



Landpower Essay

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Strategic Landpower in the 21st Century: A Conceptual Framework

by

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Introduction

Just consider what has happened in the world in the past year. Russia launched the first cross-border invasion of another country on the European continent in seven decades. A terrorist army with tens of thousands of fighters, ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], has taken over a swath of territory the size of Indiana in the Middle East.

Senator John McCain¹

As the United States prepares to draw down its Army to a pre-World War II level, now is a prudent time to consider how we as a nation view Strategic Land Power (SLP) and its role in U.S. national security strategy. This paper offers a strategic framework that articulates why SLP is important, defines it in a broad strategic context, offers a way to gauge its relative strength and provides a brief discussion regarding what constitutes adequate SLP for a nation.

Background

War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.

Carl von Clausewitz²

If we accept that war is an inherently political activity waged to achieve a specified political endstate, then the heart of SLP rests in a nation's ability to influence people and their political institutions. Doing so from a distance (air, sea, economic, or cyber, for example) has a certain conceptual attraction due to the idea that this approach will limit friendly casualties and prevent entangling engagements. However, the characteristic of SLP that makes it unique from other elements of national strategic power is its capacity to achieve long-term political ends through direct and personal interaction with populations, their political leaders and the societal institutions of their nation. SLP options are broad and can range from ground combat, to post-conflict stabilization, to foreign internal defense, all the way through theater security cooperation in relatively stable areas. The importance of this range of activities ties directly into what a nation believes it can, or should, achieve in a conflict or in support of a friendly/allied nation.

A nation's ability to achieve what it deems to be favorable terms of conflict termination (victory) in a given situation rests on a sliding scale with two key components: the nation's concept of victory, or desired

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endstate, and the level of resources it is willing to commit to achieve this endstate. Resourcing decisions over time will either enable or constrain the types of post-conflict endstate a nation can reasonably expect to achieve. If a nation limits its desired endstate, or “victory conditions,” to objectives that do not include domination of an enemy land force, control of enemy territory and resources, the securing of a population or even the possibility of changing the political structure of an enemy nation, then its requirements for SLP will be relatively low. The primary risk of this approach lies in the limited strategic options available to leaders facing rapidly emerging conflicts. Opportunities for decisive intervention may evaporate far more quickly than a nation can generate the SLP required to enable a desired endstate. Much has been speculated regarding what might have happened had France and Great Britain applied adequate SLP in the interwar years as Germany brazenly violated the Treaty of Versailles. In short, if a nation wants to even consider the possibility of an intervention that includes the potential for regime change, then it requires at least a moderate amount of standing SLP and cannot expect to be able to quickly generate this capability during an emerging crisis.

Strategic Land Power Defined

Military action is a method used to attain a political goal.

Mao Tse-Tung³

SLP can be best defined as a nation’s ability—as a product of both its physical capacity and political will—to accomplish three essential strategic tasks (the SLP Triad) in pursuit of its political objectives. These tasks are not of equal importance in every situation but will generally focus on territory, populations and political structures.

The first element of the SLP Triad is the ability to control territory, and thus a nation’s resources and the locations in which its population lives. Success in this task often comes following decisive combat operations but can also be the result of force deployments intended to defend friendly governments from internal or external threats. While territorial control is relatively easy to assess, the second element of the triad, securing populations, is more difficult.

Securing populations, both physically and psychologically, is a challenging task even without the societal upheaval present during and after a conflict. While physically securing a population is challenging, securing it psychologically is even more so and requires no less planning than any other deliberate military action. Success in the first two elements leads to the real prize: the ability to influence political structures.

The third and arguably the most important leg of the SLP Triad is the ability to eliminate, establish and/or defend political structures. A nation’s impact on another nation’s political structures, whether positive, negative, local or national, is by far the most difficult, important and enduring aspect of SLP.

SLP is inherently a measure of a nation’s joint and interagency capabilities and is not based merely on the capabilities of a ground-oriented force such as an army or marine corps. Such a definition would be entirely too narrow. Rather, it includes all of a nation’s capabilities that contribute to the accomplishment of the SLP Triad’s key tasks. For example, strategic lift (air and sea-based assets) and a nation’s ability to mobilize and project nonmilitary elements of national power in a “whole of government” approach actually contribute to a nation’s SLP and can be counted as a part of it.

Just as naval theorist Julian Corbett argued that command of the sea is relative and contested,⁴ SLP is similar in its application but with some important differences. First and foremost, the elements of SLP interact with noncombatants to a far greater degree than any other elements of strategic power. Additionally, and depending on the phase of the conflict, the nonlethal elements of SLP may have a far larger role than even the lethal elements. Finally, in situations during which SLP is applied in support of a friendly nation in response to an internal threat, or in the case of post-conflict stability and transition operations, SLP is generally far more widely distributed and its presence is more persistent than many of the other elements of national power. Given its importance, assessing the relative strength of a nation’s SLP is guided by several core factors.

