

Success and Failure in War in the 20th Century

Robert O'Neill
All Souls College
Oxford University

Introduction

In the light of current events this topic is obviously an important one to consider as we near the end of one century and the beginning of another. War is only one of several factors that are at work shaping the international system and the lives of those who make it up. The other forces, economic power, political strength, social currents, religious belief, and the concern to ensure ethnic or cultural survival are all important. Arguably they have become more so as power has become more widely distributed within national societies and the international community as a whole. The days when kings could lead armies of a few tens of thousands of men across their borders and take over other states ended in the 18th century. With the development of mass mobilisation, supported by public opinion in democratic or revolutionary states, the political dynamics of warfare became much more salient. With the development of technology and the rapid growth of associated dependence on key resources especially oil, the dimensions of economic and industrial power, and the ability to exert influence in the resource rich parts of the world have become as important as political and social strength in the contest for power among nations.

One might have thought that the logical conclusion from the study of conflicts in the 20th century was that the initiation of hostilities by any powers other than the very strongest would be seen to be so unprofitable that wars would no longer be fought. The history of the past fifty years shows how feeble a conclusion this is. The world has seen many wars, from Korea, the Middle East, Vietnam, Africa, the Gulf through to the recent Balkan conflicts, in which the initiators of conflict disregarded the obvious logic of strategic power and launched themselves into deadly struggles. Often the weak did not prevail, but in many cases they had remarkable degrees of success. So in gauging the utility of force in the 20th century we need to look at a more complex array of factors than size of armed forces, and economic and industrial power. Tough leaders have made their calculations and placed their very consequential bets, on the basis of other factors.

Let me focus on what appear to me to be the seven most important factors in determining the utility of force in the past century:

1. Preparation
2. Quality of military force
3. Political support at home
4. International legitimacy
5. Avoidance of over-commitment
6. Knowing when to end a conflict - the exit strategy
7. National economic capacity

1. Preparation

Many of those who have initiated wars during this century have recognised their relative weakness and sought to offset it by intense preparation. Notably well-prepared users of force have been:

Japan in 1904, Germany in 1914, Japan in 1941, North Korea in 1950, the Israelis in 1967, the Arabs in 1973 and the US in 1990-91 against Iraq. The Germans in 1914 did not have it all their own way because their principal land opponents, France and Russia, were also reasonably well prepared. Their chief naval opponent, Britain, was extremely well prepared, although the British Army remained a small weight in the balance. Schlieffen chose to ignore the Royal Navy however and focused optimistically entirely on land warfare, Germany's field of strength.

Hitler was prepared but only to a degree in 1939, as was Mao in 1945. They both prospered more than might have been thought possible from the skill of their commanders and their operational techniques against potentially superior forces.

Notably unprepared belligerent powers have been Russia in 1904, China in the 1930s, Hitler's enemies in 1939-41, the Vietnamese communists in 1945, South Korea in 1950, Britain at Suez, both sides in the early phases of the Cold War, Britain in the Falklands, many of the providers of UN peacekeeping forces, and participants on the Nato and UN sides in the recent Balkan conflicts.

What correlation has there been between preparation and success in war in the 20th Century?

Essentially not a lot. Some of the better-prepared participants have been defeated: consider the outcomes of both World Wars, and the Korean War. The two conflicts where success really turned on preparation were the Russo-Japanese war and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In both cases the initiator of the use of force also had considerable superiority in operational technique and the backing of a cohesive population.

Rarely is it possible to pull off a daring attack and then reap long term benefits, as the Kaiser and Hitler both discovered - lessons that had to be learned by Kim Il-sung in Korea, General Galtieri in the Falklands, and Saddam Hussein in Kuwait.

