



## BASIC IMPLICATIONS OF STRATEGY ON WAR AND OTHER OPERATIONS

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[Strategy](#), coupled with an [effects-based approach to operations](#), shape how the Air Force conducts operations. The following sections explain a number of the practical implications that the forgoing tenets of strategy have on the conduct of operations, on the uses of airpower in war, and on the general manner in which the Air Force approaches the employment of forces.

### The Desired End State and Commander's Intent Should Drive Subordinate Considerations

The principle of the [objective](#) is to “direct military operations toward a defined and attainable objective that contributes to strategic, operational, and tactical aims” (Air Force Doctrine [AFD] Volume 1, [Basic Doctrine](#)). This expresses only part of the reality of war, however. **The attainment of military aims, even at the strategic level, should be subordinate to attainment of a set of conditions that needs to be achieved to resolve the situation or conflict on satisfactory terms and gain continuing advantage, as defined by appropriate authority** (such as the President or Secretary of Defense [SecDef] at the national [strategic level](#) and the [joint force commander](#) (JFC) at the [component](#) level). **This set of conditions is the national strategic [end state](#),**<sup>1</sup> and it involves political, cultural, economic, informational, and other considerations in addition to desired military conditions. The set of conditions that the military is directed to deliver, not all of which may involve military forces, is the military end state.

**Military objectives should flow naturally and logically from the [commander's intent](#), which includes the military end state.** The military end state, in turn, should flow logically from the national strategic end state. Again, always looking to the end state, there should be a COA identifying what should be accomplished in addition to attainment of military objectives. The latter will normally be the focus of military

<sup>1</sup> In joint doctrine the “end state” is, “The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives.” Note that the text above is *not* intended as an alternate definition, only to explain the concept in a wider context. In joint doctrine, the “military end state” typically refers to a point in time and circumstances when objectives have been achieved and the military instrument of national power can “disengage” from the operation. It is also described as, “the way the commander wants the operational environment to look at the conclusion of operations.” (both references: Joint Publication [JP] 5-0, [Joint Operation Planning](#)).

commanders, but commanders should also be intimately familiar with the larger context in which their military actions take place.

## Victory in Battle does not Equal Victory in War



### Victory in Battle Does Not Equal Strategic Victory

*Napoleon's armies won a string of spectacular military victories against their Spanish and British opponents in 1808; yet Napoleon lost the Peninsular War. Napoleon invaded Russia with an army of 600,000 men and won all of the major battles en route to capturing Moscow; yet he was compelled to retreat and his 1812 campaign ended in utter defeat. Hitler's armies crushed France in 1940 and inflicted millions of casualties on the Russian army in the summer and fall of 1941; yet Nazi-Germany was totally defeated in World War II. Japanese forces initiated World War II in the Pacific with a series of impressive feats of arms from Pearl Harbor to Singapore; yet Japan shared the fate of Nazi-Germany. During the Chinese Civil War, which continued after the end of World War II, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist armies at first greatly outnumbered and were better equipped than their Communist foes; yet in three years Chiang and his armies were utterly defeated. The United States never lost a major battle during the Vietnam War; yet in 1972 a dispirited America withdrew from the frustrating Asian war, and three years later did nothing when North Vietnam drove all the way to Saigon.*

— Dr. Joseph Strange, *Capital "W" War*

War is much more than just battle and a collection of tactical battles (however successful) is no substitute for a strategy that creates continuing strategic advantage. It is easy for military commanders to lose sight of the fact that victory in battle does not guarantee achievement of the desired end state.

The lower the level of the military commanders involved, the more likely they will remain focused on [tactical](#) aspects of a conflict. It is even tempting for leadership at the [operational](#) and strategic levels to focus too much on tactical events. However, there are [indirect effects](#) and strategic end state considerations that all leaders, from the lowest-level through the JFC, should keep in mind. National civilian leadership can also make this same mistake and focus on the military instrument, at the cost of losing sight of the larger cultural and political context, as happened during the Vietnam War when the President and his immediate advisors exercised excessive, direct control of military (especially air) operations.

## **Knowledge of the Operational Environment is Critical, but Ultimately Limited**

The operational environment is the composite of conditions, circumstances, and influences that affects the employment of capabilities and bears on the decisions of the commander.<sup>2</sup> **Understanding of the [operational environment](#) should account for interested parties not directly involved in the conflict; the physical environment; threats to the joint force; and the overall cultural, historical, political, and economic context of the conflict, not just the characteristics of the adversaries or their systems.** On the other hand, the very volume of data available to be turned into “actionable” information often creates a form of friction, and even “perfect” knowledge (assuming such is possible) may *not* impart predictive awareness of events, contrary to some opposing claims.

## **Outcomes are not Deterministic**

War takes place in complex, non-linear, and often chaotic environments, which are characterized by very complex interactions between actors, to chance, and to friction. Like chess, war involves the contention of human wills, it involves many more aspects of the human psyche as well, such as fear and courage. War is thus orders of magnitude more complex than chess, or any other game or simulation. Its outcome is never predictable or guaranteed, plans should never be considered static or prescriptive, chance is always “in play,” and the enemy always “has a vote,” and the ability to adapt often equals the ability to survive or succeed. Commanders and strategists should be wary of any plan, technique, methodology, or wargame that claims to offer deterministic or predictive insight into warfare’s outcome. **War is not deterministic; military victory ultimately relies on the judgment of commanders as well as the will, insight, and moral courage of all participants in the conflict.**

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<sup>2</sup> Based on JP 3-0, [Joint Operations](#).