

Special Address

Containment and Cold War before the Nuclear Age: Liddell Hart and Allied Strategy in 1937-1941

Azar Gat

In this presentation I shall try to bring out the most general premises and perceptions that underlay Western democracies' defense policy and grand strategy before and during the crisis period in 1937-1941. I suggest that liberal democracies were feeling their way towards a policy and strategy of containment and cold war long before the nuclear era, and before the concepts themselves were coined. Although not explicitly defined at the time, these concepts were very much in the air, as they were most in tune with the needs and values of modern liberal democracies. They decisively shaped policy during the crises of the 1930s. Much of what I shall describe here will ring very familiar to us nowadays, as democracies continue to struggle with the challenges of international security with the same deep-seated reluctance to resort to war that they already manifested during the interwar period.

The man who systematically formulated the new concepts in the language of strategic doctrine as early as the 1930s was the famous British military theorist and policy advisor, B. H. Liddell Hart, and I will use him as a prism to bring the subject into focus. It was the situation in Europe that most attracted his attention and that of his countrymen, and therefore will also attract most of our attention, but things were not different with respect to the policies adopted vis-à-vis Japan in East Asia. In contemplating the problem of his islands' defense Liddell Hart thought globally. He was not a pacifist, for he believed that the use of force might still become necessary in an insecure world. At the same time, he searched for limited strategies that would offer an effective response to the security challenges facing Britain and the West while not embroiling them in a disastrous total war. It is this that makes his policy prescriptions so relevant to the concerns of liberal democracies in today's world.

The notion that serious war is an unmitigated disaster and constitutes sheer madness increasingly took hold in the newly formed liberal democratic countries at the outset of the twentieth century, as the global industrial, trading, and financial system expanded and interdependence deepened. It was against this background that World War I caused such a crisis in the liberal consciousness and traumatized liberal societies. Contrary to a widely accepted view, the deep trauma that developed in the aftermath of the war did not result from the great losses of life and treasure in themselves. These were not greater—relative to population and wealth—than the losses suffered in massive wars throughout history. The novelty was that liberal opinion now regarded such wars as wholly out of step with the modern world.

Britain, for example, was Europe's most liberal power, and the retrospective reaction against the war and the mourning for the 'lost generation' were the greatest there, even though Britain's losses were the smallest among European powers. British casualties—three-fourths of a million dead—were terrible, of course, but amounted to no more than 12 percent of British troops enlisted during the war. They were smaller in absolute terms, and even more

so relative to population, than France's loss of almost 1½ million and Germany's two million dead. Indeed, as the twentieth century ran its course, the smallest number of casualties became sufficient to discredit a war in affluent liberal societies. People in the 1930s felt that the war had conflicted with the economic and normative rationale of the modern world; that everybody had more to gain from peace, and everybody had lost from the war, even if some had lost more than others.

Given liberal democracies' fundamental attitude, the problem of how to deal with conflict has become a torment for them. Some liberals (and socialists) came to espouse more or less unilateral pacifism. This, however, lacked a convincing explanation of what to do if the other side is not similarly pacifist, and so pacifism never became a dominant creed. More in tune with the liberal mainstream has been the effort to make the entire international system conform to the Kantian-Wilsonian vision—that is, to have it embrace democratic self-determination, liberalism, and free trade, link into the modern spiral of mutual prosperity, and resolve disputes through international institutions. Where the conditions for that model materialized, as they did most notably in post-World War II Western Europe, North America, and parts of East Asia including Japan, the results are truly remarkable. But most of the world proved highly resistant to that model, and much of it still is.

Another liberal option of choice has been collective security, whereby all states combine against those that disturb the peace. This idea has been central to the League of Nations and to the United Nations, but by and large it has failed for reasons long ago sensed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: powerful states and coalitions cannot easily be restrained by the threat of overwhelming collective action; the threat remains mostly theoretical, because states exhibit scant willingness to get involved in a conflict not their own; in the absence of a coercive authority that would prevent free-riding, states expect others that are more closely involved to do the job; states often have a greater interest in maintaining good relations with the aggressor; and determining who the aggressor is involves value judgments, about which no consensus can be reached. The current disagreements regarding the international community's response to the challenges posed by North Korea, Iran, or Syria amply illustrate the point.

