

## Why Strategy is Simple

**Aaron A. Bazin**

*“In fact, the means and forms that the strategist employs are so very simple, so familiar from constant repetition, that it seems ridiculous in the light of common sense when critics discuss them as they do so often, with ponderous solemnity... ...Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is easy.”*

*-Clausewitz, On War, Book Three, Chapter One*

*We shall lay them (our arms) down when hostilities shall cease on the part of the aggressors, and all danger of their being renewed shall be removed, and not before.*

*-The Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms, 1775*

If strategy is difficult, it is only because those who ponder and execute strategy have made it that way. In an attempt to kill enemies in unclear ways, the strategic use of force has become muddled. Today, the lexicon of American strategic thought has become a mix of technologically enabled micromanagement, restrictions that ensure a healthy dose of gridlock, and constant political “blame-storming”. With a Nostradamus-like mix of art, science, and conjecture, modern strategy is lukewarm at best. To the soldier, the use of force is simple, kill, if you have to, so you can come back home alive in 15 months. Why is the use of force so complicated to strategic thinkers?

Strategy must be translated through the levels of theater-strategic, operational, and countless other bureaucratic filters to be understood by American Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen. Strategy must be one thing; simple. It must be so, not only to communicate to the military what to do, but tell the American people what the military is doing (that ever-important part of Clausewitz’s secondary trinity) and finally, to make the enemy understand that until they capitulate all they will experience is death, political failure, and economic ruin. Strategy should be a situationally applied tool that uses violence and the other elements of national power to adjust an international actor’s behavior so that it falls into concert with international norms.

There are only so many emotions that human beings can experience. Despite how decisions are made, out of these emotions only four possible reactions can occur: fight, flee, posture, and submit. Based on the enemy actions and the strategic tools available (diplomatic, informational, military, economic), a strategic leader doles out positive and

negative reinforcement until they have destroyed the enemy or the enemy complies with the norms of international behavior. In the end, the strategic leader truly has three options at any given time: annihilation, deterrence, or reassurance. The more a strategy tries to use finesse to split the difference between these three the more likely that it will fail by becoming stuck in the middle.

*Why does strategy appear difficult?*

In the mind of the enemy lay the biggest uncertainties of strategy. The mind is the medium for Clausewitz's fog and friction, Boyd's OODA loop, Luttwak's paradoxes, and it is why Liddell Hart's indirect approach has worked well. Despite the best predictive analysis of red cells and war-gaming, the enemy always gets to vote in their own and unique way. Even if the American military could break free of mirror imaging and understand the enemy's decision-making processes and intricate culture like a native, American military will never be right all the time.

The enemy's purpose is to disrupt the logical lines of operation, pick away at our means, invalidate our ways, and change our ends. This is where experience, the study of history, political science, international relations, or economics can help bring some clarity to uncertainty. In the best case, the strategic thinker only makes semi-accurate predictions of an uncertain future. With any educated guess comes an unknown amount of error. When there exist only a set number of possible actions and reactions, why do strategists expend so much mental energy trying to predict the future? Whatever is going on in the enemy's mind, ultimately his actions will telegraph his intent.

*The Set Parameters of Strategic Decision Making: Human Emotion*

There is a limit to the number of emotions that an individual or collective group can experience (Figure 1). The closer any two emotions fall on the emotion continuum, the easier they are confused with one another. Subconsciously, emotions drive people to make decisions. At a physiological level, as the brain absorbs information it filters it all through the thalamus, which evaluates the information for emotional arousal. If the information arouses the brain to a high degree, the unconscious emotion becomes a conscious one.



Figure 1 - The Emotional Continuum

Often the decision maker is often never aware how much emotion is playing in their decision. There is also a direct observable connection between emotion and action. When a human or an animal is happy it approaches; when angry, it attacks; when frightened, it escapes; when sad, it disengages. Emotion plays a tremendous part in decision-making, and strategic decision-making is no different.<sup>1</sup>

Animals display four basic reactions: fight, flee, posture, or submit (Figure 2). When confronted with the elements of national power an errant international actor's strategic actions will display its intent in a similar manner. If it fights, it is not only willing to kill for survival but to die as well. If it flees, it may try to kill at some later point, but at the time survival is its utmost concern.<sup>2</sup> If it postures, it is willing to give and take, rattle its

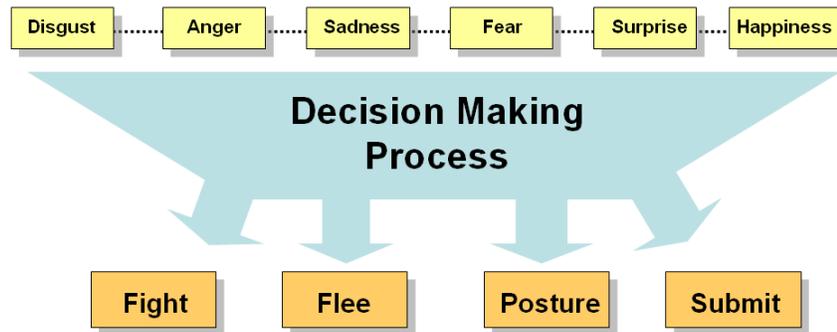


Figure 2 – Emotion into Action

sabers to display its strength, and survive on terms as similar as possible to its previous state. If it submits, it is willing to concede, perhaps not forever, but for the time being.<sup>3</sup> Instead of trying to predict what a determined enemy will do at some point in the future, the strategist should focus on shaping behavior in the present into compliance through the application of a strategy of annihilation, deterrence, or reassurance.

