified and evaluated. Special attention should be given to intangible elements of both friendly and enemy forces.

For converting a military-strategic objective to theater-strategic objectives, an estimate of the military situation should be conducted for a given theater of operations. Then each theater-strategic objective should be in consonance with a given political objective in the respective theater of operations. The military- or theater-strategic estimate should end with conclusions and recommendations (or lines of effort) for essential aspects of the military-strategic situation.

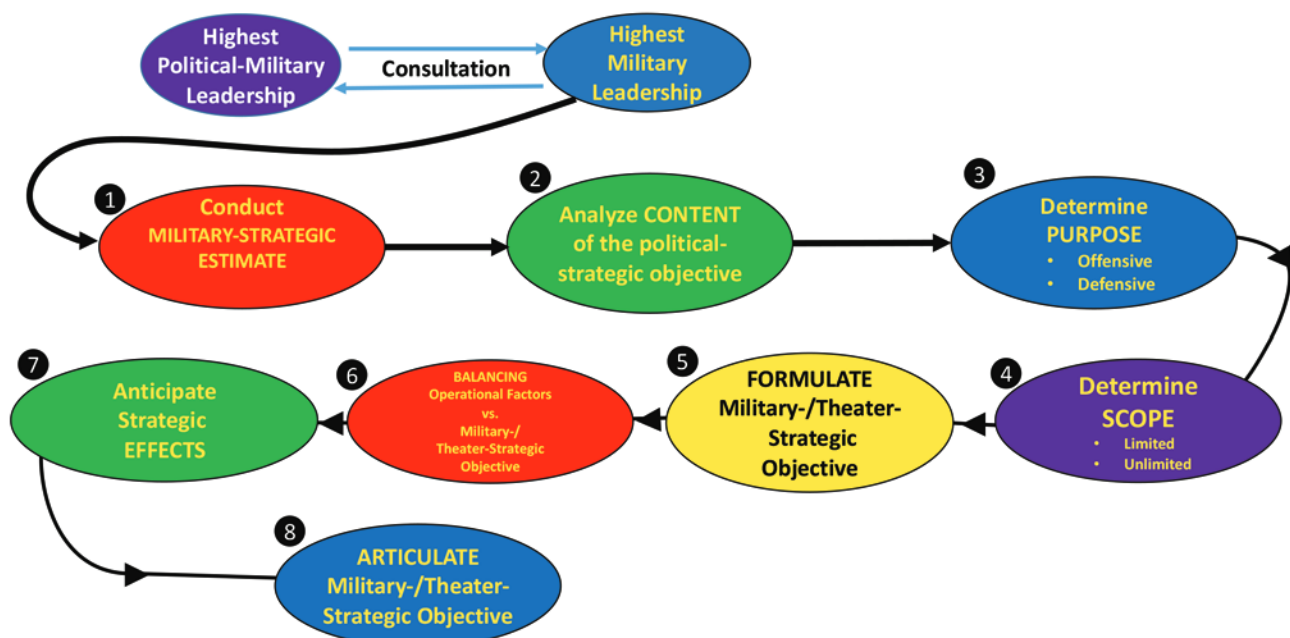
Military-strategic leadership must carefully analyze the content of political objectives issued by the highest politico-military leadership. The primary purpose is to identify those parts of political objectives that require the use of military force. Normally, one's sources of military power would be used to obtain political or ideological dominance of a certain area, overthrow the enemy regime, change the enemy's social system, or impose control of the enemy's economic resources.

