

Briefing Memo

Frontiers of Strategic Studies: Current Status and Challenges in Britain and the U.S.

ISHIZU Tomoyuki

Chief, 1st Military History Research Office, Military History Department

Not exclusively for the field of strategic studies, the term “frontiers” seems to be an appropriate expression to describe research trends in the United States rather than those in Britain or Europe. This is because researchers in every disciplinary domain in the United States are undertaking studies for the survival of their particular academic field, with the domain of strategic studies being no exception. This article attempts to examine the tide in strategic studies in Britain and their characteristics in comparison with the prevailing trend of strategic studies in the United States.

First, we take a look at the current status of strategic studies in the United States. As in the case of Britain, strategic studies in the United States is positioned as an interdisciplinary field. If anything, however, there are numerous strategic studies from the standpoint of international relations, and some draw fully upon the strength of quantitative analysis or computer simulation, with a strong tinge of what is referred to as science.

As with strategic studies in Britain, as a matter of course, U.S. strategic studies appears to involve historical studies using Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and Carl Von Clausewitz’s *On War*. As their distinctive tendency, however, U.S. strategic studies, it seems, focuses on today’s significance of these classical writings, rather than try to understand the classics themselves. On this score, they follow a path different from research approaches of strategic studies in Britain and Europe that set out to understand classical writings by reading in classics.

Premised on the Cold War structure between the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which possess nuclear weapons, U.S. strategic studies during the Cold War revolved around the logics of nuclear strategies and nuclear deterrence. Today, following the end of the Cold War, they extend subjects of research into such fields as strategic culture and asymmetrical warfare in their bid for survival. But this is where one of shortcomings of U.S. strategic studies lie, that they easily alter areas of research too often in accordance of changes in circumstances and demands of the times.

Under the generally accepted academic segmentation in the United States, international relations is a subcategory of political science, and strategic studies is one of the areas covered by security studies, which is also a subcategory of international relations. Thus, it is true that criticisms on why strategic

studies needs to be singled out as if as an independent academic domain abound. Unfortunately, it is hard to say that strategic studies in the United States has yet to establish its status as an independent domain of learning.

Next, we look at the actual state of affairs in strategic studies in Britain. Prof. Paul Kennedy of Yale University, known in Japan for his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, once complained in a lecture in London that he can no longer get enough excellent American students for his graduate school class. Every single excellent American student wishing to study at an American graduate school wants to earn his/her master's or doctor's degree in international relations, while students hoping to get degrees in historical studies all want to study in Britain, leaving no excellent students for his graduate school class studying diplomacy and strategies from the standpoint of historical science, Kennedy explained. Needless to say, his remarks were largely a mixture of modesty and jokes. Yet, we know no better statement than Kennedy's that so adequately describes the difference in approach between American and British strategic studies of today.

As in the case of its U.S. counterpart, strategic studies in Britain is also expanding its domain of research in its bid either for survival or for further development (in Britain, strategic studies is quite popular among both undergraduate and postgraduate students, making it a cash-cow course for universities). At the same time, such research areas as history and philosophy still sit at the core of strategic studies. At university research and educational institutions such as Oxford University, King's College London (KCL) and London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) as well as major think tanks including the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), strategic studies places a particular emphasis on history and philosophy in holding to the traditional policy since their inception.

In fact, the syllabus of the Department of War Studies at King's College London includes courses on Carl Von Clausewitz and strategic thoughts as well as, needless to say, on war histories in various periods. Among other centers of strategic studies in Britain are the "Ministry History Seminar" at the Institute of Historical Research, the University of London, and the British Commission for Military History. As their names suggest, these research centers study war and strategies on the basis of history.

Another characteristic feature of strategic studies in Britain can be found in the tendency to analyze strategic issues from a global perspective, apparently inheriting the legacy of the hegemon of the British Empire. The British public's perceived general mentality in favor of understanding international affairs from a global point of view may also explain seemingly perennial interest in

geopolitics, a somewhat dubious academic domain. Further, this may also relate to the fact that many students studying strategies at universities and graduate schools in Britain come from other countries.

There are many conceivable reasons why strategic studies remain highly popular in Britain. The biggest of them all can be traced, it seems, to the simple fact that Britain remains essentially invincible (at the very least, the country has never experienced an ultimate defeat). As a consequence, the British people, for better or for worse, view war as something close to home, and there is not so large a gap between military affairs (or military forces) and their everyday life. These circumstances have prepared the groundwork to accept strategic studies as an independent domain of research naturally.

In fact, while I stayed in Britain as a RUSI- NIDS Fellow for a year from the autumn of 2007, I had a chance to observe a series of military-related events that indicate the proximity between ordinary people and military affairs (military forces), something that can hardly be experienced in Japan. They include: “Remembrance Day” memorial services for the war dead in November; The Windsor Castle Royal Tattoo (there used to be an annual Royal Tournament); Trooping the Colour in June, an annual inspection parade-like ceremony to celebrate the Queen’s birthday; the Farnborough Air Show in July; and the Edinburgh Tattoo, a seasonal tradition in August.

