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## HOW TO UNDERSTAND STRATEGY

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### Abstract

Strategy is no longer an exclusive issue of warfare and military affairs. Due to its application across nearly all areas of social reality, the meaning of the term has acquired various and often incorrect interpretations. Today, strategy is most commonly understood as an idea, concept, or approach to bridging the gap between the current situation and a desired future. In answering the question “how”, strategy is also viewed as a coherent plan of action designed to achieve desired outcomes, as well as the art of crafting and implementing such a plan. Since the process of formulating an idea or plan involves the use of logical and methodological tools, strategy is often understood as a method of thinking, or even as a science. The author argues that this broad spectrum of meanings of the term “strategy” obscures a clear understanding of strategy as a phenomenon, which inevitably affects the validity of scientific theory and terminology. Starting from the principle of scientific precision, the author defines strategy as an idea about how to apply available means in the context of a defined goal. In doing so, he aims to clearly distinguish the concept of strategy from phenomena that are closely related to it, but which cannot be equated with it.

Keywords: strategy, idea, plan, concept, method of thinking, science.

### Introduction

Understanding strategy is inextricably linked to military theory. For centuries, strategy has served as a framework for a deeper understanding of war – specifically, as a pathway toward achieving its ultimate purpose. Thus, the question “What is strategy?” inevitably leads us back to military practice and theoretical reflection. Indeed, tracing the term to its etymological roots, a substantial body of literature suggests that the origins of strategy lie squarely within the system of military knowledge about war. For more than two millennia, it was regarded as the art of dukes or generals, passed down through generations as privileged knowledge within closed circles of a small and elite group (Bofr, 1968, p. 17). This understanding remained largely unchanged until the early 19th century, after which – during the period from Napoleon to Hitler – strategy was institutionally developed and studied as a formal military science (Erl, 1952, p. vii). However, as Hadley Bull observed, “strategy has long ceased to be an exclusive matter of warfare” (Bull, 1968, p. 593). As a practical tool for solving complex problems, strategy has entered the substantive, methodological, and theoretical frameworks

of numerous academic disciplines. Its application has expanded in parallel – both to the conduct of statecraft and to the language and routines of everyday life. This broad and varied usage of the term across multiple fields and contexts has contributed to a growing ambiguity in the understanding of strategy as a phenomenon. Based on the scientific principle of precision, this paper seeks to define strategy clearly and distinguish it from related phenomena with which it is often confused.

### **Difficulties in Defining Strategy**

Dragan R. Simić notes that, “since the end of the Second World War, strategy, originally an exclusively military concept – has transcended and ‘swallowed’ war itself, coming to encompass an ever-widening scope of reality. Institutionally, it has moved from general staff headquarters to institutes, universities, ministries, government cabinets, and beyond. This is why there is increasing reference today to the notion of polystrategy, which, in addition to the military dimensions, also includes political, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. In this expanded sense, strategy overlaps with foreign policy and has become indispensable in the study of international relations” (Simić, 2009, p. 151).

Lawrence Friedman, however, observes that “strategy is no longer confined to matters of important statecraft or military decisions – questions of life and death – but is also applied to more ordinary issues” (Friedman, 2013, p. ix-x). Hence, polystrategy should not be associated solely with state affairs. “Today, strategy is needed by everyone – not just statesmen and generals, but also managers of large and small corporations, medical professionals, social workers, lawyers, athletes, and even individuals in their private lives. We invoke strategy every time a decision depends on the resources required, their effective application, and even the sequence in which they are applied. There is hardly a human activity considered too trivial to be devoid of strategy. A strategic approach is always preferable to a merely tactical – or worse, a random – one. To have a strategy is to possess the ability to look beyond the short term and to distinguish what is essential from what is superficial. It means addressing causes rather than symptoms, seeing the forest rather than just the trees. Without strategy, confronting any problem or pursuing any objective is regarded as careless” (Friedman, 2013, p. ix-x).

Given that it extends into nearly all areas of social reality and encompasses a wide range of activities that go beyond the issues of war and military organization, J. Boone Bartholomees notes that “the subject matter of strategy has become so broad that understanding and defining it has become a complex task” (Bartholomees 2012, p.13). This view is shared by the Serbian academic Časlav Očić, who observes that “there are so many differing opinions on what strategy is that, rather than presenting all of its definitions or searching for a single, unified one, it is more reasonable to try to identify strategic questions and consider the prospects for their resolution” (Očić, 2017, p. 18).

