

Masters of Grand Strategy

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Grand strategy has principles that, when adhered to, will definitely benefit the state. In order to thrive, a grand strategy needs to be sustained by a strategic culture. A state's strategic culture resides predominantly in its strategic establishment. This comprises different elites from the respective professions that bear upon the course of the state in the world, those that give shape to policy. These elites can be grouped in different factions within the strategic establishment, such as the military elite, the political elite, the administrative elite. Bad relations among these, such as bad civil-military relations, can be a sign of a fragmented and unhealthy strategic establishment. Such a strategic establishment will not generate a strategic culture that is able to sustain a grand strategy. In order to remedy, prevent, and generally improve upon this, the strategic establishment should conduct strategic simulations. Strategic simulations will instil the principles of grand strategy whilst moulding a healthy strategic establishment that will be able to generate a sustainable strategic culture.

I use the term “strategic simulations” as a container concept, because too narrow a definition can only serve to prevent creative exploration. My definition: “Strategic simulations are simulations of realistic events, transpiring in the past, present, or future, with a focus on learning something”. “Learning something” is the essential part for all the possible different simulations that could fall under this definition: to gain insight that is deemed useful for the real world. Strategic simulations are meant to provide knowledge and experience, to stimulate debate, and to provide a unique forum for communicating ideas. They

help us to imagine how we want to have our future unfold, and test our path towards it with rigour. They do not show us the future, but enrich us with experience in flexibility when discovering the unknown unknowns.

STRATEGY AND SIMULATIONS

When considering grand strategy, we find that it is an interwoven web of much more than a first glance may convey. Grand strategy is both the interpretation of, and the way forward for, the reality of the world. The reality of the world today is highly complex. Perhaps not because of the inherent constitution of the problems that we are facing, but because of the speed at which they evolve. There is seldom much time to react to a given situation before it changes completely, while problems that arise are rarely isolated events. It is this higher level of interconnected challenges that grand strategy wrestles with. Instead of pulling at different problems with as many ropes, grand strategy seeks to latch a string to each problem, intertwining them into a single rope to pull. A single rope that enables all to pull in one direction.

John Lewis Gaddis probably made the best argument for strategic simulations to be used in the service of grand strategy, stating that: “training is the best protection against strategies getting stupider as they become grander, a recurring problem in peace as well as war. It is the only way to combine the apparent opposites of planning and improvisation”.¹ One of the key advantages of strategic simulations is creating an understanding of grand strategy step by step, whilst leaving room for improvisation, gradually providing experience in what a good grand strategy is and can provide. A luxury that is rarely given

in the real world, because events rarely allow for mistakes without consequences. Strategic simulations are able to discover and teach the principles of grand strategy, thus helping us in creating new ways to produce, use, and combine instruments as well as determining new goals in the service of the state's interest. Thus creativity can flourish, which is essential for grand strategy to thrive.² Grand strategy takes the long view, because its ultimate goal remains as long as the state remains. This means that reaching any intermediate objective is only part of this longer timeline. Strategic simulations can help develop such a comprehension by forcing participants to think about what they want to do after success.

STRATEGIC CULTURE

In order to achieve a grand strategy that produces a single rope to pull at all the problems it needs to tackle, there must be a strategic culture that enables the strategic establishment to keep the line strung and tense. A strategic culture that is reconcilable with the grand strategy that is set. Otherwise, we might find that not the entire strategic establishment is pulling with the same effort. When the strategic culture is entirely hostile towards the principles of grand strategy, we find that it can lead to disaster and instability. A strategic culture is shaped by factors that are there to stay, such as history and geography, but their interpretation is not set in stone. A strategic culture that is able to support the grand strategy and bind the strategic establishment to it, is a soil where lush gardens may come to fruition. Grand strategy's ultimate goal is the survival of the state and its way of life. It is for the most part a highly complex yet rational endeavour. A supporting strategic culture should therefore provide the shared requirements to prevent the withering of the organic system that grand strategy seeks to create.

Strategic culture has been described as the result of instruction or imitation,³ or transmitted through socialisation mechanisms.⁴ This would indicate that it is possible to create a strategic culture, perhaps even without a long history that precedes it. It suggests that by continual practice, a strategic culture could emerge. McCraw calls it a set of beliefs, values, and habits.⁵ Habits

are established through repetition, and beliefs can be taught. In this sense we could describe strategic culture as a set of norms. This becomes interesting when we compare this with the study of Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink on international norm dynamics and political change.⁶ They state that norms have a three-step lifecycle: emergence, cascade, and internalisation. This could also serve as the cycle in which a strategic culture can be established through the use of strategic simulations.