#### *Situational Use of Annihilation, Deterrence, or Reassurance*

The use of force, along with the other elements of national power, provide positive rewards and negative sanctions to bring the dysfunctional actor closer to cooperation and peace with situational strategy (Figure 3). A strategy of reassurance provides positive incentives to include military-to-military contacts, economic support, humanitarian aid, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic inclusion. This is the ideal state of relations between any two groups. Deterrence seeks to prevent an international actor from doing something or to encourage rational action. For deterrence to be effective, it has to be backed up with the real threat of annihilation, and real promise of positive reward. Deterrence should also focus on open communication with the errant actor to bring it back from the precipice of the downward spiral of violence and prevent the escalation of the conflict.

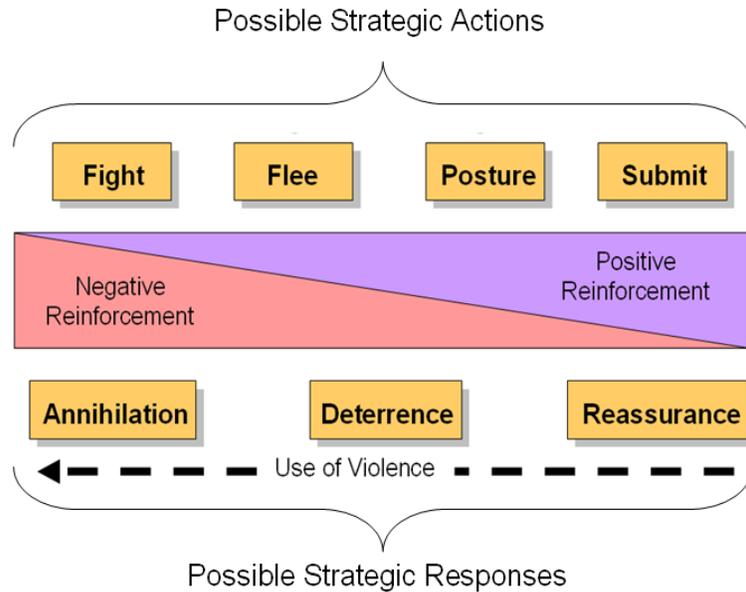


Figure 3 – Situational Use of Annihilation, Deterrence, or Reassurance

Once a terrorist group, state, or other actor makes the decision to kill and is willing to die for their cause, there can be no turning back until they capitulate. Every flex of strategic muscle must be focused on the complete annihilation of the persons, weapons, and infrastructure that allowed such an irrational actor to emerge. Strategy must excise the cancerous tumor as quickly as possible and place it in the laboratory jar. Annihilation demands unconditional surrender, at which point the positive rewards may resume. All the strategist must do is to decide what response the current actions and strategic environment dictate.

Scholars of military history, international relations, psychology, and organizational behavior have all made assertions that group behavior can be modified with the situational application of positive and negative reinforcement. Military theorists Beaufré, Brodie, and Howard provide the historical and theoretical basis for the strategies of annihilation, deterrence, and reassurance.<sup>4</sup> The political scientist, Schweller's concept of incentive driven international relations provides the basis for positive reinforcement.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the widely accepted arguments of psychologists Douglas McGregor's X and Y theories of human behavior and Hershey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory reinforce the academic validity of the concept. Actors seek reward, avoid punishment, and can be influenced with realistic threats.<sup>6</sup>

#### *America's Current Strategic Situation*

Today, Al-Qaeda seeks a fight; it must be annihilated wherever it exists. The violent Islamist ideals of jihad have spread from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and now are active in parts of Africa. America's strategy should seek to annihilate it with overwhelming force that ceases only upon Al-Qaeda's unconditional surrender. In addition, our strategy should deter non-aligned countries like Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea with the real threat of annihilating force, positive incentives for compliance, and

open communication that American intends what it says. America should pursue a strategy of openness, mutual respect, and economic cooperation everywhere else.

There are only so many options a rouge actor has; fight, flight, flee, or submit to the pressures of the international community. Our strategic decisions must be clear to all stakeholders. The gift of American support and reassurance is only to be given to those that deserve it. The ultimate goal is peace, cooperation, and communication with all, but those who do not desire that must be made to see the error of their ways. The more a strategy deviates from its simplest forms, annihilation, deterrence, and reassurance, the less successful it will be at modifying an irrational actor's behavior and reaching its goals.

*Major Aaron Bazin is a US Army Strategic Plans and Policy Officer and a member of the United States Military Strategist Association.*

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<sup>1</sup> Palombo, Emotion and Learning. *Training & Development*, November 2000, Vol. 54, Issue 11.

<sup>2</sup> When considering ways in which one strategically "flees", I found it interesting that Saddam Hussein and Bin Laden both went into hiding, and Hitler committed suicide to avoid capture and trial. To me this indicates that fleeing is a viable and realistic decision for a strategic decision maker.

<sup>3</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 1995, Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> J. Boone Bartholomees, ed., *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2006, pp. 79-105.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 287.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGraw-Hill: New York, 1985; Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hershey, Great ideas revisited, *Training & Development*, January 1996, Vol. 50, Issue 1.

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