So a very high degree of preparation for offensive operations has not been a major determinant of outcomes. Very few generals have pulled off the kind of successes that Moltke gave Bismarck in 1866 and 1870. Where preparation has been important is in exerting a deterring effect on intelligent opponents, as we saw during the long years of the Cold War. Defensive preparations have often (although not always - the Maginot Line, the Bar Lev Line) paid off. Responsible leaders generally try to signal their strength and determination to potential aggressors, but much depends on the willingness of the latter to read and think about the message. Too much preparation can be frightening and make an opponent feel cornered, without options other than to strike hard and desperately as the Kaiser did in 1914, believing himself to be caught between a strong France and the oncoming Russian steamroller, supported only by the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire

Other factors have been more important in determining outcomes in war.

2. Quality of Military Forces

Which belligerents have had relatively high quality forces in the conflicts of the 20th Century?

In 1904-5 it was Japan (although as Russia mobilised properly in the latter part of 1904 this advantage was reduced as better quality Russian forces were sent east - consider the respective casualty ratios in the battle of Mukden). In 1914 it was Germany on land and Britain at sea. In the 1930s Japan had a significant quality margin over China, as did the Italians over Ethiopia. In the Second World War the Germans and Japanese clearly had better armies at least until 1943. The Japanese strength in naval airpower and the effectiveness of German submarines offset their lack of strategic airpower. In the post 1945 conflicts the Chinese Nationalists began with a strong quality advantage over the Communists, which the Nationalists then nullified through their political weakness and in-fighting. The North Koreans enjoyed a strong quality advantage over the South Koreans in 1950, Britain and France had it over Egypt at Suez, the Israelis had it over the Arabs in all their wars, Nato enjoyed it in the Cold War and in the Balkans, Britain in the Falklands, the US in the Gulf War, and the UN's peace-keeping and enforcement partners have had a quality edge for most of the time.

How much good have these higher quality forces done their governments? For the first half of the century the results are very mixed. The Germans did not win the First World War - nor the Second. Japan was defeated in the Second, the North Koreans

collapsed and had to be rescued by the Chinese once the US began to intervene, the British and French were humiliated at Suez (although not militarily). But from then on, with the arguable exception of Vietnam - arguable because the US Armed forces initially were actually weak in counter-insurgency warfare - the better military forces have won - from the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 through to the recent Balkan war.

The wars of the first 60-70 years of this century show that military superiority does not translate easily into victory. Wars became longer, and more widely based. Other factors such as economic power, political support and international legitimacy came to play major offsetting roles.

Yet in the shorter conflicts of the 1980s and 90s, and in the Cold War itself, there is an almost complete correlation between outcomes and relative quality of military forces. What determines force quality is now much better understood. No longer is it viewed largely in terms of capacity to achieve an early strategic breakthrough. More emphasis is given to ability to ride out a potential killer blow, regenerate and then dominate the battlefields with high quality fire power supported by elaborate logistics systems and copious supplies of everything consumable from gasoline to radio batteries.

Despite the high correlation between success and force quality in the past thirty years, there have been a number of leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, who have chosen defiance of such logic as their watchword. Obviously they were looking at other factors to swing the outcome in their favour.

3. Domestic Political Support

A survey of wars of the 20th century will show that in the main, the initiators of the use of force and interveners have had their own public opinion behind them. Exceptions have been the British and French governments at Suez, the United States for the latter years of the Vietnam War (although before 1968 the war was popular), some of the less successful peace-keeping operations of the past forty years, and arguably Nato's air campaign against Yugoslavia (but not in all countries, especially the UK, the U.S.A. and France).

One obvious conclusion from today's perspective is that if you do not have public opinion behind you when a conflict begins, you are in big trouble in launching the use of military force. But public support in itself does not ensure victory

It is also true that publics have supported many a losing belligerent: Germany and Austria-Hungary in the First World War, Germany and Japan in the Second, the Russians for much of the Cold War, the Argentineans in the Falklands, the Serbs in the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia - and probably in Kosovo but it is too early to say yet.