As long as the world has not become fully affluent, liberal, and democratic, and collective security remains largely ineffective, liberal democracies have been obliged to cope with the prospect of conflict and war. Their strategic policy in facing this prospect has typically followed a pattern, progressing on an upward scale from isolationism to appeasement, containment and cold war, limited war, and only most reluctantly, to full-fledged war.

Where isolationism could be adopted, it has been a most tempting option for liberal democracies. However, in a shrinking world of growing interdependence, it has become increasingly untenable. Furthermore, even where no significant interests are involved, the liberal commitment to universal values and human rights often makes a foreign disturbance hard to ignore.

When faced with a significant threat that could not be shut out, liberal democracies' option of a second resort has been to compromise with a rival by accommodating some of its demands and offering it economic rewards. This option is cheaper than war, rests on affluent liberal democracies' strongest asset—their abundant resources—and holds the prospect of

integrating the rival into a mutually beneficial economic relationship that may eventually also lead to its liberalization. The success of such a policy of appeasement hinges on whether the other side chooses to accept the deal and become a partner, or views the offer as a sign of weakness that only whets its appetite. Thus, states must appease from a position of strength and must dangle sticks in addition to carrots.

If appeasement fails, containment and cold war have been the next steps in the sequence. These involve building a deterring coalition, applying economic pressure, and engaging in covert subversion and ideological warfare. Finally, if an armed conflict breaks out, liberal democracies attempt to limit its scope. They most often do this by providing money and hardware to cement coalitions and strengthen local forces against adversaries; employing blockades and naval and aerial actions, in which developed countries possess a clear superiority; and staging limited operations by technologically superior strike forces. Direct large-scale warfare, especially on land, where casualties might be high, has become the least desirable option. Libya has been a recent model of this pattern of action.

All the above, of course, are 'ideal types' that often overlap. It may sound as if they come from today's headlines, but their application has in fact been long standing, with the period between the world wars as their formative time.

By the mid-1920s, the Western democracies' elites increasingly felt that the punitive Versailles treaty had been a mistake. During the 'Locarno era' they attempted to reach accommodation with Germany by helping it to revive its economy, normalize its international status, integrate it into international institutions, and by holding before it the prospect of further peaceful settlement of its grievances. Unfortunately, this attempt collapsed with the post-1929 world economic crisis and the disastrous introduction of trade walls or protectionism by the major powers, which *inter alia* drove Japan onto imperialist expansion. As the prospect of a great power war returned in both Europe and East Asia during the 1930s, what was the liberal democracies' response?

The actions by Japan, Germany, and Italy to change the international status quo, posed acute threats to the democracies. Nevertheless, in all the liberal democratic great powers—the United States, Britain, and France—the public mood was unmistakably against involvement in another large-scale war. The majority of the political elite itself genuinely felt that a repetition of anything like the First World War might spell the end of civilization, was too horrible to contemplate, and was wholly out of the question. But what were the alternatives? Again, the democracies' policies evolved from isolationism to appeasement, to containment and cold war, to limited action. Total war was only imposed on them by their enemies. All the liberal great powers trod that road during the years of crisis.

Isolationism was the first option of those who felt themselves able to embrace it successfully; the British only toyed with the idea and then adopted half-way isolationism in the shape of 'Limited Liability' regarding the dispatch of ground forces to the European Continent; and the United States espoused isolationism more fully and for a longer period. However, in view of the magnitude of the threats, both countries augmented isolationism with attempts to lessen the conflict and tame the Axis powers by meeting some of their grievances and offering them economic rewards. This so-called policy of appeasement failed, and earned notoriety

when pursued whole-sale by Neville Chamberlain. But those who opposed Chamberlain's policy did not object to appeasement as such, but believed it had to be more circumspect and buttressed by force.

