

## *Book review*

# **Military strategy: A global history**

*Jeremy Black*

---

New Haven and London: Yale University Press  
2020, 306 pages  
ISBN 978-0-300-21718-6 (Hardcover)

The idea and practice of strategy is universal across time and space, and predates the modern vocabulary around the term, which was essentially developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is the central, deceptively simple argument toward which Jeremy Black works in his sixth book of 2020, *Military strategy: A global history*. A former professor of history at the Universities of Exeter and Durham and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) in the United States, Black is an immensely prolific military and political historian who focuses here on the development of military strategy over the last six centuries. Much in the sweeping style of John Lewis Gaddis' *On grand strategy*,<sup>733</sup> Black delineates and compares a selection of broad global and domestic contexts for strategy from the Ming Dynasty in fourteenth-century China to the complex, geo-political competition of great and small powers of the modern world. In its broadest sense, the book looks to contribute to an understanding of the way military strategy partly shapes international relations and how strategy cannot be separated from the domestic policies of a country. In the process, Black also contributes to an understanding of strategy as a concept and to the elusive notion of strategic culture.

The book is structured according to certain meta-contexts for strategic practice that Black identifies, rather than simply according to time frames, causing the initial chapters at least to overlap noticeably. While discussions on the two world wars, the Cold War, and the contemporary world are afforded their own chapters later, the initial chapters look to generalise (albeit with characteristic precision) over large swathes of cultures and time periods. Naturally, maintaining a global perspective inevitably causes a trade-off with specificity when confining the book to only 300 pages. However, this trade-off does not necessarily harm Black's aim, which is to illuminate the continuity and variation of strategy across many individual cases. In the opening salvo, Black maps his conceptual terrain which, even without the rest of the book, is a masterclass introduction to strategy. In defining this core term, Black shows an aversion to constraining his analysis with a restricted view of the essence of strategy. Rather, he conceives of it in a 'total' sense, seeing strategy as the way in which actors generally go about shaping their domestic and international contexts through the pursuit of outcomes that provide them security and advance their interests. The contest for power is thus the crucial, arch-context of strategy.<sup>734</sup> It echoes the influential definition by Lawrence Freedman, who did away with parameters and defined strategy in his *magnus opus* with characteristic breadth as "the art of creating power".<sup>735</sup> The approach is helpful for what Black wants to achieve and appropriate to the scope of the book, although it does risk casting the conceptual

net too wide in many cases: anything that can be related to the contest for power, falls in the ambit of strategy. Nevertheless, Black understands this and defends his approach by noting that, unavoidably, “any strategy is contingent on complex contexts, both international and domestic, short- and long-term, and has no optimum dimensions”.<sup>736</sup> This point is developed throughout the book and puts the concept beyond the institutional ownership of military institutions. Adding an additional dimension, Black also argues, “[those] who direct strategy are not always the same as those who evaluate its success”.<sup>737</sup> A significant problem thus faced by those executing strategy, is for them to justify their decisions to those who frame the criteria for its success.<sup>738</sup> This sets up the interesting, ever-present puzzle of *who* is executing strategy, *what* they are trying to achieve, and, crucially, *who* they are trying to convince. It makes a visible overlap with what Katya Coleman has described as identifying the “legitimacy audience”.<sup>739</sup> The second concept, ‘strategic culture’, is also treated broadly, and (as is often the case with this term) is a matter of just because it is difficult to define, does not mean that it is not there. Black treats the hotly debated term with delicacy, however, employing it to open discussion on specific social and cultural contexts within which military activity is shaped. An example is the question of how different societies approach limits in war-making, e.g. the treatment of prisoners of war, the use and extent of scorched earth policies, the tolerance of casualties and the notions of victory, defeat and what counts as ‘appropriate’ conduct.<sup>740</sup> With this ‘total’ view of strategy developed and having related it to his view of strategic culture, Black goes on to paint its various contextual contingencies and influences over time and space in succeeding chapters.