Essentially people will give a wide degree of trust and latitude to their leaders in the use of force provided that those leaders can demonstrate that there is a credible threat to the nation's freedom or status. Once leaders lose public confidence, as did the Nationalists in China and the Johnson and Nixon administrations in Vietnam, policy constraints gravely complicate the gaining of a successful end to a military commitment. The contest for public support gives an intelligent opponent an option which he would not have had outcomes been determined on the battlefield alone. In general this factor has come increasingly to favour the liberal democracies because their propaganda is more appealing, more credible, and delivered more effectively to target populations

But recent conflicts since the Gulf War have shown that Western democrats are becoming more resistant to their own government policies when these involve war, and particularly if such wars threaten to cause significant casualties to Western forces or civilians. These attitudes gravely complicate the decision making of Western leaders in attempting to deal with what they regard as major threats to international order or massive infringements of human rights. In the more controlled conflicts of the post Cold War era that seem less directly relevant to Western publics, we are entering a new paradigm period. The outcome of the Kosovo conflict however shows that there is still a little latitude for the use of force by democratic powers in the face of critical public opinion. Speed of results and avoidance of collateral damage are key elements in a successful campaign. In Kosovo the intervening powers just got away with intervention in time. Had Milosevic held out for another week or two the consequent need to prepare seriously for a ground campaign would have been more controversial than the air campaign. Fortunately he cracked when he did.

Public opinion is influenced not only by a sense of threat: people also like to believe that the actions of their own government have clear legitimacy. Let us move on to examine the changing impact of this factor.

4. International Legitimacy

The powerful effect of having legitimacy in the eyes of both one's own public opinion and the international community has been increasingly evident in most of the wars of this century. It has become more important as the world has become more interactive, and public education and involvement in national political life have strengthened. It did not seem to matter much that the Japanese lacked legitimacy in 1904 in attacking the Russians on 8 February without even a simultaneous declaration of war. German lack of legitimacy in 1914 and 1939 was not enough of a force to sway United States public opinion to support intervention. These conflicts taught hard lessons. The costs of failing to support international law and order were recognised widely after

those wars as being much higher than had been previously thought. Since 1945 the correlation between lack of perceived international legitimacy and loss of a war has been very high: consider the fates of the North Koreans in 1950, the French in Indo-China, Britain and France at Suez, the United States in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Vietnam in Cambodia, the Chinese in Vietnam in 1979, Saddam in 1979 against Iran and in 1990 against Kuwait. We can now add to that list Milosevic in the three wars that he has fought and lost.

Why did international legitimacy become so important? Briefly it is because of the nature of international order, the way the UN's role has been strengthened, the growing linkage between legal sanctions and the use of force, the inclinations of Western and especially US legislative and public opinion, and the media which serve them and keep them informed, the spread of liberal education, and the growing willingness of people to state a moral perspective. It is also due to the way in which conflicts have become less directly threatening to the most influential public opinions of the world, enabling them to feel free to take a long term, moral perspective which is often critical of their own governments, rather than cling to the old slogan "My country, right or wrong!"

Unless world order should deteriorate dramatically, the possession of what is seen as international legitimacy will remain an extremely important factor in determining outcomes. It is one of the main motivators of collective action by the world's most powerful states, it builds consensus for their actions, it isolates offenders against international law, and it threatens them with effective legal action when they persist, thereby creating disunity and mistrust in the enemy's senior ranks. It greatly reduces the long term options of the offender.

Let us move on to consider avoidance of over-commitment.

5. Avoidance of Over-Commitment

There is a high correlation between this factor and overall success in war. Many a time has an initially successful exponent of force encountered disaster through the war widening beyond his capacity to fight it successfully on the front or fronts that he has chosen. He then has to reinforce the least successful one and lose the advantages gained on his most successful ones.

The Japanese Army suffered from over-extension in 1905 after the battle of Mukden. Germany became over-committed after failure to implement the Schlieffen plan successfully, and again in the Second World War once Russian capacities to resist began to increase in late 1941. Japan was over-extended in China in the late 1930s, and then again in the Pacific after 1942. The North Koreans suffered similarly after 1950, as

did the Americans in Vietnam due to Westmoreland's offensive strategy, the Soviets in the 1980s in the Cold War, and Saddam in the 1980s against Iran.