Against Italy and Germany during the Ethiopian and Spanish crises, the Western democracies still had little appetite for action in what they perceived as too small a threat. It is interesting, however, to note the type of strategies that were suggested (though mostly not implemented) to counter the Axis moves in both these theaters. Liddell Hart argued that, rather than direct military intervention, these should include economic sanctions, the isolation of both Ethiopia and Spain by the Allies' vastly superior naval power, and the supply of armaments to the Ethiopians and the Spanish Republicans. Writing his memoirs in the 1960s, Liddell Hart likened his proposed strategy to the one employed by the Americans in the Cuba Missile Crisis in preference for an invasion. Furthermore, he believed that given the right Western strategy, it was the Axis forces that were in danger of being entangled in remote and exceedingly difficult theatres of war, or, as we would say, could be made to meet their Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

In any event, it was only the Czechoslovak crisis in 1938 that greatly alarmed Western opinion. The strategic ideas pressed in opposition to appeasement during the crisis again fit the above pattern. In Britain, Anthony Eden, David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, the British Labour and Liberal parties—all briefed by Liddell Hart—held that Germany had to be contained by a superior coalition (incorporating the Soviet Union), capable of deterring Germany or, failing that, of strangling it economically.

Czechoslovakia was a very difficult case for the Western allies. The country was geographically isolated, and there was virtually nothing Britain and France could do to directly assist in her defense. And yet, Liddell Hart assessed at the time that Czechoslovakia was one of the most vital elements of Britain's security system. The point, as he saw it, was that the Western allies were simply too weak to defeat Germany on the battlefield in any given time-scale. Their sole potent weapon of deterrence and coercion against Germany was the blockade which, despite her efforts to achieve autarky and develop ersatz goods, her highly industrialized economy could not withstand for very long. Over 66 percent of Germany's ores for steel production came from abroad, as did 25 percent of her zinc, 50 percent of her lead, 70 percent of her copper, 90 percent of her tin, 95 percent of her nickel, 99 percent of her bauxite, 66 percent of her oil, and 80 percent of her rubber. In the age of mechanized warfare Germany's shortages in such certain key raw materials made her even more vulnerable to the blockade than she had been during the First World War. As Liddell Hart saw it, Germany could not be effectively stopped, not even by a disastrous total war, once it broke loose of its restricted territorial and resource base. The sacrifice of Czechoslovakia would bring all the countries of the Danube basin with their agricultural and mineral wealth within German reach, and give Germany the ability to sustain a prolonged war. As we all know, Japan suffered from a very similar vulnerability, and was exposed to a similar Allied strategy of strangulation, from which she strove to break out.

The direct costs incurred by the loss of Czechoslovakia were very significant in themselves. The military equipment captured in the country in vast quantities was found

sufficient to equip twenty new German divisions, including three Panzer, armed with the Czech T35 and T38 tanks. During the 1940 campaign in the West, some 40 percent of the German medium (gun-mounted) tanks were Czech models. And all this before counting the loss of the strong and modern Czechoslovakian army, numbering 1,250,000 soldiers in 34-35 divisions.

Soviet cooperation was the most significant condition for a successful war against Germany. Like the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal opposition to Munich, which he advised and with which he cooperated, Liddell Hart valued Soviet cooperation highly and feared the consequences on the Soviet Union's position if Czechoslovakia was abandoned.

In retrospect it seems that the prospects of containing Germany were best during the Czechoslovakian crisis. The fear of a general coalition war against Germany was the nightmare of the German General Staff. Chief of Staff Ludwig Beck resigned on August 21, after having failed in his efforts to reverse the course of German policy. He judged that the Allies would not launch major land offensives against Germany, but insisted that in the long run they were bound to strangle her economically. Similar views were held by other senior German officers. Beck's successor, Franz Halder, and his allies in the German army and officialdom conspired to depose the regime if the order to attack were given. Historians have been skeptical towards the German opposition to Hitler for very good reasons. They agree, however, that the pre-Munich activity—before Hitler's bloodless victory proved him smarter than anyone—was the most serious internal threat to his leadership.

Munich marked a watershed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, and many historians later on who argued that Munich at least earned Britain and her allies time to prepare for war, Liddell Hart did not doubt that the balance of power had changed drastically for the worse. Germany's power base expanded; her economic ability to wage a long war increased; and the Soviet Union was given the cold shoulder by Britain and the West.