The first of the ‘cases’ in the book, as it were, concerns the strategies of what Black identifies as ‘continental empires’, spanning the years 1400 to 1850, with a focus on China, Turkey, Russia, Austria and France. Although countries such as China, Russia and France have maritime components to their strategic practice overall, the chapter considers their continental contexts. As an acute example of his trade-off with specificity, Black looks to justify this focus by arguing that, during this period, “there was scant sense other than for a while in the nineteenth century that geopolitical destiny inevitably lay with [maritime powers]”.<sup>741</sup> With respect to China over this 400-year period, for example, while acknowledging significant variation within and between ruling dynasties, Black argues generally that the Chinese had “a sense that they dominated, and should dominate, the world,” yet were notably orientated to their northern frontiers in the face of the persistent Mongol threat.<sup>742</sup> Black then contrasts the continuity and relative unity of Chinese culture with that of the Ottoman empire, which was seen as having to reconcile many different priorities and interests on many frontiers. Black also notes the significance of religion in Turkish strategy, which led to an initial enthusiasm for campaigns against Christendom in the sixteenth century. In this way, Black continues to highlight and contrast different contexts and pressures during different periods for different groups that guided their strategic practice. In terms of imperial Russia, Black notes its relative disregard for its Eastern interests and focus on European interests before hostilities with Japan in the nineteenth century. Turning to France, under Louis XIV, dynastic dynamics, ministerial factions, and the appeal to catholic interests are highlighted. Authoritarianism is a common theme in strategic considerations that emerges for these groups, which Black essentially sets up as a contrast for succeeding

discussions about the formulation and execution of strategy in the face of public politics – a *force majeure* that is present throughout most of the book.

The exposition moves to Great Britain during the ‘long nineteenth century’ (1688 to 1815, i.e. from the Glorious Revolution to the overthrow of Napoleon), to focus on strategy not dominated by the military or the court, but by maritime capabilities and the rise of public discussion and political accountability through parliament.<sup>743</sup> This sets the context for what Black calls “Republican Strategies”,<sup>744</sup> which also takes shape in the United States and France in the late eighteenth century during the American War of Independence (1775–1783). Although the concept is not explicitly stated, this is where the idea of the legitimacy audience – the question of who is setting the conditions for success – becomes a key analytical tool for Black. As it relates to the United States, the discussion is effective because it highlights how intensely local American political culture really is and how it has been a driver of American military strategy for centuries.<sup>745</sup> What these discussions also continuously serve is the idea of strategic practice happening without the need for formal language around the term.

Having considered the rise of public politics and its effect on strategy in Great Britain, the United States and France in the eighteenth century, Black moves on to the nineteenth century to focus on the Napoleonic wars, where Clausewitz and Jomini (although not only they) sought to explain the science of command, contributing directly to how the term ‘strategy’ is understood today. Valuable here is the understanding of how the word ‘strategy’ became analytically separated from operational art. Jomini is now understood to have conflated the latter with strategy.<sup>746</sup> The United States again comes into focus with discussions about the Mexican American War (1846–1848), the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the ongoing conflict with American Indians during that period. Deigning to touch on developments in the global south – except for references to colonialism – Black again shifts to Europe and the lead-up from Napoleon’s defeat to World War I. One of the crucial contexts focused on during this period, especially in terms of Austria and Germany (the empires that launched the Great War), was the dominance of military institutions in public affairs and how strategy was shaped when those military institutions began resisting political oversight. The picture that emerges from this discussion is one of strategy not so much determined by strong civilian control over the military, but rather one of strategy as an outcome of the struggle for control between civilian and military leaders (to the extent that they were even separate). The subsequent chapters on the First and Second World Wars emphasise not only the influence of technology on strategy, but also strength understood in terms of numbers, and the concept of limitless, ‘total’ war borne out of the nineteenth century focus on ‘decisive’ battles. In an analysis of the Cold War, Black continues to point out the complex contingencies for strategy in a world that explicitly sought to avoid ‘total’ war as nuclear weaponry proliferated.

