



# The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective

*Hew Strachan*

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## **The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective** Hew Strachan

The wars since 9/11, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, have generated frustration and an increasing sense of failure in the West. Much of the blame has been attributed to poor strategy. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, public enquiries and defence think tanks have detected a lack of consistent direction, of effective communication, and of governmental coordination. In this important book, Sir Hew Strachan, one of the world's leading military historians, reveals how these failures resulted from a fundamental misreading and misapplication of strategy itself. He argues that the wars since 2001 have not in reality been as 'new' as has been widely assumed and that we need to adopt a more historical approach to contemporary strategy in order to identify what is really changing in how we wage war. If war is to fulfil the aims of policy, then we need first to understand war.

## **The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective Details**

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### notabattlechick says

a series of lectures and essays, shop there's no central thesis, really. some chapters are better than others. he defines a real problem, but is hard to tell what he's proposing as a solution.

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### Hadrian says

Critique of contemporary use of the word 'strategy' by the US and UK, and instead calls for a return to strategy in a Clausewitzian sense, where it is the application of military means to a political end.

Ultimately suggests that the lack of long-term strategy (instead concentration on tactical or operational methods) led to failure of interventions in Afghanistan + Iraq. Replete with interesting historical examples.

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### Christopher says

The best book on the subject in recent memory. A little uneven thanks to the format (collated articles from the last decade or so), and a little bit repetitive at times. Still the most insightful approach to strategy of any modern writer, and a damn sight more fluent and enjoyable to read than Colin Gray. If you leave aside his weird views on American politics and his bizarre civil-military relations paradigm, everything Strachan writes is pure gold.

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### TheF7Pawn says

I like Strachan, but I have to agree with the other reviewers. The essays can become repetitive, highly theoretical, and somewhat inconsistent. Still, he writes well on important topics, particularly the taxonomy of strategy, policy, and operational art. Recommended.

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### Nick says

While not perfect, certainly one of the best works on strategy I've read recently and possibly the best work on post-1945 strategic history I've read in a while. Two main flaws or issues of contention: Strachan's critique of civil-military relations is at times lucid, but at other times appears to come slightly off the rails. Second, the books origin as a (much altered and added too) collection of articles shows through in the many areas which it doubles back on itself covering ground previously well trodden. While at times this is done to build on previously mentioned ideas, at other times it seems overly repetitive. On the whole it is an excellent assessment and striking critique of the recent history of Strategic Studies as a field. Admittedly, as a historian I find many of his disciplinary critiques regarding the history/IR balance within the discipline quite convincing, but I suppose I'm biased.

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## Ryan Fishel says

Excellent Book - One of the best on the subject of contemporary strategy. Contrast with nuclear, game theory.

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## Greg says

This is a really good summary of the state of strategy as a discipline in the twenty-first century. Each chapter can be read independently. He addresses various contested issues like grand strategy versus strategy versus operational levels of analysis, maritime versus naval strategy, new versus old wars, the obsolescence of major wars, and the continued relevance of Clausewitz. There is an Anglo-American bias, which is to be expected.

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## Andrew Carr says

I work at a 'Strategic & Defence Studies Centre' and like to use the word strategy. But I confess to not being really sure what the word means. In this confusion I am not alone.

In *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* Hew Strachan (pronounced 'strawn') examines the 'lost meaning of strategy'. Today most government departments try to be 'strategic' as do businesses, health coaches, schools and caterers.

This is a far cry from what the term classically meant. Strachan compellingly argues that for 18th and 19th century thinkers such as Clausewitz and Jomini, strategy meant 'the use of the battle for the purposes of the war'. This was the notion which World War One generals carried with them into the conflict. The change in meaning occurred after World War Two and with the rise of the nuclear age.

No longer could states use battles for war, because war could no longer be risked. The total war of Hitler, Stalin and Hirohito was too high a burden, and nuclear weapons made conflict seem cataclysmic. As Bernard Brodie famously wrote 'Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have no other useful purpose'. Ever since, Strachan laments, strategy has been broad, grand, and banal. It covers peacetime and war, economics and policy and is thoroughly confused about its purpose and role.

Through a series of thematic essays Strachan traces this change and the harm it has done to our modern understanding and use of war. While total wars between powerful states have thankfully paused, warfare continues in a variety of forms.