In Japan, researchers have studied how the use of imaginary role-play can have a positive effect on the decision-making process with regard to sustainable policy. Participants in the town of Yahaba were asked during policy debates to take the role of representatives of future generations and the current generation. Participants alternated roles, so that all participants played both. Participants were asked to wear certain clothing when playing a representative from the future, helping them in their role, resembling a uniform. During multiple sessions the research found that a self-reflective viewpoint was created, developing a greater awareness of the current generation's responsibility and exhibiting greater empathy for their neighbours in the present. Shared viewpoints were developed and with that came an increase in participants' feeling of responsibility to pass things on to the future generations. The study proved the effectiveness of the simulation in leading individuals to detach themselves and set aside their normal self-interests. This study shows how simulations can shift perspectives and could perhaps even change institutions and social systems.⁷ When applied to the field of grand strategy, we can immediately see the advantage of creating a strategic culture that is geared towards the future.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Withered grand strategies are, however, not inconceivable. When the strategic culture is not suitable, the grand strategy will not take root. The first indication of this are the civil-military relations. The military is inherently more trained by its profession to take the long-term view, to

think strategically. Most studies in strategy also find their origin with the armed forces and their exploits. Because of the nature of their occupation, they reside longer within the strategic establishment than the political elite (in a democratic system). The military is traditionally also the institution that has most to lose when the grand strategy takes a disastrous turn. They put their lives on the line for the ultimate goal of grand strategy. The political elite are more distracted by the here and now. Their professional survival depends on their popularity. The level of friction between these two sides is therefore a barometer for the strategic culture. Unhealthy civil-military relations, too much or too little friction, might indicate that the strategic culture will not be able to adequately support the grand strategy.

Strategic simulations are there to provide a correct amount of friction without the dangerous implications that decisions in the real world create. There can be an immense amount of friction without the risk of a coup d'état taking place or of officers being dismissed. The political elite are free to make decisions and learn from them without incurring the wrath of the population. Relationships of trust and mutual understanding are created through experience that may serve the state throughout both respective careers. Discrepancies in the strategic culture are found without the grand strategy withering away. This may lead to a different grand strategy, yet the interpretation of the strategic establishment will be coherent. All involved parties will find through simulation the common direction. Strategic simulations especially enable those that make up the strategic establishment to take an overarching perspective on the world and the situation of the state. Through strategic simulations we are able to see the interwoven web of different strings and understand why it is advisable to intertwine them in one rope to pull. And why it is to a state's advantage to employ and understand grand strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What to do

What a state such as Belgium ought to do is establish the practice of strategic simulations, focussed on grand strategy and its principles. This means that the strategic establishment should have an institution that is capable of running strategic simulations. Anchoring the practice and expertise of strategic simulations within an institution that serves the Belgian state and perhaps even the EU. A residing expert should hold general courses and specifically tailored strategic simulations, together with a small team, that accommodates the needs of the strategic establishment. The use of strategic simulations should to become a habit when a new policy that has bearing on the grand strategy of the state is established. It needs to become a habit for those that set their first steps within the strategic establishment. The young officers and assistants that will one day become the generals, admirals and ministers or directors respectively.

Who to focus on

Those at the top of the current strategic establishment (probably) do not have the time to be involved with strategic simulations. Although they would benefit greatly from the experience, the fact remains that many other responsibilities might rob them of their ability to spend the necessary energy in a strategic simulation. On the other hand, in 1983 President Ronald W. Reagan participated in a two-week nuclear war simulation named *Proud Prophet*, described as the most realistic exercise involving nuclear weapons ever played by the US government.⁸ An argument could be made for strategic simulations that would not require around the clock participation from the top echelons of the strategic establishment. However, it should be said that the US already had sufficient experience with strategic simulations in one form or another, making the task of persuading top-level policy makers less difficult. Another method of grounding simulation in reality when top-level policy makers are not available is asking people who have held senior positions in the past to participate. Such an

approach has been used during a simulation that sought to examine if the US and Japan were on the right course to deter grey-zone challenges from China. The actions that were taken could be viewed as reliable because the participants had experience and insider knowledge on the situation.⁹

However, all of this predominantly tests existing policies and grand strategic aspirations, without teaching the principles of grand strategy, strengthening strategic culture, or sowing the seeds for better civil-military relations. The top echelon of the strategic establishment is mostly already set in a certain mental framework. If we take the military, for example, the first five years are when the strongest cultural development takes place.¹⁰

Therefore, in regard to teaching, the focus should be on the lower levels of the strategic establishment. Strategic simulations should be held with recently graduated officers and those that just started a career in the civil service or a political party: the strategic establishment of the future. It is this segment that is most likely to be able to spend time on strategic simulations. Furthermore, it is the perfect opportunity for those at the bottom of their respective organisations to forge valuable networks, which will serve their organisation and will most definitely aid the participants in their future careers. It will be an opportunity to instil the principles of grand strategy and create experience which would otherwise only come slowly with the passing years. This experience would spread further throughout the strategic establishment, providing fresh perspective and creating a strategic culture that provides the needed sustainability for future grand strategy.

Strategic simulations that focus on testing existing policy can use, as mentioned before, those that have held senior positions or work with the different levels in the strategic establishment. This means that assistants and junior officers would liaise between the strategic simulations and their bosses. Junior assistants/officers would be the main participants of the simulation and would write short summary reports, on the basis of which the senior policymakers can make their choices.

This would again provide valuable experience for those that just started in their respective careers. It would also provide the state with the opportunity to test policy and the different interpretations that different elements within the strategic establishment may hold.

CONCLUSION

Together, grand strategy and strategic culture are a driving car. The car is the state, the grand strategy is the engine, and the strategic culture is the fuel on which it runs. Civil-military relations is the 'check engine' light on the dashboard. In this sense civil-military relations can work as a barometer for the strategic culture, and the compatibility between the strategic culture and the grand strategy. Unhealthy and broken down civil-military relations are therefore a sign that your car is heading towards an undesirable future. Strategic simulations are the factory where your car is made, repairs are done and where you learn to drive with it.

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Endnotes

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