By the time war came in 1939, conditions had changed considerably. Germany had become less susceptible to economic pressure because of its domination of southeastern Europe and its pact with the Soviet Union. As Liddell Hart clearly saw, the Western allies had lost the ability to contain Germany within its old frontiers, choke it economically if it attempted to break out of them, or militarily defeat it, save Poland, and recover Eastern Europe from Germany's grip. Under these circumstances, the "twilight" or "phony war"—"Sitzkrieg"—being waged on the Western Front was not a laughable abnormality as it is customarily regarded, but the most natural strategy for Britain and France. Britain and France in effect resorted to more or less the same strategic policy that the West would adopt against the Soviet Union after World War II. They opted for armed co-existence, containment, economic pressure, and ideological and propaganda warfare. Militarily, they restricted themselves to peripheral and indirect action, trying to avoid escalation to full-fledged war. As Chamberlain wrote to Roosevelt, Britain would not win the war, "by a spectacular and complete victory, but by convincing the Germans that they cannot win." "Hold out tight, keep up the economic pressure, push on with munitions production and military preparations with the utmost energy," but "take no offensive unless Hitler begins it." In all but name, this was a policy of containment and cold war. The Allies hoped that over time, as the Western bloc formed its defenses and deployed its resources, the Germans would be forced to seek an accommodation with the West. They also hoped that the

Nazi regime might mellow or lose power.

It is interesting to see how Allies' attitudes were echoed on the other side of the hill. After the Polish campaign the German high command, led by Brauchitsch and Halder and supported by all three army group commanders, was almost unanimously against launching any offensive in the West. Most high-ranking German generals did not believe Germany was capable of decisively defeating the Allies, and feared such an offensive would develop into a high-intensity war of attrition which could only be to Germany's disadvantage. They thought that Germany ought to sit quietly and concentrate on absorbing the wealth of Eastern Europe. In the words of General Alfred Jodl: "There was, particularly in the army, a widespread opinion that the war would die a natural death if we only kept quiet in the West." It was Hitler who forced the reluctant army into planning and executing an offensive in the West. To the surprise of the generals on both sides, the whole Allied strategy of containment collapsed in May-June 1940, when the Germans succeeded in decisively defeating the Allies and overran Western Europe.

The United States followed a similar political and strategic line during the years of crisis. President Roosevelt's line of thought with respect both to Europe and the Far East was typical. In late 1937, following Japan's invasion of China and the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan, the president increasingly aired the notion of a coordinated policy of sanctions and containment against them. The idea was embodied in his famous "quarantine speech" of December 5, 1937. Later, during the Czechoslovak crisis, Roosevelt called for a "siege" of Germany. He suggested that the European Allies close their borders with Germany, even without declaring war, and stand on the defense, relying on the economic blockade to do the job. The United States would back them economically.

In 1940-1941, American policy in both Europe and the East Asia encompassed all means short of open war. A crucial element in Britain's decision to keep fighting in the summer of 1940 was Churchill's belief that the United States would enter the war before long, probably after the presidential election in November. This did not happen. Massive American economic aid in the form of Lend-Lease enabled Britain to continue the fight. But the prospect of an American declaration of war remained a dubious matter throughout 1941. During the summer of that year, the United States extended Lend-Lease to the Soviet Union, took over the battle against the German submarines in the western half of the Atlantic, and garrisoned Iceland. Nevertheless, it became clear to the British that American entry into the war was not to be expected in the near future. The majority of Americans and members of Congress objected to the war, and Roosevelt's own intentions were unclear. He was surely not going to allow Britain to fall, and probably would have used the United States' growing weight to steadily increase American influence on the course of the war. But was he waiting for more progress to be made on US rearmament, and using the time to prepare American public opinion for eventual participation in the war? Or was he quite satisfied with the existing situation, wherein Britain and the Soviet Union carried the burden of fighting, with massive American political and economic support but without full American participation? These questions remain in dispute and will probably never be answered conclusively. It is doubtful that Roosevelt himself knew. It was only Japan's surprise attack and the subsequent German declaration of war on the

United States that decided the issue. Neither Britain nor the United States embarked on all-out war until forced into doing so by the surprising collapse of their defenses, in May-June 1940 in Western Europe, and in December 1941 in the Pacific, respectively.

Indeed, although far more powerful than Japan in all respects, the United States deployed non-military means to contain Japan in 1940-1941. Washington tightened economic sanctions so strongly that the imposition of an oil embargo threatened to bring Japan to its knees. However, defensive precautions to back up this policy proved insufficient. As it had with Germany the year before, the policy of containment, economic coercion, and cold war floundered when Japan did the unthinkable, and in a highly successful lightning campaign, broke down the walls that had been built up against it.