In the next step, the main purpose of a given political objective should be evaluated. Generally, an offensive political objective would require the accomplishment of offensive military-strategic

objectives. For their "first operational stage of the war" in 1941–1942, the Japanese selected offensive military strategic objectives: to gain mastery of the Far East area by destroying U.S. power in the western Pacific and British forces in the Far Eastern waters and cutting their respective sea communications with these areas and land communications from India to China (the Burma Road).³⁶ In November 1941, the central Japanese army-navy agreement specified that the war objectives were "reduction of foundation of U.S., British, and Dutch power in Eastern Asia, and occupation of Southern Areas."³⁷ The U.S. Joint Staff directive of July 2, 1942, to General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific Area, stated that his ultimate (theater-strategic) objective was "seizure and occupation of New Britain–New Ireland–New Guinea area."³⁸

Sometimes political-strategic objectives were offensive, but they were not supported by offensive military-strategic objectives. Russia's political objectives in its war against Japan in 1904–1905 were clear: maintain control over Manchuria and decisively repel Japanese advances. Yet the Russian military-strategic objective was defensive: retain control of the positions they already held in Port

Figure 2. Steps for Converting a Political Objective to a Military-/Theater-Strategic Objective



Arthur, the Trans-Siberian Railway, Vladivostok, and other concessions on the Yalu River.³⁹ Russia's proper military-strategic objectives were destruction of the Japanese forces in Manchuria and obtaining/maintaining control of the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan.

Defensive military-strategic objectives are usually selected by the side on the strategic defensive. They could sometimes be combined with some preparatory measures to go on the offensive. The Combined Chiefs of Staffs directive to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas/U.S. Pacific Fleet, on March 30, 1942, stated the following objectives:

*a) Hold the island positions between the United States and the Southwest Pacific Area necessary for the security of the line of communications between those regions; and for supporting naval, air and amphibious operations against Japanese forces; (b) Support the operations of the forces in the Southwest Pacific Area; (c) Contain Japanese forces within the Pacific Theater; (d) Support the defense of the continent of North America; (e) Protect the essential sea and air communications; and (f) Prepare for the execution of major amphibious offensives against positions held by Japan, the initial offensives to be launched from the South Pacific Area and Southwest Pacific Area.*⁴⁰

Sometimes, the weaker side had a defensive political objective, but the only way of accomplishing it was by going strategically on the offensive. In the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Confederate states had a defensive political-strategic objective: force the Union to recognize Confederate independence. However, this could be accomplished only by selecting an offensive military-strategic objective.⁴¹

Like a political objective, a military-/theater-strategic objective may be unlimited or limited. An unlimited objective would be selected if the political objective is to overthrow the enemy's government and/or social system or capture a major part of the enemy's territory. In a case of war between two strong

opponents, accomplishing an unlimited military strategic objective would usually result in a long war requiring maximum exertion of all spiritual and material resources of a nation or an alliance/coalition, as the war on the Eastern Front in 1941–1945 illustrated. In other cases, a much stronger side might accomplish its offensive and unlimited political- and military-strategic objectives relatively quickly, as the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Norway in April 1940, and Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941 demonstrated.

In its invasion of Ukraine, Russia initially selected offensive and unlimited political and military-strategic objectives. Putin expected to capture Ukraine's capital Kyiv quickly and install a compliant government. He reportedly believed that the Ukrainian military would be ineffective and that the Ukrainian political leadership could be easily replaced.⁴² Rapid takeover of Ukraine would present the West with a fait accompli.⁴³

In a war fought for limited political objectives, a military-/theater-strategic objective would also usually be limited. One normally does not risk all for limited political objectives, nor does one commit all his sources of power in such a war.⁴⁴ Accomplishing a limited military-/theater-strategic objective would require low to modest use of military power, efforts, and time. A state might not need to pursue an unlimited military-strategic objective by trying to destroy the enemy's forces and seek their surrender. Liddell Hart wrote that a state seeking not conquest, but the maintenance of its security would accomplish its military-strategic objective if the threat is removed and "if the enemy is led to abandon his purpose."⁴⁵ Or it "may desire to wait until the balance of forces can be changed by the intervention of allies or by referring forces from another theater. It may desire to wait, or even to limit the military effort permanently, while naval or economic action decides the issue."⁴⁶

