

Grand Strategy and the Byzantine “Operational Code”

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All states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not. That is inevitable because grand strategy is simply the level at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world of other states, with their own “grand strategies.”

All states must have a grand strategy, but not all grand strategies are equal. There is coherence and effectiveness when persuasion and force are each well guided by accurate intelligence, and then combine synergistically to generate maximum power from the available resources. More often, perhaps, there is incoherence so that the fruits of persuasion are undone by misguided force, or the hard-won results of force are spoiled by clumsy diplomacy that antagonizes neutrals, emboldens enemies, and disheartens allies.

The Byzantines had no central planning staffs to produce documents in the modern manner, including the recent innovation of formal statements of “national strategy” that attempt to define “interests,” the means to protect and enhance them, and the alignment of the two in rational or at least rationalized terms. The Byzantines never called it that—even “strategy” is only a Greek-sounding word not used by ancient or Byzantine Greeks. But they assuredly had a grand strategy, even if it was never stated explicitly—that is a very modern and indeed rather dubious habit—but certainly it was applied so repetitively that one may even extract a Byzantine “operational code.”

First, however, two matters must be defined. The identity of the protagonists and the nature of strategy, or rather of the paradoxical logic of strategy.

Identity

The Byzantine ruling elite faced the outside world and its unending dangers with a strategic advantage that was neither diplomatic nor military but instead psychological: the powerful moral reassurance of a triple identity that was more intensely Christian than most modern minds can easily imagine, and specifically Chalcedonian in doctrine; Hellenic in its culture, joyously possessing pagan Homer, agnostic Thucydides, and irreverent poets—though Hellenism was a word long avoided, for it meant pagan; and proudly Roman as the *Romaioi*, the

living Romans, not without justification for Roman institutions long endured, at least symbolically.

But until the Muslim conquest took away the Levant and Egypt from the empire, this triple identity was also a source of local disaffection from the ruling Constantinopolitan elite, for of the three only the Roman identity was universally accepted.

Insert Map No. 13 The Empire in 525, 1025 and 1360

To begin with, the speakers of Western Aramaic and Coptic, who accounted for most of the population of Syria and Egypt, including the Jews in their land and beyond it, did not partake in the Hellenic culture—except for their own secular elites, which were organically part of the Byzantine regime and were indeed often attacked by nativists as “Hellenizers.” For the rest, the masses either did not know that Homer ever lived, or were easily led by unlettered fanatical priests to vehemently hate what they were too ignorant to enjoy.

Moreover, the zone that rejected Hellenism, as it had rejected the Roman habit of bathing as too sensual, also rejected the excessively intellectual Chalcedonian definition of the dual nature of Christ, both human and divine, insisting on the more purely monotheistic conception of the single, divine nature of Christ.

That is the Monophysite creed still upheld by the Christians of the Coptic churches of Egypt and Syria, the Orthodox churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Jacobite and Malankara Orthodox churches of India, and in much more nuanced fashion by the Armenian Orthodox Apostolic Church. In these ecumenical days, Orthodox Christians are no longer deeply committed to their sides of the Chalcedonian dispute, but the Byzantine empire of the sixth and seventh centuries was dangerously divided by the Chalcedonian persecution on one side and, on the other, by Monophysite vehemence, which rejected all imperial attempts at doctrinal compromise, notably the monoenergism and monotheletism of Herakleios.

None of this should have diminished the willingness of Monophysite Christians to fight for the empire against non-Christians, but it did, and for good reasons: most non-Christians who attacked the empire were not doctrinally anti-Christian, and several pagan enemies converted to Christianity, notably the Bulgars, Magyars, Kievan Rus', Serbs, and Croats; the doctrinally anti-Christian Muslims, on the other hand, were as purely monotheistic as the Jews, and more so than the Chalcedonians.

