

CHAPTER XXII

GRAND STRATEGY

This book is concerned with strategy, rather than with grand strategy—or war policy. To deal adequately with this wider subject would require not only a much larger volume, but a separate volume—for while grand strategy should control strategy, its principles often run counter to those which prevail in the field of strategy. For that very reason, however, it is desirable to include here some indication of the deeper conclusions to which a study of grand strategy leads.

The object in war is to attain a better peace—even if only from your own point of view. Hence it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire. This is the truth underlying Clausewitz's definition of war as a 'continuation of policy by other means'—the prolongation of that policy through the war into the subsequent peace must always be borne in mind. A State which expends its strength to the point of exhaustion bankrupts its own policy, and future.

If you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after-effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war. This is a lesson supported by abundant experience.

The risks become greater still in any war that is waged by a coalition. For in such a case a too complete victory inevitably complicates the problem of making a just and wise peace settlement. Where there is no longer the counter-balance of an opposing force to control the appetites of the victors, there is no check on the conflict of views and interests between the parties to the alliance. The divergence is then apt to become so acute as to turn the comradeship of common danger into the hostility of mutual dissatisfaction—so that the ally of one war becomes the enemy in the next.

This raises a further and wider question. The friction that

commonly develops in any alliance system, especially when it has no balancing force, has been one of the factors that have fostered the numerous attempts throughout history to find a solution in fusion. But history teaches us that in practice this is apt to mean domination by one of the constituent elements. And although there is a natural tendency towards the fusion of small groups in larger ones, the usual result of forcing the pace is the confusion of the plans to establish such a comprehensive political unit.

Moreover, regrettable as it may seem to the idealist, the experience of history provides little warrant for the belief that real progress, and the freedom that makes progress possible, lies in unification. For where unification has been able to establish unity of ideas it has usually ended in uniformity, paralysing the growth of new ideas. And where the unification has merely brought about an artificial or imposed unity, its irksomeness has led through discord to disruption.

Vitality springs from diversity—which makes for real progress so long as there is mutual toleration, based on the recognition that worse may come from an attempt to suppress differences than from acceptance of them. For this reason, the kind of peace that makes progress possible is best assured by the mutual checks created by a balance of forces—alike in the sphere of internal politics and of international relations.

In the former sphere, the experience of the two-party system in English politics continued long enough to show its practical superiority, whatever its theoretical drawbacks, to any other system of government that has yet been tried. In the international sphere, the 'balance of power' was a sound theory so long as the balance was preserved. But the frequency with which the European 'balance of power' has become unbalanced, thereby precipitating war, has produced a growing urge to find a more stable solution—either by fusion or federation. Federation is the more hopeful method, since it embodies the life-giving principle of co-operation, whereas fusion encourages the monopolizing of power by a single political interest. And any monopoly of power leads to ever-repeated demonstrations of the historical truth epitomized in Lord Acton's famous dictum—'All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' From the danger even a federation is not immune, so that the greatest care should be

taken to ensure the mutual checks and balancing factors necessary to correct the natural effect of constitutional unity.

Another conclusion which develops from the study of grand strategy against the background of history is the practical necessity of adapting the general theory of strategy to the nature of a nation's fundamental policy. There is an essential difference of aim, and must be a consequent difference of appropriate method between an 'acquisitive' and a 'conservative' State.

In the light of this difference it becomes clear that the pure theory of strategy, as outlined earlier in Chapter XIX, best fits the case of States that are primarily concerned with conquest. It has to be modified if it is to serve the true purpose of peoples that are content with their existing territorial bounds, and are primarily concerned to preserve their security and maintain their way of life. The acquisitive State, inherently unsatisfied, needs to gain victory in order to gain its object—and must therefore court greater risks in the attempt. The conservative State can achieve its object by merely inducing the aggressor to drop his attempt at conquest—by convincing him that 'the game is not worth the candle'. Its victory is, in a real sense, attained by foiling the other side's bid for victory. Indeed, in attempting more it may defeat its own purpose—by exhausting itself so much that it is unable to resist other enemies, or the internal effects of overstrain. Self-exhaustion in war has killed more States than any foreign assailant.

