

Strategic Theory: What it is...and just as importantly, what it isn't

 www.e-ir.info/2011/04/28/strategic-theory-what-it-is%e2%80%a6and-just-as-importantly-what-it-isn%e2%80%99t/

M.L.R Smith ,

One of the most useful services that academics can perform is to explain the principles of thought that guide their study. As a 'strategic theorist' this is rather challenging. The term 'strategy' must be one of the most commonly used terms in public discourse. It is employed to refer to anything from state policy to personal choices. Yet, few appreciate what this term really is, and what it implies as a system of inquiry. In fact, I have rarely been called upon to state what it is that explicitly underpins a strategic theory approach to the study of social phenomena.

The notion of strategic theory as a method of analysis has slowly, over the course of 40 years, permeated the domain of international relations and political studies via the work of those like Thomas Schelling and Colin Gray – classic strategic theorists – and has been increasingly used and acknowledged as a tool to assist in the comprehension of decision making. One of the best statements of the utility of strategic theory has been given by Harry Yarger: 'Strategic theory opens the mind to all the possibilities and forces at play, prompting us to consider the costs and risks of our decisions and weigh the consequences of those of our adversaries, allies, and others'.^[1]

What, then, precisely is strategic theory, and how does it help us to open the mind? Working from first principles in the following commentary I aim to provide a concise understanding of what strategic theory encompasses in its most essential form. As will be shown, to achieve this understanding it is important to appreciate what strategic theory is not, as much as what it is. In the process, I hope to show that strategic theory is a simple, parsimonious, yet elegant, way of clarifying complexity.

Before itemizing what strategic theory is, it is necessary to appreciate how the term 'theory' is being used in this context. Plainly, in any study of the infinitely varied scale of human conduct strategic 'theory' cannot aspire to any hard scientific understanding that survives experimental testing under exactly replicable conditions. However, it does constitute a theory in the broader sense that it advances a set of propositions that if true can be held to explain certain facts or phenomena. In this regard, strategic theory reveals itself less as a set of hard and fast rules, but more as a series of purposive assumptions that guide analysis.

The Assumptions of Strategic Theory

1) The study of ends and means

The term strategy denotes the endeavour to relate ends to means. Strategic analysis thus refers to the study, in Michael Howard's words, of the 'use of available resources to gain any objective'.^[2] Here, the term 'resources' or the 'means' refers not simply to the tangibles of power that may be employed to gain objectives but also to the many intangible factors that may impose themselves on any decision-maker, most notably the degree of political will that an actor may exert to attain its goals.

2) The study of the political actor as the central unit of analysis

What do strategic theorists study? Principally, they examine the calculations of the individual social actor, be it a state, a sub-state entity, or any other social grouping. Hence, strategic theory analysis is interested in describing the choices available to an actor and evaluating the quality of decision making.

3) Understanding the political actor's value system and preferences

What specifically do strategic theorists wish to understand in their examination of political actors? They want to comprehend the actor's value system. What motivates them? How do actors construct their interests, which, thereby, inform the objectives they strive for and the manner in which they seek to attain them?

4) An actor's interest will be influenced by the wider strategic environment

Integral to the endeavour to understand the actor's values and preferences is an appreciation of the wider social environment in which it functions. Lyndsey Harris puts it well when she argues that the strategic environment is the crucial 'determinant of the information that is available to an actor and the structure within which actors operate. The environment determines what the actors think they know for sure and what they have to infer, if possible, from the behaviour of others'.^[3]

5) The actor is behaving rationally in pursuit of its aims

It is sometimes said that strategic theorists assume rationality on the part of those whom they study because they cannot assume anything else.^[4] To pass judgment on whether anyone is rational or irrational in political life is to assume that one exists in Olympian detachment with a unique insight into what constitutes supreme powers of reasoning (a self-evidently delusional position). The assumption of rationality, however, does not suppose that the actor is functioning with perfect efficiency or 'that all rational decisions are right ones, merely that an actor's decisions are made after careful cost-benefit calculation and the means chosen seem optimal to accomplish the desired end.'^[5]

6) The acceptance of clashing interests

An individual actor has to function in an environment full of other actors all trying to pursue their interests and objectives. It is a constantly reactive condition in which, according to Schelling, the 'ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions the other participant [or participants] will make'.^[6] Strategic theory thus accepts that clashes of interest are liable to occur among actors and that in some instances this will lead to the resort to war as a means of obtaining objectives.