I now move to the last phase of the period covered in this paper—when Britain stood alone. Churchill's crucial decision was to keep Britain in the war after the fall of France and to continue the fight with total commitment of all resources until Nazi Germany was overthrown and "victory" achieved. In the defense establishment this "act of faith" was expressed in the more systematic language of strategic planning. Devised by the chiefs of staff in the spring of 1940, British strategy held that Britain would never be able to create a land force strong enough to invade the Continent and defeat the German army. It was assumed, however, that German power could be weakened by the application of combined pressures which ultimately, and relatively quickly, might lead to its collapse. The effort was to consist of three principal means: the blockade, strategic bombing, and subversion in the occupied countries—leading armed insurrections against the Germans, supported by small amphibious British expeditionary forces. It was widely believed that the foundations of the Nazi regime were shaky, that morale on the German home front was very low, and that both might collapse at any moment. It seems incredible today that professional opinion could subscribe to such wishful thinking. But it universally did.

In hindsight, historians agree that Britain's strategy to win the war by herself was based on unsustainable and naively optimistic assumptions which had no prospect of materializing. Liddell Hart, however, assessed all that at the time. He had no quarrel with Churchill's decision to continue the war, maintain Britain's independence, and resist Germany's domination of Continental Europe. But on the other hand, he assessed that Britain had no chance of positively defeating Germany militarily.

With Germany's occupation of Western Europe, domination over Central and Eastern Europe, and economic access to the Soviet Union, Liddell Hart assessed that the blockade had lost its effectiveness against her. Similarly, he argued that in a bombing match between Germany and Britain, Germany, possessing air bases in France and the Low Countries, in close proximity to Britain, was bound to inflict on her much heavier punishment. Only the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, which diverted the Luftwaffe from Britain for the rest of the war, and the United States' entry into the war were to change this basic equation. Finally, Liddell Hart pointed out that British expeditionary forces would stand no chance against the German army, and landing attempts would only lead to new Dunkirks, as the Norwegian and Greek campaigns clearly demonstrated. Again, it was only the distraction of the German army onto the Eastern front and America's entry into the war with all its industrial

might that would make landing in Europe possible.

But what did Liddell Hart propose instead during the period from June 1940 to June-Dec. 1941, when Britain stood alone? The only viable strategy he saw for Britain was cold war. Britain was unable to liberate occupied Europe by force. Therefore, while making her defenses impregnable, she must renounce all offensive efforts. She should try to return to normality and in collaboration with the United States resume economic growth and foster prosperity. Her best weapon would be the building up of a free and just society at home which would serve as a shining model and as an attractive alternative to the German “New Order” in Europe. This model would be constantly subversive to German rule, until in time it might lead to its disintegration from within.

Such ideas would gain universal currency after World War II with the Cold War. In retrospect they appear extremely interesting and intriguing. Whether or not they could be realistically applied against Germany and before the nuclear age is not our concern here. As we know, Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, and Pearl Harbor, made the question redundant. In the nuclear age, the prospect of a major great-power war diminished, and it appears to have become even more remote since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist challenge. Still, the same strategic pattern delineated in the 1930s continues to manifest itself even in liberal democracies’ conflicts with far smaller and weaker rivals. Most typically, the full range of options—from appeasement, to containment, and limited preemptive strike—has been tried out or considered in the effort to stop or reverse the nuclearization of North Korea, so far with little success. And the same political and strategic menu has also been practiced or is contemplated by the U.S. and its liberal democratic allies vis-à-vis Iran, to keep it from crossing the nuclear threshold. It remains to be seen how the dilemma unfolds.

The above described pattern of conflict behavior has had a mixed and often disappointing record since it began to crystallize in liberal democracies during the first half of the twentieth century. It may yet be tested again. We all hope that current tensions with China in East Asia do not develop into hostilities or a new cold war. This would create a challenge for democracies, including Japan, as big as the one which Liddell Hart addressed and formulated in the language of strategic theory when confronted by the problem of his Islands’ defense during the 1930s. Given the nature of modern liberal societies—their way of life and normative outlook—the above described political and strategic response to conflict is very much their norm and is here to stay.