The Muslim conquest saved the empire from these deep divisions by cutting away its most vehement dissidents. It was by no means linguistically homogeneous even after that—there were

many Armenian-speakers in the east, and many Slav-speakers in the west, while in between there long survived autochthonous languages, such as the Thracian, or Bessic, spoken within sight of the Theodosian Wall and recorded among monks within them. But none of that interfered with participation in the Hellenic culture for those who wanted it, and a different original language comported none of the divisiveness of the doctrinal fracture. It might be said, therefore, that the loss of Syria and Egypt, unlike Latin-speaking and Chalcedonian North Africa, was a mixed curse for the empire: it brought the blessing of religious harmony, and increased cultural unity.

The Muslim conquest found a very large but disunited empire that might have disintegrated entirely, given a little more bad luck, and left a smaller, much poorer, but more united empire hardened to successfully withstand six centuries of wars. (There are sound reasons not to abuse of the word crusade to describe Byzantine warfare, yet it had a holy war dimension, certainly on the frontier as described in *De Velitatione*.)

This too is an explanation for the immense resilience of the imperial ruling class in times of acute crisis, and during agonizingly protracted periods of extreme insecurity: when all seemed bleak and hopeless, the Christian faith, the culture of ancient Greece, and Roman pride combined to reject surrender and inspire tenacity.

The Logic of Strategy

“Strategy” is one of those Greek words that the Greeks never knew, for the pan-Western word strategy (*strategie*, *strategia*, etc.) derives from *strategos*, often mistranslated as “general,” but in historical fact a combined politico-military chief, and thus a better source-word for an activity that is equally broad. The logic of strategy is not quite so simple.

“Men do not understand the coincidence of opposites: there is a ‘back-stretched connection’ like that of the bow.” Thus Herakleitos or Heraclitus of Ephesus, thought very obscure by the ancients, but for us entirely transparent after the experience of the paradoxes of nuclear deterrence, whereby the peaceful had to be constantly ready to attack in retaliation, aggressors had to be meekly prudent, and nuclear weapons could be useful only if they were not used. Deterrence unveiled for all to see the paradoxical logic of strategy with its apparent contradictions, turning the “back-stretched” connection that unites opposites into a commonplace, except for those incurable innocents who failed to see that safety could be the sturdy child of terror.

With that, Herakleitos, the first Western strategic thinker (“War is the father of all and king of all and so he renders some gods, others men, he makes some slaves, others free”), was finally vindicated, though long before him many a cunning fighter had won by instinctively applying the

paradoxical logic to surprise his enemy, a thing possible only when the better ways of fighting, hence the expected ways, are deliberately renounced. The presence of a reacting enemy, the straightest and broadest and best-paved highway is the worst road upon which to attack an enemy, because it is the best road, while a bad road could be good. It is by that same logic in dynamic action and reaction that the victories of an advancing army can bring defeat once they exceed the culminating point of success, indeed victory becomes defeat by the prosaic workings of overextension. Likewise, warfare itself can yield peace by burning out the strength and the will to continue fighting.

Indeed, all that is formed and forged in the crucible of conflict eventually turns into its opposite, if only it persists long enough, a dynamic version of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicola de Cusa or Nikolaus von Kues. It is not necessary to be philosophically inclined to apprehend the logic, nor does one need to know of its existence in order to apply it—but none that ever built an empire in war as the Romans did, or preserved one over the centuries as the East Romans did, could do so but by obeying the logic. It starts with the simple, static contradiction of *si vis pacem para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare war), and proceeds to dynamic contradictions: if you defend every foot of a perimeter, you are not defending the perimeter; if you win too completely, destroying the enemy, you make way for another; and so on.

The only additional complication is that conflict unfolds at separate levels—grand strategic, theater-strategic, operational, tactical—which interpenetrate downward much more easily than upward. To cite a modern example, Adolf Hitler's choice of the wrong allies and the wrong enemies at the level of grand strategy—he had Italy and Japan with him, America, Russia, and the British empire against him—could not be overcome by the many German tactical, operational, and even theater-level victories, notably over France in 1940; and the final outcome could not have been changed by even larger battlefield victories. Had the D-Day landings been repulsed, Germany would still have lost the war, it is only that the first target of the fission bomb would have been Berlin instead of Hiroshima. And even if there had been no fission bomb, Americans, Russians, and the British empire would still have won the war in a few more years. Tactical brilliance, operational ingenuity, even theater-level victories cannot outweigh a defective grand strategy, while by contrast a coherent grand strategy requires only mere adequacy in theater strategy, operational methods, and tactics.