Weighing these factors of the problem, it can be seen that the problem of a conservative State is to find the type of strategy that is suited to fulfil its inherently more limited object in the most strength-conserving way—so as to insure its future as well as its present. At first glance, it might seem that pure defence would be the most economical method; but this implies static defence—and historical experience warns us that is it a dangerously brittle method on which to rely. Economy of force and deterrent effect are best combined in the defensive-offensive method, based on high mobility that carries the power of quick riposte.

The East Roman Empire was a case where such an actively 'conservative' strategy had been carefully thought out, as a basis of war-policy—a fact which goes far to explain this empire's unrivalled span of existence. Another example, more instinctive than reasoned, is provided by the strategy, based

on sea-power, that England practised in her wars from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The value of it was shown by the way that her strength kept pace with her growth, while all her rivals broke down in turn through self-exhaustion in war—traceable to their immoderate desire for the immediate satisfaction of outright victory.

A long series of mutually exhausting and devastating wars, above all the Thirty Years' War, had brought statesmen by the eighteenth century to realize the necessity, when engaged in war, of curbing both their ambitions and their passions in the interests of their purpose. On the one hand, this realization tended to produce a tacit limitation of warfare—an avoidance of excesses which might damage after-the-war prospects. On the other hand, it made them more ready to negotiate a peace if and when victory came to appear dubious of achievement. Their ambitions and passions frequently carried them too far, so that the return to peace found their countries weakened rather than strengthened, but they had learnt to stop short of national exhaustion. And the most satisfactory peace settlements, even for the stronger side, proved to be those which were made by negotiation rather than by a decisive military issue.

This gradual education in the inherent limitations of war was still in process when it was interrupted by the French Revolution, which brought to the top men who were novices in statesmanship. The Directory and its successor, Napoleon, pursued the vision of an enduring peace through war after war for twenty years. The pursuit never led to the goal, but only to spreading exhaustion and ultimate collapse.

The bankruptcy of the Napoleonic Empire renewed a lesson that had often been taught before. The impression, however, came to be obscured by the sunset haze of Napoleonic myth. The lesson had been forgotten by the time it was repeated in the war of 1914–18. Even after that bitter experience the statesmen of the Second World War were no wiser.

Although war is contrary to reason, since it is a means of deciding issues by force when discussion fails to produce an agreed solution, the conduct of war must be controlled by reason if its object is to be fulfilled. For—

(1) While fighting is a physical act, its direction is a mental process. The better your strategy, the easier you will gain the upper hand, and the less it will cost you.

(2) Conversely, the more strength you waste the more you increase the risk of the scales of war turning against you; and even if you succeed in winning the victory, the less strength you will have to profit by the peace.

(3) The more brutal your methods the more bitter you will make your opponents, with the natural result of hardening the resistance you are trying to overcome; thus, the more evenly the two sides are matched the wiser it will be to avoid extremes of violence which tend to consolidate the enemy's troops and people behind their leaders.

(4) These calculations extend further. The more intent you appear to impose a peace entirely of your own choosing, by conquest, the stiffer the obstacle you will raise in your path.

(5) Furthermore, if and when you reach your military goal, the more you ask of the defeated side the more trouble you will have, and the more cause you will provide for an ultimate attempt to reverse the settlement achieved by the war.

Force is a vicious circle—or rather, a spiral—unless its application is controlled by the most carefully reasoned calculation. Thus war, which begins by denying reason, comes to vindicate it—throughout all phases of the struggle.

The fighting instinct is necessary to success in the battlefield—although even here the combatant who can keep a cool head has an advantage over the man who 'sees red'—but should always be ridden on a tight rein. The statesman who gives that instinct its head loses his own; he is not fit to take charge of the fate of a nation.

Victory in the true sense implies that the state of peace, and of one's people, is better after the war than before. Victory in this sense is only possible if a quick result can be gained or if a long effort can be economically proportioned to the national resources. The end must be adjusted to the means. Failing a fair prospect of such a victory, wise statesmanship will miss no opportunity for negotiating peace. Peace through stalemate, based on a coincident recognition by each side of the opponent's strength, is at least preferable to peace through common exhaustion—and has often provided a better foundation for lasting peace.