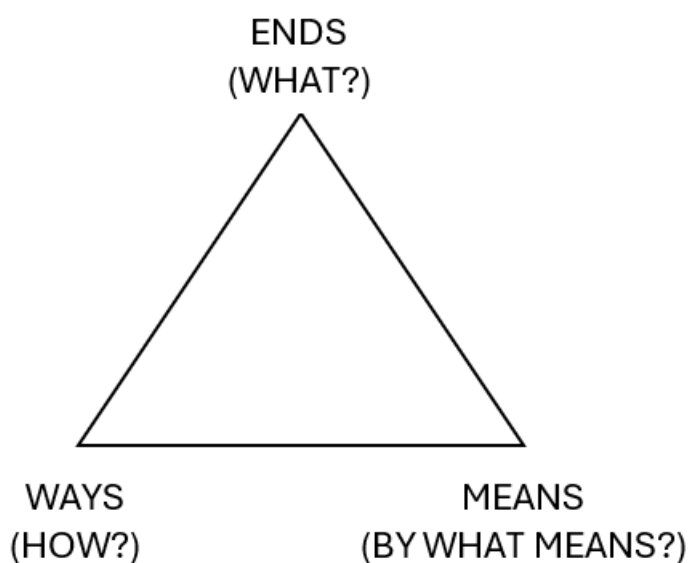
The use of the term “strategy” across different contexts and in nearly all spheres of social reality has led to a proliferation of meanings. Some are narrowly defined, others more expansive, and many are frequently misinterpreted. We are often inclined to use the word strategy as a generic term referring to a course of action or a vision for how to proceed – whether personally or organizationally. In such usage, it often implies little more than a general idea of what we would like to do next in pursuit of a particular goal. However, this reductive interpretation obscures the true complexity of strategy – especially institutional or state strategy – by reducing it to little more than a good idea or plan, devoid of the necessary intellectual rigor and conceptual depth. Today, strategy is undoubtedly confronted

with the problem of its own definition. Much of this problem lies in the fact that the use of the term “strategy“ in various contexts has influenced the language of those sciences and disciplines that deal with strategic issues – even the very field of strategic studies, where such issues are central.

According to Bartholomees, “the language of science is both a product of and a foundation for every effective theory. Theorists aim to use terminology consistently to refer to the same phenomena, and such terms should carry context-specific meanings, even when they are used in non-theoretical settings” (Bartholomees, 2012, p.13). However, the widespread use of the term “strategy“, accompanied by reductive and often incorrect interpretations, has blurred the clarity and precision of scientific language – and this inevitably affects the validity of strategic theory. As a result, understanding and defining strategy today is no easy task, and the correctness of many of its definitions is increasingly subject to scrutiny. The second and arguably more important issue lies in the fact that, although the concept of strategy has evolved and grown in complexity over recent decades, there has been no corresponding development of a unified discipline – strategology – that would systematically address strategic questions and provide a clear terminological, methodological, and theoretical apparatus.

### **Strategy is a Conceptual Idea**

Emphasizing the need for strategology, Časlav Očić notes that “in the 1990s, Patrick Gunkl, in his attempt to define ideonomy as a general science of ideas, included strategology as one of its many disciplines” (Očić 2017, p.18). From the perspective of Gunkel’s view of strategology, strategy – broadly defined – can be understood as an idea, more precisely, an idea concerning the use of means in the context of a defined objective. Strategy, therefore, is meant to answer the question: “How should something be done in order to achieve a given goal?” In this sense, it can be understood as a link that connects available means to a desired end. Many authors, including Frans P. B. Osinga, interpret this link as a concept. He states that “strategy is an idea that provides a conceptual connection between action and effect, or between instrument and objective” (Osinga, 2006, p. 9).



*Figure 1. Conceptual framework of strategy.*

John F. Schmitt further elaborates on the concept, defining it as “a description of a method or scheme for employing a given capability to achieve a specific objective. It is viewed through the relationship between ends, ways, and means, where it corresponds to the way. The means are the capabilities to be employed in a given situation; the ends are the conditions or states that those means aim to achieve; and the ways are the methods by which those means are applied” (Schmitt 2002, p. 3).

Since it answers the question “how”, the essence of every strategy lies in the idea of a method – that is, how something should be done. However, a more comprehensive understanding of this idea is attained through its conceptual framework – that is, through the relationship between ends, ways, and means, or, put differently, through the guiding questions of “what”, “how”, and “by what means”. Indeed, strategy – as a conceptual idea about the way in which available means are applied to achieve a given objective – addresses not only the essential question of “how”, but also the questions of “what” and “by what means.” In other words, it is neither possible to formulate a strategy nor to assess its effectiveness without posing and answering all three of these questions. Therefore, it is reasonable to view strategy, in a broader sense, through the conceptual framework of ends–ways–means (Owens, 2007, p.111).