Key Elements of Strategic Land Power

Several key elements will dominate the discussion of a nation's relative strength in SLP. While the relative importance of each element is situational, an overall assessment includes the following:

1. **Lethality** – This is the ability to defeat and dominate opposing land forces and those elements contributing to the enemy's ability to generate and project combat power. While lethality is the most traditional way of looking at SLP and remains a large and critical component, it is not the only, or in some phases, even the most important part of SLP.
2. **Engagement Ability** – SLP is very human in its approach, and the ability of a nation to engage across cultures with partners, allies, defeated enemies and nations with whom it seeks to build relationships is a key measure of SLP. While Special Forces, Civil Affairs and Military Information Support Operations units are especially well-suited to this type of work due to their language and cultural training, conventional forces require the capability to do this well.
3. **Civil Power Projection** – The ability to mobilize, focus and project the full spectrum of nonmilitary national capabilities is a core element of SLP. While not limited to the traditional elements of diplomatic, informational and economic power, projecting the nonmilitary national capabilities of a nation has historically been exceptionally difficult. U.S. involvement in Iraq demonstrated how even the world's only superpower was inadequately postured to do this and displayed a significant weakness in this area.⁵
4. **Legitimacy and Political Support** – The ability of a nation to communicate strategically and win in the "court of world opinion" weighs heavily on any evaluation of the relative strength of a nation's SLP. This perception of legitimacy, the degree of international political support for an action, the number and capabilities of allies and the opinions of neutral and opposing nations will serve as either an additive force or a reductionist one. Additionally, a nation's capacity to generate and maintain domestic political support, especially when the costs of a conflict rise over time, factor into the nation's ability to sustain the application of SLP.
5. **Military Governance Capacity** – The ability to secure populations, both physically and psychologically, and to defend, establish, and/or eliminate national political structures is a core capability of SLP. Current U.S. doctrine defines military government as:

the supreme authority the military exercises by force or agreement over the lands, property and indigenous populations and institutions of domestic, allied or enemy territory, therefore substituting sovereign authority under rule of law for the previously established government.⁶

This requirement is not generally in doubt; however, a nation's ability to execute this function effectively at an acceptable cost often is. While the merits of the U.S. involvement in Iraq continue to be hotly debated, few question that the results of the U.S. military occupations and political restructuring of Panama, Germany, Japan, the Philippines and the Confederate States of America were significant geopolitically, albeit not always in a universally positive way.

6. **Strategic Leadership** – Leadership is the most dynamic element of combat power and ultimately the most critical element in the application of SLP. This includes not only the actions and policies of key leaders but also their ability to shape the institutional cultures that both guide an organization and provide long-term continuity. Just as SLP is relative to a specific situation, so too is the relative leadership capacity of specific senior leaders. While strategic vision, temperament, ability to work with allies and warfighting skill all influence a leader's ability to apply SLP, different temperaments and skill sets may be required for different phases of the same campaign. Some leaders are able to make the transitions between phases well, while others who are well-suited to one phase of an operation (e.g., decisive combat operations) may be wholly unsuited for a subsequent phase (e.g., stability operations). Careful consideration of leader selection for each phase of an operation requires mature talent management systems as the importance of this principle increases geometrically with the level of responsibility and authority.

A Brief Look Forward

The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.

Paul Johnson⁷

The United States is in the process of making difficult decisions regarding defense expenditures and will determine either by analysis or by indifference both what it requires in terms of SLP and to what extent it will be resourced. As Thucydides aptly noted, “As is the way of a democracy, in the panic of the moment they [are] ready to be as prudent as possible.”⁸ Unfortunately, without an immediate and motivating crisis, policymakers and strategists may be tempted to overemphasize recent history and arrive at incorrect long-term conclusions regarding their nation’s requirements for SLP. However, by taking a broader contextual view and incorporating recent experience and long-term historical trends, senior leaders can create a better and more accurate assessment of the ends, ways and means a nation must align to achieve its security goals.

While defining SLP itself is fairly straightforward, defining adequate SLP for any nation is not. Perhaps the best rule of thumb would be that defining adequate SLP is analogous to deciding how much insurance to buy. While insurance is a way for families to protect themselves from uncertainty and catastrophic financial loss, too many consider the economics of the moment and buy inadequate policies with the naïve expectation that life is predictable. Yet once a catastrophe occurs, they realize that the long-term costs of the situation are far larger than expected and could have been mitigated for a fraction of the net cost of final outcome. In a similar way, adequate SLP is a hedge against both risk and uncertainty in a world littered with accidental wars, both large and small, that were never supposed to have happened.

Endnotes

- ¹ Senator John McCain, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, 28 January 2015, <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2015/1/opening-statement-by-sasc-chairman-john-mccain-at-hearing-on-the-impact-of-budget-sequestration-on-u-s-national-security>.
- ² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 87.
- ³ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 89.
- ⁴ Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longman, 1911), pp. 334-339, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15076/15076-h/15076-h.htm#Page_128.
- ⁵ Brian M. Michelson and Sean P. Walsh, “Lopsided Wars of Peace: America’s Anemic Ability to Project Civilian Power,” 12 December 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/lopsided-wars-of-peace-america%E2%80%99s-anemic-ability-to-project-civilian-power>.
- ⁶ Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms*, as amended through 15 February 2014 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 15 February 2014), p. 171.
- ⁷ Paul Johnson, *The Quotable Paul Johnson: A Topical Compilation of His Wit, Wisdom and Satire*, ed. George J. Marlin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 138.
- ⁸ Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, February 2008), p. 481.

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