Control in the execution of a war is vital - and increasingly so. The Americans did not have it in Vietnam, nor did the Arabs have it against the Israelis. Arguably the UN did not have control against the Serbs in Bosnia and mission creep resulted, leading to loss of international support and effectiveness. Nato was just able to avoid a humiliating protraction of the Kosovo conflict which would have turned to Milosevic's advantage.

The telling effect of over-extension is increasingly apparent now after the experiences of Saddam and Milosevic to any other leaders who are intervened against. They have tended to cling to the notion that their own endurance was potentially greater than that of western leaders who could intervene against them. Militia leaders in West Timor are no doubt basing their plans on their view that they can outlast and wear down the Australian-led peace-keeping force deployed in East Timor to restrain them. Interfet therefore has to be prudent and use its force with precision and selectively, avoiding engagement on ground of the enemy's choosing.

A related, although separate, factor is the ability to judge when to end a conflict on a successful basis.

6. Knowing When to End a War

There has always been a high correlation between success in war and ability to achieve a clean termination - although this has not been recognised widely until recently. We now acknowledge the importance of the exit strategy. Ideas on what makes a successful conclusion and how to disengage after achieving it need to be thought through before beginning a war or intervention, and not after it has begun to go awry. There are both diplomatic and military aspects of war termination. An adroit government has to be able to switch emphasis from the military to the diplomatic neither too early, risking reversal in the field, nor too late, once military credibility has been lost.

Sometimes external actors can play a helpful role, as did President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, when Japan was on the edge of major difficulties in bringing the war with Russia to a conclusion. The Kaiser could have pulled his chestnuts out of the fire in 1916 or 1917 had he not been so stubborn. The Japanese might have consolidated their holdings in China and made inroads into Siberia in the early 1940s had they adopted a limited strategy and not given priority to overthrowing the colonial powers in South-east Asia and humiliating the US in the Pacific at large.

Hitler probably never had a good opportunity to consolidate his gains for the long term and negotiate an end to the Second World War because of Churchill's

implacability and because he infringed the basic rights of too many people to be seen as a tolerable neighbour. None the less there were leaders who were prepared to negotiate with him in 1940 and had he been a better manipulator, he could have made a better attempt than he did to conclude the war in Europe before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Sadly he lacked any sense of moderation in war and doomed his nation to fight with finite resources on an ever-expanding series of fronts against much more powerful enemies.

The Chinese and North Koreans could have avoided the destruction of North Korea's infrastructure and its building-stock by cutting their losses in late 1951. Britain decided to quit the Suez war soon after the war had begun but still lost by her intervention. The war conflicted so badly with the interests of Britain's senior partner that it should never have been contemplated. In Vietnam, President Johnson had no idea of how to begin the process of termination. Richard Nixon understood its importance well before he won office but his view of what made acceptable terms for US withdrawal and disengagement was too remote from anything that Hanoi would agree to. He ended up with far less than he might have held, had the Congress not pulled the rug from beneath him.

Had the Soviet Union had a leader of Gorbachev's ability and perceptiveness a decade earlier, it is possible that we could still be living in a bi-polar world. It would be a world less directly threatening than during the old Cold War of the 1960s and 70s, but one in which the Soviet Union, and its peculiar form of authoritarianism could well have survived much better than by continuing the struggle until Soviet moral, political and economic exhaustion was obvious.

Yet the outcome of the Gulf War in 1991 and its long aftermath has shown that leaders can be too conscious of seeking the right opportunity to end a war. Done too soon it enables an aggressive opponent to survive and wreak havoc at some later date, compelling those containing him to spend vast resources in watching him and holding him in check. Protraction of the Bosnian conflict was an evident concern to the Clinton administration, so it moved powerfully for a major negotiation at Dayton, and was largely successful. It is worth noting, though, that the US is not out of conflicts with the Serbs yet.