Understanding strategy as an idea that provides a conceptual link between means and ends is applicable across all domains of state and societal activity. From the perspective of statecraft, strategy is defined as “a rational idea for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated manner to achieve policy goals in accordance with national interests” (JDN 1-18 2018, I-1). In the realm of military affairs, strategy may be understood as an idea concerning the use of military capabilities to accomplish political objectives. However, if military activity is viewed exclusively through the lens of wartime, then strategy can be understood as an idea about how to conduct war – that is, as an idea concerning the use of armed force to achieve political objectives.

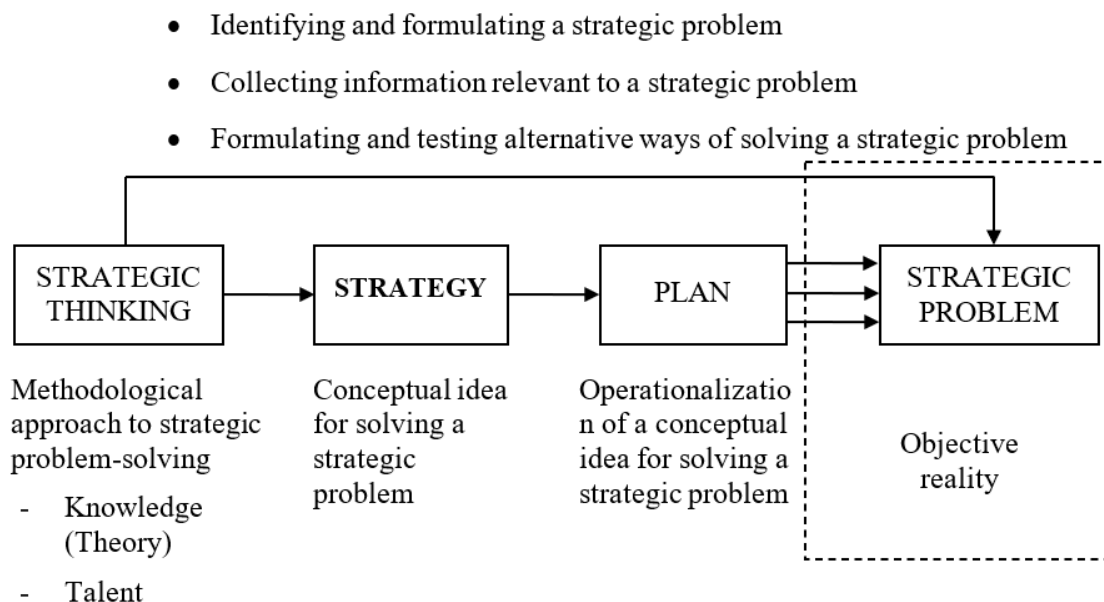
## **Strategy and Its Related Phenomena**

Regardless of the domain in which it is applied, strategy should fundamentally be understood as an idea, not as a plan, a method of thinking, a science, a theory, or an art. Nevertheless, strategy remains closely connected to all of these phenomena; it either precedes them or emerges from them. That is why it is important to explain the relationship between strategy and each of these related phenomena.

Strategy is most often equated with a plan, but it is in fact a broader concept. It is defined as a comprehensive idea or vision that guides the movement of an organization (state, nation, military, company, etc.) from its current state toward a desired end state. “Unlike a plan, strategy represents the highest and most general level of approach to a given problem. In the broadest sense, it outlines the method or concept for overcoming obstacles and leveraging advantages in the organization’s environment to solve a particular problem by achieving a defined goal. Strategy, as a general conceptual vision or idea, provides the direction for problem-solving, whereas a plan describes in detail how that direction is to be executed. A plan is, therefore, a detailed roadmap that operationalizes the conceptual idea of solving a specific problem through concrete actions, timelines, geographic scope, and the necessary material and human resources” (Lynch, 2017). In this sense, the plan

constitutes the operational component of strategy. In other words, strategy is embodied in the plan by means of specifically defined activities or courses of action.

Strategy is often equated with a method of thinking. However, the method of thinking pertains to strategic thinking, while strategy is its outcome. The method of thinking refers to the logic or process by which strategic thinking unfolds. In the broadest sense, strategic thinking is defined as “a mental activity applied in the context of generating rational conceptual solutions for achieving a given objective – in the field of national security, for achieving the goals of state policy in accordance with national and state interests” (Vračar & Milkovski, 2022, p.53). The rationality of such conceptual solutions lies first in their feasibility, and then in their effectiveness and efficiency. This constitutes the logic underlying strategic thinking. It implies that available means should be applied in ways that ensure the achievement of the desired objective (effectiveness), but within acceptable costs and risks (efficiency). The path to such solutions leads through the process of strategic thinking – through the logical and methodological procedure by which it is carried out. The outcome of this process is strategy, understood as the idea of how to resolve a strategic problem.