7) The observance moral neutrality

Strategic theory is intellectually disinterested in the moral validity of the means and ends of any actor. Commentary is confined to evaluating how effective chosen means are in attaining stated objectives. This understanding includes and applies to all acts of violence which are viewed as politically instrumental; that is, undertaken with the conscious purpose of securing goals and interests. This may seem clinical, even cold blooded, but it is a logical extension of any dispassionate understanding of the wider political environment and vital to sustain coherent evaluation. As Schelling again elucidates, this is for two reasons. First, strategic 'analysis is usually about the situation not the individuals – about the structure of incentives, of information and communication, the choices available, and the tactics that can be employed'.^[7] Second, strategic theory 'cannot proceed from the point of view of a single favored participant. It deals with situations in which one party has to think about how the others are going to reach their decisions'.^[8]

Seven Assumptions = One Key Idea – the Application of Occam's Razor

These seven assumptions comprise the core of strategic theory. It is a precise and economical method because it applies the principle of Occam's Razor. That is to say, it incorporates as few postulates as possible in its understanding. In essence, strategic theory is the study of correlations between ends and means, including the use, or threat of use, of armed force as a conscious choice of political actors who are intent on rationally pursuing their objectives.^[9] It is as simple as that.

Of course, what has been presented so far is only the basic framework of this theoretical approach. The seven key assumptions provide the point of entry into many other interesting questions, such as: how is it possible to gain an

appreciation of another's value system (through serious historical research); how might we be able to assess whether an actor is attempting to be proportional in the seeking of its goals (a matter of proper qualitative judgment based on deep research); and how might we be able to discern when an actor has attained its objectives, or has reached a point where it has maximized its potential with its chosen means (again, a matter of academic judgment based on knowledge of the actor's value system)?

With its focus on understanding value systems, and how the contingent political environment shapes the formation of interests, readers may discern that strategic theory is a form of constructivism *avant la lettre*. Strategic theory, however, avoids the problematic nature of constructivist approaches as they have evolved international relations by not arbitrarily, and entirely illogically, bolting on normative commitments that hold that just because identities and interests are not permanently fixed that they must be manipulated towards some set of universal humanitarian values, a flawed and deeply ethnocentric enterprise if ever there was one.

Neither does strategic theory fall into the hole that American political science approaches often manage to dig for themselves by perceiving a contradiction between the fact that identities and interests may be constructed from contingent historical and social experiences (rather than given by immutable structures in the international system) and that once interests are formed that they are often pursued with great realist vigour, particularly on the part of major state actors on the international stage, like China, for instance.^[10] Strategic theory perceives no such contradiction.

What Strategic Theory Is Not...

Strategic theory avoids many of the pitfalls that have afflicted international relations because in disciplinary terms it is unrelated to IR. Its origins derive from public choice economics. It is an analytical method that is sometimes brought into investigate issues and problems in the realm of IR, but it is not intrinsically 'of IR'. Unfortunately, some international relations scholars think it is a branch of IR, and this leads to misunderstanding and confusion. Therefore it is worth mentioning briefly what strategic theory is not. This in itself helps to clarify the nature and value of this approach.