A change of tack comes with the final two chapters of the book, where Black moves from being an historian to an effective commentator on current strategic affairs with an eye on the future. More than anything, Black emphasises the extraordinarily complex issues that pull strategy in every direction, such as rampant population growth,

resource competition, questions about national interest and identity, the development of artificial intelligence, and religious animosity. Here, Black also helpfully comments on the difficulty of writing about the present, for there is always “a lack of clarity about the relative significance of events, developments and causes” that overshadow the strategist’s analysis.<sup>747</sup> From this, the reader takes that the variables influencing strategy often – although certainly not always – only become clear with hindsight. An important theme that Black drives home is that of popular determination and the inherent difficulties that Western democracies have in setting and executing longer-term goals in the face of deeply adversarial domestic politics.<sup>748</sup> During one election cycle, different government administrations could have completely different strategic approaches to the few ‘complex’ issues mentioned. What Black alludes to, though chooses not to address fully, is the interesting question of how government forms might shape strategy. While this topic falls beyond the scope of the book, a few pages spent with this problem in the abstract would certainly have been welcome. In a style that readers of Colin Gray<sup>749</sup> will recognise, Black offers few solutions to the future of strategy, and many warnings about inherent uncertainty, “individual conflicts emerged, and will continue to emerge, from particular circumstances”.<sup>750</sup>

In reading this book, it is important to keep in mind the trade-off with specificity that Black takes on. Writing about global events across time is an inherently difficult task that takes a considerable amount of expertise, especially when not looking to write tomes, such as Freedman’s *Strategy: A history*,<sup>751</sup> or Roberts and Westad’s *The Penguin history of the world*.<sup>752</sup> While Black seeks to provide a global history, readers, especially those in the global south, may be excused for sensing it to be a global history and analysis from a Western (American and European) perspective, over-focusing on European and American strategic practice in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. This can be defended since the cases used largely suffice in showing that, although strategy is shaped by complex contexts both international and domestic, it also has continuity in the sense that all groups naturally pursue outcomes that provide them security and advance their interests. This view opens itself to significant criticism from international relations scholars less sympathetic to realist schools of thought, which tend to be the dominant paradigms for strategic studies. Even so, the essential contribution that Black makes to strategy as a concept is that modern terminology is not a precondition for the practice of strategy nor, perhaps more significantly, the successful conduct of it.

With this book (and with many of his previous works), Black takes a seat alongside the heavyweights of strategic theory such as Colin Gray, Michael Howard, Hal Brands, MLR Smith, Lawrence Freedman and John Lewis Gaddis (to name but a few). The audience for this book would be wide, not only comprising students and practitioners of military strategy, but anyone trying to understand the geopolitical movements of centuries previous and present. If Clausewitz were alive today, setting a post-graduate or staff college course on strategy in pursuit of strategic education, he would surely list this book as prescribed reading.

**David Jacobs**

*Stellenbosch University*

## ENDNOTES

---

- <sup>730</sup> *Weekly Times*. “Boxing”. The Gladiator. 5 December 1908. 21.
- <sup>731</sup> *Sun op. cit.*, p. 11.
- <sup>732</sup> *Sun*. “Coming events – news of Artie Tully”. 25 November 1913. 11.
- <sup>733</sup> JL Gaddis. *On grand strategy*. London: Allen Lane, 2018.
- <sup>734</sup> J Black. *Military strategy: A global history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020, ix–xiii.
- <sup>735</sup> L Freedman. *Strategy: A history*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013, xii.
- <sup>736</sup> Black *op. cit.*, p. ix.
- <sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.
- <sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. ix–x.
- <sup>739</sup> KP Coleman. “The legitimacy audience shapes the coalition: Lesson from Afghanistan, 2001” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*. 11/3. 2017. 2.
- <sup>740</sup> Black *op. cit.*, p. 266.
- <sup>741</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
- <sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86–88.
- <sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>745</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- <sup>747</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–241.
- <sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 253–254.
- <sup>749</sup> CS Gray. *Theory of Strategy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.