It is wiser to run risks of war for the sake of preserving peace than to run risks of exhaustion in war for the sake of finishing with victory—a conclusion that runs counter to custom but is supported by experience. Perseverance in war is

only justifiable if there is a good chance of a good end—the prospect of a peace that will balance the sum of human misery incurred in the struggle. Indeed, deepening study of past experience leads to the conclusion that nations might often have come nearer to their object by taking advantage of a lull in the struggle to discuss a settlement than by pursuing the war with the aim of ‘victory’.

History reveals, also, that in many cases a beneficial peace could have been obtained if the statesmen of the warring nations had shown more understanding of the elements of psychology in their peace ‘feelers’. Their attitude has commonly been too akin to that seen in the typical domestic quarrel; each party is afraid to appear yielding, with the result that when one of them shows any inclination towards conciliation this is usually expressed in language that is too stiff, while the other is apt to be slow to respond—partly from pride or obstinacy and partly from a tendency to interpret such a gesture as a sign of weakening when it may be a sign of returning common sense. Thus the fateful moment passes, and the conflict continues—to the common damage. Rarely does a continuation serve any good purpose where the two parties are bound to go on living under the same roof. This applies even more to modern war than to a domestic conflict, since the industrialization of nations has made their fortunes inseparable. It is the responsibility of statesmanship never to lose sight of the post-war prospect in chasing the ‘mirage of victory’.

Where the two sides are too evenly matched to offer a reasonable chance of early success to either, the statesman is wise who can learn something from the psychology of strategy. It is an elementary principle of strategy that, if you find your opponent in a strong position costly to force, you should leave him a line of retreat—as the quickest way of loosening his resistance. It should, equally, be a principle of policy, especially in war, to provide your opponent with a ladder by which he can climb down.

The question may arise as to whether such conclusions, based on the history of war between so-called civilized States, apply to the conditions inherent in a renewal of the type of purely predatory war that was waged by the barbarian assailants of the Roman Empire, or the mixed religious and predatory war that was pursued by the fanatical followers of Mahomet. In such wars any negotiated peace tends to have

in itself even less than the normal value (it is only too clear from history that States rarely keep faith with each other, save in so far, and so long, as their promises seem to them to combine with their interests). But the less that a nation has regard for moral obligations the more it tends to respect physical strength—the deterrent power of a force too strong to be challenged with impunity. In the same way, with individuals it is a matter of common experience that the bully-type and the robber-type hesitate to assail anyone who approaches their own strength—and are far more reluctant to attempt this than a peaceful type of individual is to tackle an assailant bigger than himself.

It is folly to imagine that the aggressive types, whether individuals or nations, can be bought off—or, in modern language, 'appeased'—since the payment of danegeld stimulates a demand for more danegeld. But they can be curbed. Their very belief in force makes them more susceptible to the deterrent effect of a formidable opposing force. This forms an adequate check except against pure fanaticism—a fanaticism that is unmingled with acquisitiveness.

While it is hard to make a real peace with the predatory types, it is easier to induce them to accept a state of truce—and far less exhausting than an attempt to crush them, whereby they are, like all types of mankind, infused with the courage of desperation.

The experience of history brings ample evidence that the downfall of civilized States tends to come not from the direct assaults of foes but from internal decay, combined with the consequences of exhaustion in war. A state of suspense is trying—it has often led nations as well as individuals to commit suicide because they were unable to bear it. But suspense is better than to reach exhaustion in pursuit of the mirage of victory. Moreover, a truce to actual hostilities enables a recovery and development of strength, while the need for vigilance helps to keep a nation 'on its toes'.

Peaceful nations are apt, however, to court unnecessary danger, because when once aroused they are more inclined to proceed to extremes than predatory nations. For the latter, making war as a means of gain, are usually more ready to call it off when they find an opponent too strong to be easily overcome. It is the reluctant fighter, impelled by emotion and not by calculation, who tends to press a fight to the bitter

end. Thereby he too often defeats his own end, even is he does not produce his own direct defeat. For the spirit of barbarism can be weakened only during a cessation of hostilities; war strengthens it—pouring fuel on the flames.