THE RELATIONSHIP between
POLITICAL OBJECTIVES and
MILITARY OBJECTIVES in WAR

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LONG VERSION for individual self-study
v.OCT 2015
List 'positive' objectives to be imposed on the enemy.
Pure defense is a limited, “negative” objective.
MODEST POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Intimidate  Cause Change in Policy  Reduce Enemy Military Capacity  Take Slice of Territory  Change Regime  Change Form of Government/Ruling Class  Conquest/Absorption  Genocide/Extermination

EXTREME POLITICAL OBJECTIVE
Only examples—the actual spectrum is infinite.
Can we find a reasonably neat way to divide these objectives into TWO subsets?
Limited
POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

High-end
POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Intimidate
Cause Change
in Policy
Reduce Enemy
Military Capacity
Take Slice of
Territory
Change Regime
Change Form of Government/Ruling Class
Conquest/Absorption
Genocide/Extermination

SURVIVAL
LIMITED
POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing political entity can survive our victory.

Intimidate  Cause Change in Policy  Reduce Enemy Military Capacity  Take Slice of Territory

SURVIVAL

HIGH-END
POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing political entity will not survive.

Change Regime  Change Form of Government/Ruling Class  Conquest/Absorption  Genocide/Extermination
Does he understand that you will *permit* him to survive?
Does he believe that he *will* survive your victory?
Are your intentions even relevant?
(i.e., is there somebody *else* who will destroy him if you win?)
And what/who is that entity and how far into its guts do we need to go?
When its survival is at stake, how long will the entity’s leadership continue to defend itself?
Governments seldom commit suicide, and politicians faced with extinction are normally willing to fight to the last soldier.

When its survival is at stake, how long will the entity’s leadership continue to defend itself?
What does “SURVIVAL” mean to this particular enemy?

* Does the next world count?
Is “SURVIVAL” really the key issue, or are we actually asking about whether what we propose to do will provoke the enemy population into maximum resistance? So, what factors might affect or determine the level of resistance the enemy will offer?
Is there a similar taxonomy for military objectives?
Is there a similar taxonomy for military objectives?
Is there a similar taxonomy for military objectives?

What labels do various theorists apply to these two poles?

(And why is it so hard to find good labels?)

Limited Aims
Coercion
Exhaustion
Attrition
Erosion
To Disarm
Overthrow
Annihilation
Compellance
Incapacitation
War to achieve "limited aims"
- offensive war with a limited aim
- defensive war (aim is both limited and negative)

War to "disarm" the enemy
"to render [the enemy] politically helpless or militarily impotent"
War to achieve “limited aims”
- offensive war with a limited aim
- defensive war

War to “disarm” the enemy
“to render [the enemy] politically helpless or militarily impotent”
“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish *by that test* the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.”

Carl von Clausewitz, *ON WAR* (Howard/Paret trans.), p.88.
“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.”

For some reason, quoters of this piece almost always leave these three words out (“…”).
Ermattungsstrategie: a strategy of exhaustion or attrition.

Niederwerfungsstrategie: a strategy of overthrow or annihilation.

HANS DELBRÜCK

Same taxonomy, different theorist, different labeling.
Word problems:
“Annihilate” means “eliminate military capacity,” **NOT** “exterminate.”
[But no one will buy that.]

“Overthrow”? Sounds political.

HANS DELBRÜCK

**Annihilation - Overthrow**

**LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE**

**HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE**

“Annihilate” means “eliminate military capacity,” **NOT** “exterminate.”
[But no one will buy that.]

“Exhaustion”? Might be OK.
Strategy of Coercion: a strategy that “seeks to affect the behavior of an opponent by manipulating costs and benefits.”

Strategy of Compellance: a strategy that “seeks to force the opponent to accept political objectives even though he has the will to resist.”

(i.e., he has the will, but you have deprived him of the military means. But have you?)

Same taxonomy, different theorist, different labeling.
Strategy of Coercion: a strategy that “seeks to affect the behavior of an opponent by manipulating costs and benefits.”

Strategy of Compellance: a strategy that “seeks to force the opponent to accept political objectives even though he has the will to resist.”