1) Strategic theory is not just the study of military power

It is true that the term 'strategy' derives from the Greek word 'strategos', meaning the 'art of the general', but the way strategy is defined (the application of ends to means) implies no inherent link with military power and war, which is but one way to achieve any objective. The majority of self-described strategic theorists probably do study the use or threat of use of armed force in politics. They do this, I would suggest, because strategy in war is easier to study, and in some senses more measurable, than more ambiguous decisions in life: the choices and outcomes in war are often stark, involving matters of life and death, winning and loss, victory and defeat. Fundamentally, though, strategic theory has universal application across the sphere of human activity as the great Thomas Schelling, an economist by training, demonstrated in much of his work.^[11] Strategic theory does not refer only to the study of force, and strategic theorists themselves sometimes need to be reminded of this fact.

2) Strategic theory is not necessarily strategic studies

It is difficult sometimes to separate strategic theory from the term 'strategic studies'. Strategic studies was a phrase that developed after World War II signifying the general study of military power in international politics. Although elements of strategic theory found their expression in this disciplinary niche in IR,^[12] more often than not strategic studies became an umbrella term for the study of defence and security issues, which leads us to the next point.

3) Strategic theory is not the same thing as security studies

As a consequence of the association of the study of military power with the notion of strategic studies in IR, a more general source of misunderstanding is the conflation of the strategic approach with the term 'security studies'. The two are wholly unrelated. As a strategic theorist I recognize no connection between them. Strategic theory is the

study of ends and means. Security studies is...well, who really knows what security studies means?

4) Strategic theory is not the study of 'strategic culture'

Strategic culture is a meaningless concept. Strategic theory, as has been emphasized, is routinely about the study of how value-systems inform and influence ends and means, and if that is what people mean by the study of 'culture' then strategic theory is, *ipso facto*, concerned with the study of cultural variables. Strategic culture grew up as a popular notion within IR after the end of the Cold War by analysts who for some reason believed that, hitherto, constructivist ideas had no correspondence with the study of how political entities sought to gain their objectives in the international system. Such approaches invariably demonstrated little understanding both of the disciplinary derivation of strategic theory, or the available academic literature on the subject. Confusion was the end result and it shows in almost all works on so-called strategic culture.[13]

5) Strategic theory is not game theory

Just as strategic theory repudiates erroneous notions of 'culture', neither does it connote the opposite fallacy of an entirely valueless understanding of rational-actor behaviour embodied in game theory. It would be true to say that strategic theory originated in part from game theory, but it soon surpassed its origins. For example, Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict* is one of the most sublime works in the field. It is full of mathematical equations and abstract theorizing. But the truth is that few read this work for its mathematical formulas. You read it for the deep, qualitative insights derived from Schelling's economist background and, just as importantly, from his profound understanding of the nature and interdependency of human relationships.

A Brief Case Study

Now that a set of statements has been advanced as to what does and does not constitute strategic theory, what does it all add up to? The beginning of this piece made the claim that strategic theory was a precise and efficient method that can help simplify and clarify social phenomena. Let me provide a short example that will hopefully elucidate.

In recent years the term 'terrorism' has vexed IR scholars, with one contributor to e-IR lamenting that over 200 definitions had been put forward.[14] The received wisdom is that terrorism 'is nearly impossible to define',[15] and that consequently no stable basis for study has been possible.[16] Following the assumptions above, strategic theory would reject that view. By contrast, defining the term is easy and unproblematic. You employ Occam's Razor. Simply, terror is an abstract noun that denotes fear, and thus terrorism can be defined quite adequately as the deliberate creation of fear for a purpose.[17] In this way, terrorism reveals itself as a method, a tactic. This is a perfectly stable basis for study. If you are seeking to generate fear to achieve something, then you are practicing a tactic of terror. If you are not trying to generate fear, you are not.

The self-inflicted problem for many in IR and political science of course is that they insist, without any clear reason, in attaching moral valuations to the term terrorism (people who use terrorism = bad). Strategic theory, because it practices intellectual disinterest towards the moral validity of the cause, the means and the ends of political action, rejects this notion because, like any tactic, it can be used for either good or bad purposes.[18] As a parent, you might need to instill fear into your children (to employ terror) for a whole variety of responsible reasons. Sub-state actors sometimes employ the tactics of terror to achieve their goals. States will also practice the tactic. In any instance this can be for entirely legitimate purposes.