Given overwhelming superiority, material or moral or any combination thereof, wars can be won and peace kept without need of strategy. Antagonists too weak to react significantly are, in effect, mere objects. War may still present huge difficulties, for reasons of distance, terrain, and so

forth. But to overcome physical problems, it is not the paradoxical logic of strategy that is wanted but rather the “linear” logic of sound common sense and functional procedures.

Hence it is those fighting against the odds, the outnumbered, the beleaguered, and overambitious gamblers, who have tried to exploit the logic of strategy to the fullest, accepting the resulting risks—sometimes achieving victories disproportionate to their resources, sometimes collapsing ignominiously. Naturally, therefore, more often than not, the great names of strategy—Napoleon, most notably—ultimately failed. Herakleitos succeeded, as we saw, the ingenuous Belisarios ultimately did not; but most Byzantine commanders, while admiring both, preferred the prudent ways illustrated in the manuals, in which the paradoxical logic was exploited—but only up to the limit of risks prudently acceptable. We have seen how preoccupied the Byzantines were with the need to maximize every possible tactical and operational advantage, while studiously trying not to depend on military strength any more than they had to.

In all their infinite variety, grand strategies can be compared by the extent of their reliance on costly force, as opposed to the leveraging of potential force by diplomacy (“armed suasion”), inducements (subsidies, gifts, honors), and deception and propaganda. The lesser the actual force content, the greater the possibility of transcending the material balance of strength, to achieve more with less. The Byzantines had many precursors in this, but they became and perhaps remain the unsurpassed masters. Before his death while retreating from a foolhardy attempt to invade India, Alexander had already earned millennial glory by conquering Achaemenid Iran, the only superpower for the Greeks. His grand strategy certainly conformed to the paradoxical logic: while his tactics were “hard”—frontal attacks by the infantry phalanx, and all-out cavalry charges—Alexander’s diplomacy was “soft” and inclusive, as symbolized by the encouragement of Macedonian-Iranian marriages, to win over Achaemenid satraps and vassal peoples. Only the attempt to extend his invention of consensual empire to India overshot his culminating point of success, for there was still an original Macedonian base in his military strength, and it was by then excessively diluted.

As we have seen, the East Roman empire by us called Byzantine was least Roman in its strategy, certainly after Justinian’s attempt at total reconquest. Successively threatened from the east by Sasanian Persia, the Muslim Arabs, and finally the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, and from the north by waves of steppe invaders, the Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Pechenegs, Magyars, and Cumans, and from the west, by the ninth century the Byzantines could not hope to subdue or annihilate all comers in the classic Roman manner.

To wear out their own forces, chiefly of expensive cavalry, in order to utterly destroy the immediate enemy would only open the way for the next wave of invaders. The genius of Byzantine grand strategy was to turn the very multiplicity of enemies to advantage, by employing diplomacy, deception, payoffs, and religious conversion to induce them to fight one another instead of fighting the empire. Only their firm self-image as the only defenders of the only true faith preserved their moral equilibrium. In the Byzantine scheme of things, military strength was subordinated to diplomacy instead of the other way around, and used mostly to contain, punish, or intimidate rather than to attack or defend in full force.

The Byzantine “Operational Code”

It was an attractive Byzantine habit to convey what would not be called “methodology” in the direct form of brisk injunctions or even avuncular advice—do this, do not do that, require fewer and less cumbersome phrases than third-person hortatory language. That is the format I use below to define most succinctly the essential norms of Byzantine strategic culture. They are nowhere stated in any Byzantine source as comprehensively as in what follows, but can be imputed legitimately on the basis of observed behavior, as well as the diverse recommendations of the Byzantine guidebooks and field manuals here examined. A normative summary that minimizes duplication is one way of defining an operational code.