The seventh factor to consider is the role of economic power in determining the outcomes of conflicts of the 20th century.

7. Economic Power

There has long been a tendency for political and military leaders to believe that political determination and military prowess can set aside economic strength. Rich nations are peopled by the fat and feeble, they tend to think. The Japanese government was daring in taking on the much bigger Russia in 1904 - although Japan had staying power in the immediate region of conflict sufficient for a year of successes at sea and on land, provided that the campaign did not extend very far inland. Japan also had an importance technological edge on Russia.

The Kaiser took on a more powerful combination of states than his own alliance of the Central Powers. Hitler went to war in 1939 with only 6 weeks supply of oil in his reserves. The Japanese tried to eliminate United States' influence in the Western and Central Pacific in 1941-42. None of them were successful in their wars because they let them run on too long. Their opponents' economic and industrial strength had time to become effective in the generation of new forms of military power. Nor were the Soviets successful in their Cold War competition with the United States, despite Khrushchev's claim that the effectiveness of their ideological system would result in the burial of the West.

Yet the Chinese, far weaker than the United States in the early 1950s, were able to force a stalemate at Panmunjom, and the Vietnamese similarly humiliated the economically much stronger United States. These societies have a great capacity for absorbing pain and carrying on in a war on their own soil or close to it. Provided that China stays out of a naval confrontation with the United States, it is likely to find that the US will remain extremely reluctant to engage militarily with it on land.

In the post Cold War world it seems obvious that economic strength, and the technology that goes with it, will be increasingly influential. We are in the era of a single-super power world. Yet is it inconceivable that the authority of that super power might be challenged by a handful of haters, or even a small power, equipped with weapons of mass destruction, out for vengeance against the imagined author of their ills and humiliations? Against an unidentifiable and undeterrable foe, the great economic and military power of the United States (or that of any major Western power) is no guarantee of security. Weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, now are the great equalisers of international society. This kind of conflict seems likely to be a serious threat to peace in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Two conclusions stand out from the early part of this discussion. Elaborate offensive military planning and preparation before a conflict surprisingly do not correlate well with success. Too often they have led nations into fighting wars that they could not win. Second, superiority in the quality of a state's military forces does not correlate closely with success in a long war. In other than a short time frame, too many other factors come to bear on the outcome for military quality to be the decisive factor.

Increasingly it is the contextual factors of domestic political support, international legitimacy and economic strength which have become the most powerful shapers of outcomes. These three factors continue to grow in salience and influence, but will be militarily effective only if linked with a strong residual military operational capacity and the skills and determination to use them all. They do not of themselves replace military power - rather they shape its boundary conditions - albeit increasingly powerfully.

There remain two judgmental factors which have been extremely influential and which correlate closely with success in war: avoidance of over-commitment and the ability to decide when to end a war advantageously. Both call for fine judgement, accurate intelligence and a great amount of background knowledge of oneself, one's opponent, and the relevant international context. Those closest to the military-political interface need to focus special attention on these issues in the coming years.

Wars will continue - not always usefully or productively. They are unlikely to recur at global level because the leaders of states sufficiently powerful to launch such a war seem likely to realise the extent of the odds against a successful outcome. Wars are becoming increasingly difficult to conduct effectively in terms of meeting the ends of policy better than other means available to national leaders. But human intelligence is remarkably creative. Leaders of second and lower order states and sub-national groups will continue to arise who believe that they have the secret of war's effective use. Whether they are proved right or wrong, whether to our cost or to our benefit, will depend very much on how well we understand the above seven factors, and the ways in which their relative influence on outcomes in war is changing over time. Many people will continue to think that wars are useful in terms of serving their own interests and so we are likely to continue to have them. But whether our involvement in war is to our gain or loss will depend very much on what attitudes we take to the study of statecraft and its military dimension as they continue to evolve in the coming millennium.