The Gulf War of 1990–1991 had limited political- and military-strategic objectives. The U.S.-led coalition never intended to defeat the Iraqi armed forces as a whole and occupy the entire Iraqi

territory. The coalition objectives called for immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait, restoration of the legitimate Kuwaiti government, the security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and the safety and protection of American citizens abroad.⁴⁷ The United States aimed to remove Saddam Hussein by his domestic opposition but without endangering Iraqi territorial integrity. The coalition did not intend to defeat Iraq so completely that the ensuing power vacuum would be exploited by Iran and spark further turmoil there.⁴⁸ The United States was unwilling to pursue its objectives directly and did not intend to be involved in the nation-building and humanitarian relief that would surely follow the overthrow of the Iraqi regime. At the time, a serious disconnect existed between the more ambitious ends and modest means to be used by the United States and its coalition partners. Hence, it was not surprising that the termination of the Gulf War was not only confused and ambiguous but also had unintended and adverse consequences for U.S. national interests.⁴⁹

The geographical separation of centers of power of the opponents plays an important role in a war for limited military-/theater-strategic objectives. This is especially the case when there is a lack of an overland link between the two main belligerents due to an ocean or neutral states or if the land area is so large as to make it difficult or impossible for either belligerent to exert its full strength against the other.⁵⁰ The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 was a war with limited political- and military-strategic objectives for both sides. Both Russia and Japan disputed control of the area, which did not belong to either of them. Japan was unable to completely defeat Russia, but that was also unnecessary. This was also the case for Russia. Neither Japan nor Russia wanted to fight to the end. Thus, they were unwilling to commit their utmost efforts and sacrifices, which might have led to a complete exhaustion.⁵¹ The Russian tsar and his inner circle argued for land acquisition, while Russian Prime Minister Sergei Witte was more interested

B-1B Lancer is refueled by KC-135 Stratotanker, February 26, 2011, above Iraq, in support of Operation New Dawn (U.S. Air Force/Adrian Cadiz)



in commercial expansion in the Far East.⁵² Japan felt humiliated and double-crossed by the Russian acquisition of Port Arthur from 1895 onward. It was also staunchly opposed to growing Russian influence in Manchuria. By going to war, Japan claimed that its aim was to “liberate” Manchuria from the Russian grasp.⁵³ The Japanese military objectives were in consonance with the political-strategic objectives. Specifically, the Japanese aimed to capture the Korean Peninsula and then destroy the Russian army in Manchuria. Preconditions for this were to obtain control of the Yellow Sea and ensure security of land and sea communications between Korea and Manchuria.⁵⁴

A stronger side might be forced to change its military-strategic objective from unlimited to limited because of a series of military setbacks or defeats in the field. By early April 2022, for instance, the Russian offensive in Ukraine stalled. The Russians were unable to capture Kyiv or Kharkiv, so Russian forces began to withdraw from the vicinity of Kyiv and were redeployed to the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk people’s

republics. Once the Russians realized that their political objectives could not be achieved, they for the time being reduced both their political- and their military-strategic objectives. This was formally announced on April 26, 2022. Afterward, the Russians launched an offensive to fully occupy the Donetsk and Luhansk republics and strengthen their control in southern Ukraine.⁵⁵ That offensive failed to achieve its stated objectives. By December 30, 2022, the Russian forces were generally on the defensive except for some limited ground assaults against selected positions in the eastern part of Kharkiv, the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, and the southern area.⁵⁶

In contrast, Ukraine’s initial political- and military-strategic objectives were defensive and limited to preserving territorial integrity, protecting Kyiv and major cities, and surviving until Western support arrived.⁵⁷ Because of battlefield successes, the Ukrainian military-strategic objectives were changed in the spring of 2022. The Ukrainian forces went on the offensive and recaptured a relatively large part of eastern Ukraine, including

the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine, in November 2022. By November 12, the Ukrainians liberated 28,742 square miles of their sovereign territory (the Russians still control 17,165 square miles).⁵⁸ Their political objective remains essentially defensive, but the military-strategic objectives were expanded to recovery of the territories lost to Russia in 2014 and 2022.⁵⁹

Sometimes a side on a strategic defensive might go on the offensive but will select a limited military-/theater-strategic objective, as the United Nations (UN) forces in Korea in the summer of 1950 illustrate. However, the success of a counteroffensive might lead political and military leadership to change the military-strategic objective from limited to unlimited. After the UN amphibious landing in Inchon on September 15, 1950, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed General MacArthur on September 27, 1950:

Your military objective is the destruction of the North Korean armed forces. In attaining this objective, you are authorized to conduct military operations, including



Paul D. Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, right, takes notes while General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Central Command, take part in press conference held by U.S. and Saudi Arabian officials during Operation Desert Storm, circa February 1991 (DOD/Susan Carl)

*amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations north of the 38th parallel in Korea provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.*⁶⁰

In the process of formulating a military- or theater-strategic objective, military leaders and planners should reevaluate the validity of the preceding steps regarding the purpose (offensive or defensive) and scope and intensity of efforts (limited or unlimited) of the selected objectives. Another critical part is to identify the type of action and desired damage to inflict on enemy forces. Clearly, actions intended to accomplish an offensive objective differ significantly from those aimed at achieving a defensive objective. An offensive military- or theater-strategic objective is accomplished by the destruction, annihilation, or neutralization of the major part of the enemy's armed forces. The enemy is destroyed when the core of his forces suffers such

losses that he cannot continue the fight.⁶¹ The enemy is annihilated when he is left with no sources of power to offer any serious resistance. Neutralization means that the enemy is rendered ineffective and cannot prevent friendly forces from accomplishing their assigned objective.⁶² Defensive military- or theater-strategic objectives are expressed in terms of containing, defending, delaying, preventing, retaining, or denying control regarding the enemy's forces or a given geostrategic position/territory or sea/ocean area.

After a military-/theater-strategic objective is formulated, the next step is to balance it with the operational factors of space, time, and force (see figure 3).⁶³ In this process, all considerations should start with quantifiable factors—that is, space and time.⁶⁴ The factor of time is more dynamic and changeable than the factor of space. The key elements of the factor of space related to military-/theater-strategic objectives are geostrategic positions, the country or territory's size or shape, strategic distances, the country's capital and other large urban centers, and economically important

areas. Strategically important elements of the factors of time include anticipated duration of a war, time for preparing for a war, time for opening the hostilities, strategic warning and reaction times, and time required for strategic deployment of one's forces. The factors of space and time can be evaluated with a relatively high degree of precision.

In contrast, the factor of force is extremely difficult to assess because of the presence of not only tangible (or physical) but also numerous intangible (or abstract) elements. For military-/theater-strategic objectives, the most important tangible elements of the factor of force are the overall size/composition of the armed forces and individual services prior to the hostilities and their anticipated expansion in a war, size/composition of strategic reserves and force reinforcements, overall number/quality of the main weapons, firepower, strategic mobility, and so forth. Intangible elements of the factor of force pertain for the most part to the human factor. The most critical of these elements related to the military-/theater-strategic objective

are the national will to fight, cohesion of the alliance/coalition, quality of strategic leadership, soundness of joint/combined doctrine, morale/discipline, and state of combat readiness of the armed forces and individual services. Such elements cannot be expressed in quantifiable terms but only in very broad terms: low, medium, high, or excellent, sound, unsound.

In addition to these three traditional factors, information has emerged as a possible fourth operational factor. However, despite all the technical advances, the inherent characteristics of information have not been changed. One cannot control or anticipate volume, accuracy, timeliness, and relevance of information received. Unlike traditional operational factors, information is not meaningfully definable. Hence, it cannot be balanced with a given military objective. Yet strategic leaders should make all efforts to evaluate the effect of information on the operational factors of space, time, and force individually.