I. Avoid war by every possible means in all possible circumstances, but always act as if it might start at any time. Train both individual recruits and complete formations intensively, exercise units against each other, prepare weapons and supplies to be ready for battle at all times—but do not be eager to fight.

The highest purpose of maximum combat readiness is to increase the probability of not having to fight at all.

II. Gather intelligence on the enemy and his mentality, and monitor his movements continuously. Patrols and reconnaissance probes by light cavalry units are always necessary, but not sufficient. Spies are needed inside enemy territory to provide early warning of war threats, or at least to report preparations for war, and help divine enemy intentions. In between reconnaissance by combat units and espionage in civilian garb, the middle layer of intelligence gathering is often the most productive: clandestine (= hidden in nature) scouting, that is, passive observation and reporting. Efforts to scout and prevent enemy scouting are seldom wasted.

III. Campaign vigorously, both offensively and defensively, but attack mostly with small units; emphasize patrolling, raiding, and skirmishing rather than all-out attacks. Avoid battle, and especially large-scale battle, except in very favorable circumstances—and even then avoid it if possible, unless the enemy has somehow fallen into a condition of complete inferiority, as in the case of a fleet badly damaged by storms.

IV. Replace the battle of attrition with the “nonbattle” of maneuver. On the defensive, do not confront greatly superior forces; instead keep close to invading armies, remaining just beyond their reach, to quickly pounce on outnumbered detachments, baggage trains, and looting parties. Prepare ambushes large and small in the path of enemy forces, and lure them into ambushes by feigned retreats. On the offensive, mount raids or, better, probes that withdraw promptly if they encounter stiff resistance. Rely on constant activity, even if each action is small in scale, to demoralize and materially weaken the enemy over time.

V. Strive to end wars successfully by recruiting allies to change the overall balance of power. Diplomacy is therefore even more important in war than at peace—not for the Byzantines the foolish aphorism that when the guns speak, diplomats fall silent. In recruiting allies to attack the enemy, his allies are the most useful recruits because they are nearest and know best how to fight the enemy’s forces. Enemy commanders successfully subverted to serve the imperial interest are even better allies, and the best of all might be found at the enemy’s court, or within his family. But even peripheral allies that can only help a little are to be recruited if at all possible.

VI. Subversion is the best path to victory. It so cheap as compared to the costs and risks of battle that it must always be attempted, even with the most unpromising targets infused with hostility or religious ardor. When facing an imminent jihadi offensive, the strategos is advised to befriend the emirs of the frontier castles, sending them “gift baskets.” No exception was to be made for known fanatics: by the tenth century, the Byzantines had certainly discovered that religious fanatics can also be bribed, and indeed often more easily—they are creative in inventing religious justifications for taking bribes (“the ultimate victory of Islam is inevitable anyway.”).

VII. When diplomacy and subversion are not enough and there must be fighting, it should done with “relational” operational methods and tactics that circumvent the most pronounced enemy strengths and exploit enemy weaknesses. To avoid consuming the major combat forces, it may be necessary to patiently whittle down the enemy’s moral and material strength. That may require

much time. But there is no urgency because as soon as one enemy is no more, another will surely take his place for all is constantly changing as rulers and nations rise and fall. Only the empire is eternal.

Note: The operational code outlined here allows for no historical evolution. Having claimed at the start that the construct here called “Byzantine strategy” was invented during the fifth century in response to the specific circumstances of the time, I recognize that the very different circumstances of subsequent centuries left their marks on Byzantine strategy. After all, the Byzantines learned from experience as well as any of us: they did make the same mistake twice or three times or four times, but after that they were unlikely to repeat the same mistake again, or not in the same way at any rate. It is a lesser claim that is here advanced—that there was enough continuity to define an “operational code,” and in thus conflating eight centuries I am reassured by eminent predecessors.