Furthermore, though in a relative sense just all the same, the fact that strategic studies in Britain detaches itself somewhat from real-life politics and policies seems important. It may mean that British strategic studies is not policy-oriented. However, this indeed is the advantage, as well as weakness, of strategic studies in Britain. More specifically, as British strategic studies, in contrast to its U.S. counterpart, consciously puts real-life politics at arm’s length, it has the advantage of its research activities by and large not being influenced by contemporary policies. On the other hand, however, because research tends to stay abstract without much in the way of specifics and has little influence on actual policies, British strategic studies is constantly exposed to criticism that all the research work it does is for nothing. In other words, it is an issue over the relevance of strategies.

The American approach to this issue is simple. Specifically, for example, Prof. Colin S. Gray, a political scientist, defines strategy clearly and succinctly as “the theory and practice of the use, and threat of use, of organized force for political purposes,” and maintains that strategy is positioned as the bridge between policy and armed combat and that the strategist must be a practical expert who can exercise the military force (or the threat of use) for the goals of policy. Similarly, Bernard Brodie, another political scientist, states that strategic studies is the study of specific methods and should be a guide to accomplishing objectives and attaining them efficiently, and maintains, “Strategic theory is a theory of action” and “Strategy is a field where truth is sought in the pursuit of viable solutions.”

For Gray and Brodie, strategies do not make any sense unless they are applicable to the real world. This indicates the practical workability, or relevance, of strategies that is given particular importance in strategic studies in the United States.

In contrast, strategic studies in Britain, which gives weight to history and philosophy, appears to allow it to take the position of rear guard and distance itself from real-life policies, instead of aiming for frontiers in the academic race. Seen in this light, British strategic studies, if anything, seems to belong to the domain of art.

In concluding this piece, we address several issues concerning the whole picture of strategic studies. Strategic studies is the regular target of criticisms such as below.

First, since strategy researchers or strategists are overly focused on the role of military force and thus tend to be preoccupied with issues of war, they are prone to overlook cooperative and peaceful aspects of international politics. Consequently, they are often faulted for distorting the view of the world, rather than being realistic.

Second, many researchers in strategic studies have justified their perceived morally neutral approach from the standpoint of academic objectivity. However, that approach itself is now being called into question.

Third, there is the criticism that strategy is not an appropriate academic theme in the first place and thus should not be taught at research and educational institutions, as represented by universities. In this context, there also are criticisms that strategic studies is nothing but pseudoscience and that strategic studies that is proactively involved in policy recommendations cannot be regarded as a domain of learning.

Fourth, some critics argue that strategic studies is part of the problem, not a solution. Specifically, they assert that strategic studies, premised on Clausewitz's line of thinking that military force is a legitimate tool of policy, is partly responsible for permanently instilling the mentality of tolerating the use of military force among government leaders as well as the general public.

Fifthly, strategic studies is faulted for not breaking away from the state-first approach to international politics. For example, as a consequence of researchers remaining preoccupied with the factor of national interests, they pay little attention to new phenomena such as national security problems at home and the network of international terrorism.

Adding to the above criticisms, the lack of universality in strategic studies is often pointed out as well. Since strategic studies is a domain of learning situated fairly close to policies, it tends to be affected directly by “indigenous” characteristics of a given country or region. This would make strategic studies meaningless under different situations and circumstances, critics say.

Needless to add, these criticisms are mainly directed at strategic studies in the United States, which is very close to government policy. However, to varying degrees, they are now applicable to strategic studies in Britain as well. Unfortunately, strategic studies in Britain, which has history and philosophy at the core of its research, cannot escape the overwhelming American influence. Indeed, strategic studies in Britain stands at a crossroad.

(Reference)

Katsuya Tsukamoto, “Amerika ni Okeru Senryaku Kenkyu no Genjo (The Current Status of Strategic Studies in the U.S.),” (A paper presented at a convention of the Japan Association for International Security on December 7, 2008).

Satoshi Nagasue, “Yooroppa ni Okeru Senryaku Kenkyu no Genjo (The Current Status of Strategic Studies in Europe),” (Same as above).

Tomoyuki Ishizu ed., *Meicho de Manabu Sensoron (War Theory to Be Learned from Great Books)*, Nikkei, Inc., 2009.

John Baylis et al., Tomoyuki Ishizu (translation supervisor), *Senryakuron (Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies)*, Keiso Shobo, 2010 (to be published shortly).

The purpose of this column is to respond to readers' interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS. A “briefing” provides, among other things, background information. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS. Please contact us regarding any questions, comments or requests you may have. Please note that no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without the prior consent of NIDS.

Planning and Coordination Office, The National Institute for Defense Studies

Telephone: 03-3713-5912

Fax: 03-3713-6149

E-mail: nidsnews@nids.go.jp

Website: <http://www.nids.go.jp>