“Affect?” Sounds pretty vague. What do you really mean?

Same taxonomy, different theorist, different labeling.

Limited Military Objective (Inflict Stress)

High-End Military Objective (Disarm)
Strategy of Coercion: a strategy that “seeks to affect the behavior of an opponent by manipulating costs and benefits.”

Strategy of Compellance: a strategy that “seeks to force the opponent to accept political objectives even though he has the will to resist.”

Unfortunately, these two words mean the same thing. Bad buzzwordology.

ROBERT PAPE
“Incapacitation” is literally correct. When you say it, however, people hear “nonlethal.”

"The fighting forces must be destroyed: that is, they must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight. Whenever we use the phrase ‘destruction of the enemy's forces,’ this alone is what we mean."

Clausewitz, *On War*, p.90
SUGGESTED LABELS

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE
(Inflict Stress)

Coercion
Exhaustion
Attrition
Erosion
Coercion

EROSION

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE
(DISARM)

Compellance
Overthrow
Incapacitation
Annihilation
DISARM
or
INCAPACITATE
“For if war is an act of violence meant to force the enemy to do our will its aim would have always and solely to be to overcome the enemy and *disarm* him. That aim is derived from the theoretical concept of war; but since many wars do actually come very close to fulfilling it, let us examine this kind of war first of all.”

Clausewitz, *On War*, p.90

"The fighting forces must be destroyed; that is, they must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight. Whenever we use the phrase ‘destruction of the enemy's forces’ this alone is what we mean."

Clausewitz, *On War*, p.90
Make the enemy prefer ending the war on our terms to continuing the struggle.

Convince the enemy that the pursuit of peace on his own terms is too dangerous, too painful, or too unlikely to succeed.

**TARGET:** The adversary’s **WILL** to continue the struggle

Stress comes in many varieties. Here we mean political pain. How might we use military means to inflict political pain?

**SUGGESTED LABELS**

- **LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE** (Inflict Stress)
- **HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE** (DISARM)

**TARGET:** The adversary’s **MILITARY CAPACITY** to continue the struggle

**TARGET:** The adversary’s **WILL** to continue the struggle
TARGET: The adversary’s WILL to continue the struggle

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE
(Inflict Stress)

Coercion
Exhaustion
Attrition
Erosion
Coercion

EROSION

MILITARY OBJECTIVE

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE
(DISARM)

Compellance
Overthrow
Incapacitation
Annihilation

DISARM or INCAPACITATE

TARGET: The adversary’s MILITARY CAPACITY to continue the struggle
Coercion
Exhaustion
Attrition
Erosion
Coercion
Compellance
Overthrow
Incapacitation
Annihilation
DISARM or INCAPACITATE
SURVIVAL
TARGET:
The adversary’s WILL to continue the struggle
MILITARY OBJECTIVE
These two things are not easily distinguishable from each other.
TARGET:
The adversary’s MILITARY CAPACITY to continue the struggle
MILITARY OBJECTIVE
TARGET: The adversary’s WILL to continue the struggle

Specifically WHOSE will and/or military capacity really matters?

TARGET: The adversary’s MILITARY CAPACITY to continue the struggle

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE (Inflict Stress)

Coercion
Exhaustion
Attrition
Erosion
Compellance
Overthrow
Incapacitation
Annihilation
DISARM or INCAPACITATE

SURVIVAL

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

TARGET: The adversary’s WILL to continue the struggle
So,
a limited political objective is best served by a limited military objective, and a high-end political objective is best served by the objective of militarily disarming/ incapacitating/ annihilating the opposing force.

Right?
So, a limited political objective is best served by a limited military objective, and a high-end political objective is best served by the objective of militarily disarming/incapacitating/annihilating the opposing force. Right?

NO.
Can we make a high-end military objective serve limited political ends?
Sure we can.

Can we make a high-end military objective serve limited political ends?
A SPECTRUM

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

Opposing political entity can survive our victory.

LIMITED POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Intimidate

Cause Change in Policy

Reduce Enemy Military Capacity

Take Slice of Territory

Change Regime

Change Form of Government/Ruling Class

Conquest/Absorption

Genocide/Extermination

HIGH-END POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing political entity will not survive.