The point is that deciding what constitutes a morally good or bad purpose is a wholly separate intellectual task from describing and evaluating the utility of a particular tactic. Mixing up an attempt at description with a moral judgment is what philosophers of language call a category mistake.[19] To give an example, the much-quoted phrase 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' is a classic category mistake. For a strategic theorist, one part of

the phrase – ‘terrorist’ – alludes to the description of a tactic (someone who seeks the deliberate creation of fear for a purpose), while the other – ‘freedom fighter’ – is obviously a positively loaded moral judgment. To fuse together these different intellectual tasks is illogical. Strategic theory thus succeeds in revealing that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’ as a meaningless slogan (because if one thinks about it, clearly you can be both at the same time).[20]

Conclusion

Strategic theory offers an exact and coherent basis for investigating social phenomena. In particular, as has been shown, it is able to de-conflict the attempt to assess social activity designed to achieve goals from arbitrary moral valuations. In this manner, strategic theory facilitates clarity of understanding. Strategic theory is, thereby, mind opening and intellectually liberating.

M.L.R. Smith is Professor of Strategic Theory, Department of War Studies, King’s College, University of London.

[1] Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory of for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 2.

[2] Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), p. 86.

[3] Lyndsey Harris, ‘Introducing the Strategic Approach: An Examination of Loyalist Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2006), p. 542.

[4] M.L.R. Smith, *Fighting For Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.

[5] F. Lopez-Alvez, ‘Political Crises, Strategic Choices and Terrorism: The Rise and Fall of the Uruguayan Tupamaros’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989), p. 204.

[6] Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 5.

[7] Thomas Schelling, *Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Errant Economist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 198-199.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

[9] M.L.R. Smith, ‘William of Ockham, Where Are You When We Need You? Reviewing Modern Terrorism Studies’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2008), p. 322.

[10] See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[11] See Schelling, *Choice and Consequence*, passim.

[12] See for example the excellent short introduction to strategic studies by John Garnett, ‘Strategic Studies and Its Assumptions’, in John Baylis, Ken Booth, John Garnett and Phil Williams, *Contemporary Strategy: Theories and Policies* (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

[13] See David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, ‘Noise But No Signal: Strategy, Culture and the Poverty of Constructivism’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (2001), pp. 485-495.

[14] Richard Jackson, ‘Why We Need Critical Terrorism Studies’, e-International Relations, 8 April, 2008, at

<<http://www.e-ir.info/?p=432>> accessed 25 April 2010.

[15] Dipak K. Gupta, 'Exploring the Roots of Terrorism', in Tore Bjørgo, *The Roots of Terrorism: Myths Realities and Ways Forward* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 17.

[16] Jackson, 'Why We Need Critical Terrorism Studies'.

[17] Peter R. Neuman and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How It Works and Why It Fails* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 7-8.

[18] Smith, 'William of Ockham', pp. 322-123.

[19] See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 16. A category mistake is defined as mistaking facts or 'things of one kind are presented as if they belonged to another', Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 58.

[20] M.L.R. Smith, 'Holding Fire: Strategic Theory and the Missing Military Dimension in the Academic Study of Northern Ireland', in Alan O'Day (ed.), *Terrorism's Laboratory: The Case of Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), pp. 228–33.

Further Reading on E-International Relations

[Buying our Way Out of Afghanistan?](#)

[The Art of Strategy](#)

[Interview – Melanie Richter-Montpetit](#)

[EU-NATO Relations in the Era of Trump and of the European Defence Union](#)

[Interview – Bruce Bueno de Mesquita](#)

[Review – Clausewitz on Small War](#)

[Review – Providing for National Security: A Comparative Analysis](#)

[Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency](#)