A serious disconnect between the military-/theater-strategic objective and any of the three operational factors must be somehow resolved; otherwise, there would be a real danger of suffering a major setback or even failing to

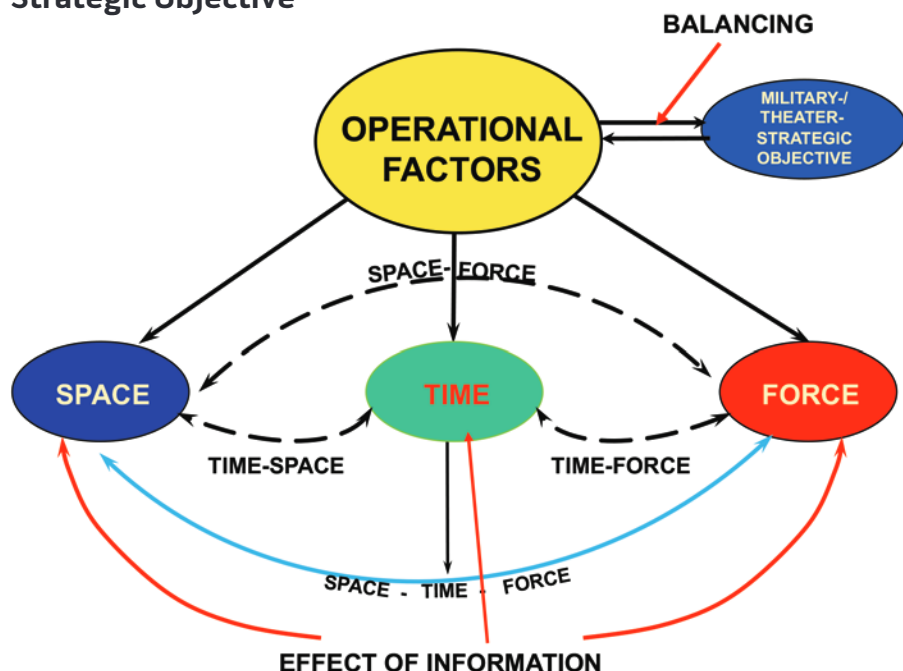
accomplish the objective. The resolution of this problem might require reducing the space for the employment of friendly forces, dividing space into several segments to offer better opportunities for advance or defense, increasing numerical superiority, assigning more lethal or mobile forces, extending the timeline, using strategic deception and/or surprise, and so forth. If a disconnect cannot be adequately resolved, then the military-/theater-strategic objectives must be modified, altered, or even abandoned. The process of balancing is largely an art, not a science. Hence, a sound solution is heavily dependent on the experience, judgment, and creativity of the military strategic leadership.

Military-strategic leaders must also give some thought to anticipating possible strategic effects after the objective is accomplished. Much depends on their knowledge and understanding of the enemy and all aspects of both the military and the nonmilitary situation. These effects of accomplishing a military-/theater-strategic objective can be positive (desired) or negative (undesired). They can be military or nonmilitary and tangible or intangible (or both). In most cases, the type of effects and their strength and

duration cannot be accurately predicted, much less precisely calculated. The effect of accomplishing or failing to achieve the military-/theater-strategic objective might not be immediately recognized by the enemy and friendly or neutral sides; it might be some time before the effects of one's actions are felt or fully understood. These effects might sometimes lead to dramatic changes in the diplomatic, political, economic, social, religious, informational, psychological, and other aspects of the situation in each theater.

National and military strategic leaders should also fully consider political, diplomatic, economic, financial, ethnic, religious, and other nonmilitary aspects of the strategic situation. Foreign policy or domestic political considerations might dictate whether a certain objective should be selected for a military action. This is especially the case in the initial phase of a war. In drafting his plans for the possible war with France and Russia, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff (1891–1905), believed that in the coming war, Germany must unconditionally go on the offensive and, therefore, invade France. Schlieffen did not consider the possibility of going on the offensive against Russia in case of war in the Balkans and remaining on the defensive against France and not violating Belgian neutrality—thereby possibly keeping Britain out of the war. His successor, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Jr., directed in a memorandum in 1913 that all planning for a great offensive against Russia be stopped because he was concerned that, in case of war, the existence of such a deployment plan could lead to confusion for subordinate commands. The German government was also fully informed that the General Staff had stopped all planning against Russia. In the same memo, Moltke noted (accurately) that the violation of Belgian neutrality might force England to enter the war on the side of Germany's enemies. Yet instead of canceling plans to invade Belgium, Moltke decided just the opposite—making the right flank as strong as possible and invading France through Belgium.⁶⁵

Figure 3. Operational Factors Vs. the Military-/Theater Strategic Objective



In deciding to go to a war of choice against a weaker opponent, it is necessary to realistically assess the possibility that such a course of action might lead to intervention of other and stronger powers. The Austro-Hungarian political leaders made a fatal mistake in declaring war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. This action led to a chain of events that eventually involved all major European powers in a world war.