Disarm/Incapacitate

Erode

or

Disarm/Incapacitate

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)
What does “SPECTRUM” mean? You mean, the enemy leadership can both survive and perish, in differing proportions, simultaneously?
By “spectrum,” we mean that these political and military elements can be combined in different ways, that we can threaten one but settle for the other, that the players can redefine “victory” and “survival” in mid-war, etc.
Limited POLITICAL OBJECTIVE
Opposing Political Entity Survives War
  - Intimidate
  - Change Policy
  - Reduce Enemy Military Capacity
  - Take Slice of Territory

High-end POLITICAL OBJECTIVE
Opposing Political Entity Will Not Survive
  - Change Regime
  - Change Form of Government/Ruling Class
  - Conquest/Absorption
  - Genocide/Extermination

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES
- Erode
- Disarm/Incapacitate

or

SURVIVAL
High-end MILITARY OBJECTIVES

Erode

or

Disarm/Incapacitate

EXAMPLES?
**Wars do not have objectives**—only the individual participating political entities (e.g., states, etc.) do.

Objectives are unilateral, so this matrix refers only to one side’s military objective.

Doing this analysis for only one side gets you only part way to understanding the strategic structure of the war.

The strategic structure can very rarely be described using only one of these terms, because the opponents’ objectives are seldom mirror-imaged.
US used limited force against the Bosnian Serbs in order to force them to reach a negotiated settlement with the Croats and Bosnian Muslims.
US used limited force against the Bosnian Serbs in order to force them to reach a negotiated settlement with the Croats and Bosnian Muslims.
Napoleon was not trying to conquer Russia, only to force it to cooperate with Napoleon’s economic blockade of Britain. But he sought to convince the Czar to cooperate by destroying his army and occupying Moscow.
Prussia completely defeated the French military in order to gain a free hand in Germany (to unify it). Collapse of French government was an unintentional and unwelcome side-effect. (They won anyway. Except that 48 years later….)
Limited POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

High-end POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing Political Entity Survives War

- Intimidate
- Cause Change in Policy
- Reduce Enemy Military Capacity
- Take Slice of Territory

Survival

Opposing Political Entity Will Not Survive

- Change Regime
- Change Form of Government/Ruling Class
- Conquest/Absorption
- Genocide/Extermination

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

MILITARY OBJECTIVE

LIMITED

- ERODE
  - Examples: US in Korea, 1953
  - Afghanistan, 1980s
  - US vs Serbs, 1995
  - US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1990s

HIGH-END

- DISARM
  - Examples: Napoleon in Russia, 1812
  - US vs Mexico, 1846
  - Prussia vs France, 1870
  - US vs Iraq, 1991

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

UNION vs CONFEDERACY

US vs SADDAM 2003

HIGH-END POLITICAL and MILITARY OBJECTIVES
US invaded Panama, completely defeated its military, and installed a new government.
LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

BOTH at ONCE

MILITARY OBJECTIVE

LIMITED

ERODE

EXAMPLES:
- US in Korea, 1953
- Afghanistan, 1980s
- US vs Serbs, 1995
- US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1990s

HIGH-END

DISARM

EXAMPLES:
- Napoleon in Russia, 1812
- US vs Mexico, 1846
- Prussia vs France, 1870
- US vs Iraq, 1991

NVN vs US

DIFFERENT STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AGAINST DIFFERENT ENEMIES IN THE SAME PLACE AND TIME

NVN vs RVN

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)
Well, then, can we pursue a **high-end** political objective via a **limited** military objective?
Well, then, can we pursue a high-end political objective via a limited military objective?
Well, then, can we pursue a **high-end** political objective via a **limited** military objective?
High-end POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing Political Entity Will Not Survive

Intimidate
Reduce Enemy Military Capacity
Take Slice of Territory

Change Regime
Change Form of Government/Ruling Class

Conquest/Absorption
Genocide/Extermination

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE

ERODE
EXAMPLES:
US in Korea, 1953
Afghanistan, 1980s
US vs Serbs, 1995
US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1990s

DISARM
EXAMPLES:
Napoleon in Russia, 1812
US vs Mexico, 1846
Prussia vs France, 1870
US vs Iraq, 1991

DISARM
EXAMPLES:
Germany vs USSR, 1941
Allies vs Germany, 1945
US in Panama, 1989
Iraq vs Kuwait, 1990

US vs NVN

NVN view of U.S. political objectives

U.S. view of U.S. political objectives

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE
High-end military objective (DISARM) vs NVN

US vs NVN

Doesn’t seem to work.

