
Reviews

Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies

Baylis, J, Wirtz, J, Cohen, E, and Gray, S.C (eds.)

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figures, boxes

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At first glance two aspects about the book stands out. Firstly, some of the foremost scholars in the field of strategic and security studies contributed to it. They include Colin Gray, John Baylis, John Garnette, Steven Biddle, Lawrence Freedman and Eliot Cohen. Secondly, this work covers a wide range of topics within the field of strategic studies. As the editors explain, their purpose is “to identify, update, and apply traditional concepts of strategy to an emerging security environment characterized by globalization, the information revolution, the new threats posed by international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and a host of ethnic and regional conflict.” Although the focus is on the emerging security environment it is clear that all the contributors followed a very traditional strategic-studies approach in their discussion of these issues, which are considered in historical context by describing the intellectual, military, or political evolution of the topic. This is done in an effort to explain that some of the modern issues are indeed old concepts or even ideas discredited long ago dressed up to meet modern tastes.

In the introduction Baylis and Wirtz attempt to provide answers to three basic questions: what is strategic studies? What criticisms are made of strategic studies? And, what is the relationship between strategic studies and security? The introduction therefore provides not only an overview of different definitions of strategy, but also explains the fundamental nature of strategy, its development as a concept and how it is to be understood in the contemporary era. Included in this discussion is an explanation of the realist philosophical assumptions that underpin the study and use of strategy. Baylis and Wirtz make a deliberate effort to explain the meta-theoretical position of strategic and security studies within the framework of the study of international relations and political science.

The book is divided into four sections. The first provides a description of the enduring issues that animate the study of strategy. The explanation, in chapter one, of the development of strategic thought and theory against the background of the history of war therefore comes as no surprise. Daniel Moran deals with the topic by differentiating between strategic thought as it pertains to war on land, at sea and in the air. The last part of the chapter focuses on the inability of strategic theorists to deal with the issue of revolutionary and irregular warfare. Chapter two provides an analysis of the impact and

role of international law on the use of force in the international environment. It is argued that even in the most extreme of circumstances, such as those involving a contemplation of the use of force, legal factors continue to influence the decisions that officials make. Chapter three deals with the causes of war and what is called “the conditions of peace.” It describes and explains theories that have been advanced by biologists, philosophers, political scientists and sociologists about why wars occur. The underlying notion is that since there are many different kinds of war, it is not surprising that no single cause of war can be identified.

In part two the authors trace the evolution of the theory, technology, and practice of war on land, at sea, and in the air. Two ideas underpin the discussion about war in the different geographical environments. It shows in the first place that wars have often shaped strategic thinking by demonstrating that pre-war doctrines and plans were disastrously out of step with battlefield realities. Secondly, the discussion highlights the reality that the requirements for successful combat in different geographical environments act as constraints on what states can hope to achieve by fighting on land, at sea, and in the air. The chapter on land warfare specifically explores the relationship between ideas about how war on land should be conducted and the way high-intensity conventional land warfare has actually been fought in the 20th century. The discussion is done by means of four particular case studies: the First World War, the Second World War, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the 1991 Gulf War. Chapter five on the theory and practice of sea power provides an overview of the importance of sea power, the constituent elements thereof, the use of sea power to obtain control of the sea and, lastly, the use of sea control for strategic effect. Underpinning this discussion is the role of sea power during the Cold War, the use of sea power in a more globalised geostrategic environment and the ability of sea power to project force “beyond the sea”. Chapter 6 on the theory and practice of air power also follows an historical line of argument to explain the development and strategic influence of air power since its inception through to “the air power decade, 1990-2000”. Accepting that air theory preceded the use of air power, unlike land or sea warfare, one expects a greater emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings of the use of air power. The bottom-line is that theory played a much larger role in the development and use of air power than in the case of the terrestrial use of power. A greater emphasis on the development of theory is a necessity in the discussion of the evolution of air power and this book reflects a shortcoming in this regard.

Part three highlights a number of the most salient strategic issues of the Cold War era. The focus is placed, in particular, on deterrence, arms control and disarmament as well as terrorism and irregular warfare. The contributors provide an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of these issues and consider on how these issues need to be updated to continue to be relevant in the post-Cold war strategic environment. Two particular issues of relevance are highlighted in the chapter on terrorism and irregular warfare. Firstly, the replacement by religious fanatics of the political with “apocalyptic millenarianism” possibly portends the lethal combination of martyrs with weapons of mass destruction. Secondly, culturally-inspired insurgents might change the nature of uprisings from traditional “trinitarian” wars to chaotic ethnic conflict.

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Needless to say that the last section, 'Contemporary Issues of Grand Strategy', contains a capita selecta of the most salient contemporary strategic issues. The use of the term grand strategy in the title nonetheless reminds the reader of the enduring nature of strategy. In the first chapter of this section Eliot Cohen addresses the question of the impact of technology on the use of force in the contemporary strategic environment, while Malcolm R. Davis and Colin Gray highlight the problem of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Davis and Gray define WMD as "any weaponized device that causes death and possibly destruction on a massive scale, quickly enough to be strategically useful for its employer." It is argued that, in the "second nuclear age", WMD remain the preferred weapons of the weak.

Theo Farrell addresses the challenge of humanitarian intervention and peace operations. In his chapter on new security issues, James J Wirtz analyses the more prominent non-military security issues of the post Cold War strategic environment: the population explosion of the 20th century, the so-called common problems (issues that transcend international boundaries) such as direct environmental damage, disease and even the threat that Earth-Crossing Objects (ECO) – better known as asteroids – hold for humankind. In the concluding chapter Lawrence Freedman provides an overview of contemporary strategy by describing the evolution of strategy over the last one hundred years and the prospects for strategy and strategists in the new century. Freedman warns that a broader focus than in the past is required to understand the nature of contemporary conflicts, but that care must be taken not to overlook the traditional role of armed forces. In the end strategic studies remains a subject that focuses on the role of armed forces both in peacetime and in conflict.

From a student's point of view the book is very user-friendly. All chapters have short summaries in the form of "key points." These provide a five to six-point summary of the most salient arguments that was raised in the preceding discussion. Throughout the whole of the book the written text is also elucidated by so-called "boxes" that contains additional relevant information to the issue under discussion. At the end of each chapter a number of typical questions are provided for students. Also, at the end of each chapter the reader will find a guide to further reading and in some instances also a guide to different web sites covering the specific issue.

Though the book was written as a textbook, it is definitely not only of interest to students at academic institutions. Any serious scholar, reader and practitioner in the field of strategic and security studies will benefit from a study of this particular work. Some of the issues under discussion are very traditional in nature, but it is presented in such a way that any serious reader will benefit from new insights. This is especially true of the last theme on contemporary issues. What critique can be levelled against the book in general? The biggest problem is the lack of depth in some of the chapters. This shortcoming is however understandable if it is kept in mind that the book is intended as an introduction to strategic studies.

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