In one fascinating chapter, Strachan highlights and critiques the emergence of the 'operational' level. This is a domain of thinking that had not existed in the past and represents an attempt by the military to recapture that original element of strategy — and their control of this highly valued term.

While Strachan rightly attacks the sloppy thinking and misuse of the term strategy, I admit to still being unclear exactly how he thinks we should use it. Perhaps a re-reading would help. This is a detailed, analytical

book that weaves its way to a conclusion rather than setting out easy to follow guideposts. As a series of reprinted and updated works from other contexts the book is coherent but not comprehensive.

If I have caught the thread, Strachan believes that strategy should not be thought of as a constant but a discussion. An intersection between policy (what the nation wants) and tactics (the use of force by the state). In the middle, and negotiated between those with responsibility for policy (the politicians) and tactics (the military) is strategy.

Where we have gone wrong is to try and split the term. So the relationship between policy and strategy occupied the West during the Cold War, leading to meaningless Presidential rhetoric about a “forward strategy of Freedom”. At the same time, the operational concept only looks at the relationship between strategy and tactics. This ignores the purpose of fighting and confuses military concerns with the resources and approach of the nation undertaking it.

Strachan also usefully highlights the temporal shift in our thinking about strategy. Instead of a discussion between past and present it is now between present and future. As a historian who resents this shift, he lays blame for this change at the feet of two groups.

First theorists from the Navy and Air Forces who either don't have much of a history to draw on. Or who believe their machines sufficiently different and perfectible in the future as to be 'revolutionary'. The other group is political scientists, particularly those after WW2 who Strachan believes got lost in abstract game theories and formal logics that ignored actual human conflict.

In *The Direction of War*, Strachan judges strategic studies a very troubled discipline. He demonstrates it is confused about its key terms, divorced from its origins, and subverted in its purposes. At the heart of this is the inability of many in the discipline to shake the romance of World War Two. That is, wanting to plan for, discuss and debate grand strategy in total war scenarios without being sullied by looking at the actual occurrences and use of strategy in mundane, limited, and localised conflicts today.

There's much to this. We have a generation of Western leaders who think every crisis is Munich, and Churchill is the only model of good leadership. And this generation, in war and peace has been terrible at using force to support national interests. Too willing, too reticent. Too fearful, too hubristic. And rarely clear minded in why and how the conflict will serve their nation. But we can't just blame the leaders. Those who advise and write on these matters need to also take responsibility.

This is a slow read but a valuable one. There is wisdom on every page, but not every page seems to take you in the same direction. The essays wander through history, shift to theory and then back again. Unsurprisingly for a Professor at Oxford, European and especially British experience is the go-to, though Strachan does an admirable job of providing as much information as you need to understand the reason why he is raising each example.

Ultimately, I still feel some confusion about strategy. Restoring strategy to its original meaning seems an unhelpful move. It would seem to exclude many critical peacetime choices, such as the development of alliances and much of defence planning (do we build ships to defend the air-sea gap, or land forces to be interoperable with coalition partners overseas?).

The present wide use of the term also suggests a need for a term that helps us connect policy and action to secure the nation and its interests. Thanks to Strachan's consistent effort to demand clear, historically grounded thinking I now feel I at least have a firm foundation upon which to build my own views.

## **Mallory says**

Inconsistent and incoherent. The book could have been published as an article with only the last chapter because that was the only chapter that seemed to support its overarching argument. The book was utterly confounding.

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## **Jeffrey M. says**

There are books you chew and books you drink. This one is a perfectly prepared cut of filet mignon. You do a bit of chewing, but it is worth every bite. Sir Strachan explains the 'why' of and brings many of the ideas in the phenomenon of war to their logical conclusion. He clearly and completely shows where strategic thinking has evolved from and the risks of it not following true strategic formation and execution. He does have some repetitive ideas, but that is due to the fact it is an anthology stitched together in a logically grouped set of ideas. This is a top shelf book I will no doubt continue to refer to and study further.

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## **Murat says**

I am dealing with military history and I need to say I found Hew Strachan's book very instructive and informative. It is a little repetitive but very useful. I think, Strachan's criticisms on Paret-Howard edition of On War has a crucial importance to understand the American military bureaucrats' approach to war, warfare and strategy.

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