WHY NOT?
A primary source of “strategic dissonance”: Opponents’ differing interpretations of their own and each other’s objectives. Even if they understand them.

U.S. view of U.S. political objectives

NVN view of U.S. political objectives
U.S. view of U.S. political objectives

NVN view of U.S. political objectives

High-end MILITARY OBJECTIVE

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE

Limited POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

High-end POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing Political Entity Survives War

Intimidate

Cause change in Policy

Reduce Enemy Military Capacity

Take Slice of Territory

Opposing Political Entity Will Not Survive

Change Form of Government/Ruling Class

Conquest/Absorption

Genocide/Extermination

X

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

MILITARY OBJECTIVE

LIMITED

ERODE

EXAMPLES:

US in Korea, 1953
Afghanistan, 1980s
US vs Serbs, 1995
US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1990s

DISARM

EXAMPLES:

Napoleon in Russia
US vs Mexico, 1846
Prussia vs France, 1870
US vs Iraq, 1991

US vs NVN

Doesn’t seem to work.
OK, tough example. Let’s look again.
Limited POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing Political Entity Survives War

- Intimidate
- Cause Change in Policy
- Reduce Enemy Military Capacity
- Take Slice of Territory

Opposing Political Entity Will Not Survive

- Change Regime
- Change Form of Government/Ruling Class
- Conquest/Absorption
- Genocide/Extermination

High-end POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE

LIMITED

ERODE
- Examples:
  - US in Korea, 1953
  - Afghanistan, 1980s
  - US vs Serbs, 1995
  - US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1991

HIGH-END

DISARM
- Examples:
  - Napoleon in Russia, 1812
  - US vs Mexico, 1846
  - Prussia vs France, 1870
  - US vs Iraq, 1991

DISARM
- Examples:
  - Germany vs USSR, 1941
  - Allies vs Germany, 1945
  - US in Panama, 1989
  - Iraq vs Kuwait, 1990

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)
Military is not the decisive instrument.

Another possibility:

High-end military objective (disarm)
Military is not the decisive instrument.

Examples:
- US vs USSR in Cold War
- US vs Castro regime in Cuba
- US in Korea, 1953
- Afghanistan, 1980s
- US vs Serbs, 1995
- US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1991
- Napoleon in Russia, 1812
- US vs Mexico, 1846
- Prussia vs France, 1870
- US vs Iraq, 1991
- Germany vs USSR, 1941
- Allies vs Germany, 1945
- US in Panama, 1989
- Iraq vs Kuwait, 1990
Military is not the decisive instrument.

Examples:
- US vs USSR in Cold War
- US vs Castro regime in Cuba
- Iran? DPRK?
LIMITED POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing political entity can survive our victory.

- Intimidate
- Cause Change in Policy
- Reduce Enemy Military Capacity
- Take Slice of Territory

HIGH-END POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Opposing political entity will not survive.

- Change Regime
- Change Form of Government/Ruling Class
- Conquest/Absorption
- Genocide/Extermination

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

LIMITED MILITARY OBJECTIVE

- ERODE
  - EXAMPLES:
    - US in Korea, 1953
    - Afghanistan, 1980s
    - US vs Serbs, 1995
    - US vs Iraq, post-Gulf War, 1990s

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

- DISARM
  - EXAMPLES:
    - Napoleon in Russia, 1812
    - US vs Mexico, 1846
    - Prussia vs France, 1870
    - US vs Iraq, 1991

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

- CONTAIN
  - (Military is not the decisive instrument)

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)

- DISARM
  - EXAMPLES:
    - Germany vs USSR, 1941
    - Allies vs Germany, 1945
    - US in Panama, 1989
    - Iraq vs Kuwait, 1990

(Survival)
So, can we apply this framework to insurgencies and conflicts with terrorists?
So, can we apply this framework to insurgencies and conflicts with terrorists? Read Bard O’Neill’s book on insurgencies, then tell me.
So, can we apply this framework to insurgencies and conflicts with terrorists?