*Figure 2 Positioning strategy within the strategic problem-solving process.*

Although many theorists still regard strategy as an art, a science, or even both, it is in fact neither. Only strategology can be considered a science, as it possesses a clearly defined subject of inquiry, a methodological framework, its own terminology, and theoretical foundations. “The subject of research in any science consists of actual problems arising from the practical interaction between humans and objective reality, while the essential purpose of every science is to understand that reality in order to master it – that is, to resolve the problems within it”. (Marković 1994, p. 628) Accordingly, the object of strategology would be the entirety of objective reality, while its subject would consist of specific phenomena within that reality – phenomena that Očić describes as “tensions, enigmas, or dilemmas that strategy is expected to resolve” (Očić, 2017, pp.18-19).

The subject of strategology, therefore, is not the phenomena themselves, but rather the problems that arise in connection with those phenomena – specifically within the context of the practical needs

of the state (or nation), various social groups and organizations (military, economic, political, religious, etc.), and even individuals. These problems are commonly referred to as strategic problems. From the perspective of the state, the subject of strategology encompasses strategic problems that emerge as challenges – namely, threats or opportunities – to the preservation, enhancement, and/or protection of national and state values and interests. From the standpoint of a military organization, it includes phenomena of an armed nature that threaten national interests.

However, the subject of strategology is not limited solely to the study of strategic problems; it also encompasses the study of the methods by which such problems are resolved. This includes the examination of the processes of identifying and analysing strategic problems, the procedures of strategic thinking – specifically, the methodology of cognitive processes that lead to the formulation of rational conceptual solutions – as well as the study of theoretical and practical tools used in decision-making within a strategic context.

Strategy is not a theory, but it necessarily relies on one. Theory is a constitutive element of strategology as a science. In this sense, the task of strategology is to understand objective reality through the lens of strategic problems, and to transform verified knowledge about those problems – and about the methods for resolving them – into scientific theory. It is important to recognize that theory does not provide concrete solutions to specific strategic problems. Its practical value lies in enabling strategists to better comprehend the phenomena of the reality around them, the fundamental elements of those phenomena, the principles that govern their interrelations and dependencies, and related aspects. This knowledge supports the strategist in the process of resolving strategic problems that arise from objective reality. The success of that process, however, does not depend solely on knowledge of the strategic problems themselves, but also on the methods used to resolve them. Therefore, it is the responsibility of strategology to also develop a theory of strategic thinking – that is, a theory of the cognitive process involved in resolving strategic problems.

Strategy cannot be equated with art either, as art is primarily associated with the process of strategic thinking. Robert Kennedy states that “art represents the capacity for strategic thought, which is acquired through experience, observation, and study. To think strategically means to systematically seek knowledge, which includes, among other things, identifying and formulating a problem, gathering information about the problem, and formulating and testing alternative ways of solving the problem” (Kennedy, 2010, pp. 15-16). However, art is not merely acquired or learned knowledge; it also involves an innate gift or talent. Dušan Višnjić describes art as “the human talent to select the most appropriate means for achieving a given goal” (Višnjić 2005, 13). The dual nature of art – as both knowledge and talent – is also addressed by Carl von Clausewitz, who describes the military genius as a key figure who surpasses the ordinary capabilities of a commander. According to him, “military genius possesses exceptional qualities essential for the successful conduct of war. He is someone distinguished by his knowledge and talent in assessing situations, making decisions, and responding effectively to changes during conflict” (Clausewitz, 1951, pp. 66-80).

## **Conclusion**

The term “strategy” is used to denote different real-world phenomena, but the meaning of the term cannot simultaneously refer to all of them. Strategy arises from strategic thinking – a cognitive process that draws upon both theoretical knowledge and individual talent – and serves as a link between means

and ends. Accordingly, strategy should occupy a distinct and clearly defined place within the broader scientific discipline of strategology, whose core mission is to identify and analyse strategic problems and to devise rational, methodologically grounded solutions. Although strategy is not a science *per se*, it depends on the systematic knowledge developed within strategology. Likewise, though it is not art in the classical sense, it requires the strategist to think critically and creatively at once, to make decisive judgments, and to respond with agility in complex and unpredictable environments. This conceptual understanding of strategy – as a guiding idea for aligning available resources with a defined objective – is broadly applicable across domains, whether in military affairs, politics, economics, or individual decision-making. Moreover, such an understanding of strategy is fully acceptable from a scientific standpoint and, as such, should be incorporated into the framework of scientific theory.

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