The faulty assumptions about possible reaction of the potential enemies often result in escalation and a much larger war, as the example of Nazi Germany in its unprovoked attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, illustrates. Hitler was confident that the Western powers (Great Britain and France) would not intervene. Hitler stated, “I have met the umbrella men, Chamberlain and Daladier, at Munich and got to know them.” Hitler assured his generals when they expressed doubts on the matter that “they can never stop

me from solving the Polish question. The coffee sippers in London and Paris will stay still this time too.” Hitler’s conviction that the Western powers would not intervene was initially strengthened because the powers did not issue an immediate ultimatum.⁶⁶ Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. The rest is history.

Putin and his inner circle and intelligence agencies clearly failed to properly assess the strategic effects of their invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This event led to radical changes in the security situation not only in Europe but globally as well. The United States, the European Union, and some other Western countries imposed massive and unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia. It greatly strengthened the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It led two staunchly neutral countries, Sweden and Finland, to ask for membership in the Alliance. Russia was forced to increase its dependence on China for

the export of gas and oil. Its geopolitical situation is much more unfavorable than it was prior to February 2022. The consequences of invasion of Ukraine were certainly not what Putin envisaged.⁶⁷

A military-/theater-strategic objective should be articulated clearly, concisely, and unambiguously. A great example of a clearly stated military strategic objective was the February 12, 1944, directive by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, for the invasion of the European continent. It stated that Eisenhower’s task was to

enter the continent of Europe, and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces. The date for entering the Continent is the month of May 1944. After adequate [English Channel] ports have been secured, exploitation will be directed to securing an



Eisenhower meets with Company E, 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment (Strike), of 101st Airborne Division, at Royal Air Force Greenham Common, England, about 8:30 p.m., on June 5, 1944, and speaks to, among others, Wallace C. Strobel (on his 22nd birthday, wearing number 23, which designated plane 23, on which he was jumpmaster) (U.S. Army)



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky reviews plans during working trip to Kharkiv region, November 30, 2023 (President of Ukraine)

area that will facilitate both ground and air operations against the enemy.⁶⁸

In the Korean War (1950–1953), U.S. and UN objectives were unclear. The UN Resolution of June 27, 1950, called for repelling the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea attack and restoring “peace and security.” Repelling an attack implied restoring the border between North and South Korea on the 38th parallel north, but restoring peace and security was not defined.⁶⁹ Another cause of confusion was that the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed MacArthur to submit plans for the occupation of North Korea. The Joint Chiefs of Staff thought in terms of a contingency plan, but MacArthur understood it as a mission.⁷⁰

Ideally, a military-/theater-strategic objective should not be grouped together with political-strategic objectives. Clarity and simplicity are grossly violated by adding purely operational objectives, or even worse, routine military activities, as the Pentagon’s public statement on the objectives for the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 illustrate.⁷¹

The process of converting political- to military-strategic objectives is the first and most critical step prior to the actual employment of one’s armed forces in war. The personality traits of the highest military leaders and their experience and judgment have extraordinary importance in the entire process. Military-strategic leaders should inform their political

counterparts about the purpose and scope of the military- or theater-strategic objective; otherwise, there is a danger that these objectives will not be aligned with the aims of policy. At the same time, political leaders should make sure that sufficient forces are available to accomplish the military- or theater-strategic objective. Every effort should be made to avoid such common mistakes as overestimating one’s own military capabilities and underestimating the enemy’s. The assessment of the military capabilities will be grossly deficient if the focus is primarily or, even worse, exclusively on materiel. The strengths and weaknesses of human factors must be an integral part of any analysis of both friendly and enemy military capabilities. JFQ

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