But, yes, we can.
So far, this has been a unilateral analysis—we’ve looked at one side’s pol/mil objectives at a single point in time. How many variations develop when we factor in the other guy? How about when we factor in the contending factions within each player? How about when we factor in mutual misunderstanding? Dishonesty? Deception? Confusion? Stupidity? And, of course, changes on all sides over time. Etc.
Each participant in a given war may have a different combination of political and military objectives, or may not know his objectives, or may be willing to switch.
KOREA 1950-53

Actual “structure” of the war?

ROK
US allies
CHINA
DPRK
USA
USSR

Anti-Gov’t Guerrilas in ROK
CONCLUSIONS
Two forms of military objective:

**TO ERODE**

**TO DISARM/INCAPACITATE**

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVE (DISARM)
Either one can serve either limited or unlimited political objectives, depending on context.
These are objectives, not methods (ways or means), time-lines, intensity levels, or casualty ratios.
Two forms of military objective:

**EROSION**

We can *inflict pain*, and thus hope to *erode will*, through blockade; seizure of territory or population; infrastructure interdiction or destruction; destruction of assets, personnel, military forces – whatever works.

**DISARMING/INCAPACITATION**

We can “erode,” “attrit,” or “overwhelm” the enemy down to nothing, thus disarming him.
These are objectives, not methods, time-lines, casualty ratios.

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

EROSION

METHOD
We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus disarming him.

INCAPACITATION

TIME-LINE
We can annihilate the enemy’s military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath.
These are objectives, not methods or time-lines. We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath. We may achieve these objectives with disproportionately small costs in materiel and casualties, or we may sacrifice our money and manpower in a 1:1 ratio or worse.
These are objectives, not methods or timelines. We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath.

A much stronger power *may* be able to completely eliminate a weaker one without even breaking a sweat, politically or militarily. [e.g., Panama]
We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath.

A much stronger power may be able to completely eliminate a weaker one without even breaking a sweat, politically or militarily. [e.g., Panama]

Or maybe not. [U.S. in Vietnam; Israel in Lebanon]
**EROSION**

**INCAPACITATION**

**AND...**

We may annihilate the enemy’s military capacity but still not erode his will to resist.
These are objectives, not methods or time-lines. We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath.

METHOD

We may annihilate the enemy's military capacity and still not erode his will to resist. The enemy's will may collapse long before his military capacity is destroyed or even seriously damaged.

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

EROSION

INCAPACITATION

OR...

The enemy’s will may collapse long before his military capacity is destroyed or even seriously damaged.
These are objectives, not methods or time lines. We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to 1-week *Blitzkrieg* or a 4-year bloodbath.

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

This is called CONTEXT DEPENDENCY!
These are objectives, not methods or time-lines. We can erode, attrit, or overwhelm the enemy down to nothing, thus attaining annihilation. We can annihilate the enemy's military capacity to resist in a 1-week Blitzkrieg or a 4-year bloodbath.

This is called **CONTEXT DEPENDENCY!**

We may annihilate the enemy's military capacity and still not erode his will to resist. The enemy's will may collapse long before his military capacity is destroyed or even seriously damaged.

This is called **THE BANE OF STRATEGIC-THEORIST WANNABES**.
LIMITED or HIGH-END MILITARY OBJECTIVES

“KNOW YOUR ENEMY, KNOW YOURSELF, AND KNOW THE CONTEXT, and YOU WILL SURVIVE A THOUSAND BOGGSATS.”

*NWC lexicon: “Bunch of Guys and Gals Sittin’ Around Talkin’.”*
So now, in the finest traditions of Clausewitzian theory, let’s forget this stuff for a while and go have a drink. (This is Seminar ‘O’ of the Prussian War College, 1815.)