

The Balancing Acts of Strategy

Written by¹
COL Daniel Sukman

You remember lesson about balance? Lesson not just karate only. Lesson for whole life. Whole life have a balance. —Mr. Miyagi¹

Strategy is making hard decisions. In many ways the development of coherent strategy is not about black and white decisions, but more to do with the careful balancing of multiple options. The acts of balancing do not necessarily require perfect alignment or perfectly equal scales, but rather the proper amount of pressure on each one. This paper will identify and examine ten balancing acts of strategy ranging from the national or grand strategic level down to military strategy.

Balancing Act 1: Domestic Policy and Foreign Policy. Balancing domestic and foreign policy is crucial. Each contributes to a nation's holistic security, be it the level of readiness and employment of the military or the state of transportation infrastructure. Accomplishing goals in each requires spending of political capital and taxpayer dollars. There are times when the exigencies of the world necessitate national leadership counterbalance, tipping the scales among a host of priorities. Counter balancing against the weight of events and associated pressures, if done poorly, can divide a nation.

There are multiple examples of U.S. Presidents balancing foreign policy decisions against domestic policy decisions. In his book *Running the World*, David Rothkopf explains how President Clinton established the National Economic Council (NEC) as an additional source of policy advice and implementation to coincide with the National Security Council (NSC). Indeed, President Clinton understood that national security decisions would have economic impacts on the domestic front, and economic tools are useful in execution of foreign policy.² Tariffs and economic sanctions, for example, impact domestic and foreign populations. A second example of the foreign and domestic balance occurred early in President Obama's administration when deciding on a troop surge in Afghanistan. Part of President Obama's decision calculus was an understanding that money spent on counterinsurgency in Afghanistan meant less money spent on domestic projects.³ Further, political capital spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was essentially a zero-sum equation when balanced against efforts to pass an Affordable Care Act. In the contemporary environment, President Biden is balancing decisions on policy towards China as well as the expanded Russian invasion of Ukraine against COVID-19 and domestic energy policies. Balancing decisions, resources, and even political capital is perhaps the most difficult of balancing acts at the highest levels of government.

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Balancing Act 2: Secret and Unclassified. In the United States, every administration tends to focus on leaks and other operational security violations. Operational and tactical level details of military plans, or the private communications between diplomats should remain classified or privileged. In a democracy, however, the government is responsible to the electorate. Those that choose to exercise their right to vote deserve to make informed decisions based on informed judgments on the performance and conduct of men and women who run for office. Further, citizens of a nation deserve to understand how the government spends its taxpayer dollars and how those that are elected or appointed represent them at home and abroad. Moreover, published unclassified strategies find audiences with allies, partners, competitors, and enemies alike. In recent years, the Department of Defense has released both classified and unclassified defense strategies. With the use of both forums to communicate to various audiences, the Department has found a balance between the two.

Often, secrecy is a necessary component of executing strategy. In his book, *Inside the Five-Sided Box*, former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter observed that controlling leaks is an obsession of senior leadership, as leaks can compel leaders make decisions at undesirable times.⁴ In the execution of strategy, President Nixon's approach to China in the early 1970s marks an event that required secrecy for success. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, was only able to achieve the historic détente because of his secret travels to conduct talks with Chairman Mao prior to Nixon's historic summit with Mao in 1971.⁵

An important part of balancing whether to release information or to keep it classified is a determination of risk. The risk of unclassified strategies is that they serve political rather than policy purposes. At the national level, since the *1986 Goldwater – Nichols Act* initiated the requirement for a National Security Strategy (NSS), the various NSS's over the years have morphed into a strictly unclassified document. The current belief is that the risk of publishing an unclassified strategy balances the needs of classification and an informed citizenry. Other subordinate strategic documents, such as the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and National Military Strategy, have unclassified primers but more detailed classified versions. The leaders publishing the particular documents believe that having two versions allows them to maintain the integrity of the classified requirements while balancing the need to inform the citizens of their government's intentions, the imperative of communicating with allies and partners, and messaging competitors and adversaries.

Efforts to balance, however, sometimes incur unforeseen risk. The unclassified nature of modern U.S. National Security Strategies, according to a report published by the U.S. Army War College, has led to the NSS becoming increasingly "divorced from meaningful strategic planning."⁶ Strategies with unlimited audiences then become strategies with unlimited ends, tipping the balance of the three legs of strategy (ends, ways, and means) towards an unbalanced, unsustainable state.

Balancing Act 3: Ends, Ways, Means. As much as strategists tend to deflect from using the ends, ways, means paradigm, it persists as an effective method to manage risk. The metaphor of strategy as a three-legged stool originated with Art Lykke. In his metaphor, each leg of the stool

represents ends, ways, and means respectively.⁷ Indeed, a strategy with lofty goals that does not include the right capabilities or methods to achieve its objectives is not a strategy; it's a fantasy.

A clear example of the ends, ways, means mismatch occurred in 1993 when the U.S. military deployed forces to the East Coast of Africa to deliver humanitarian assistance to the people of Somalia. After the initial deployment of forces, the mission expanded to include the objective of capturing the warlord Mohamed Farrah Adid. President Clinton, however, reduced the number of troops in theater and refused to provide the force with additional firepower and protection requested by field commanders all while not adjusting the desired policy goals. The failure to balance, as Hal Brands states in his book, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, proved a classic case of an ends – means mismatch resulting in the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces following the famous *Blackhawk Down* incident.⁸

It is more often the case that political ends change as operations progress, as new information or events unfold. Balancing, as the Somalia case suggests means revisiting the ends and matching the ways and means to those ends. In some instances, the effort to balance necessitates rapid response, like supplementing forces and providing more equipment to achieve an end. In other cases, the situation is inherently precarious and rapid response risks rapid escalation. Strategic balance rarely occurs from complacency. Strategists eschew Lykke's metaphor because they perceive the stool metaphor of balance as a state to be achieved. Rather, strategic balance is a dynamic to be perpetually and actively managed.

Balancing Act 4: DIME. Armies do not win or lose wars in and of themselves; nations do. In the execution of strategy at the national level, nations must apply all instruments of national power, diplomatic, informational, military, and economic to attain their objectives. Not every international dispute requires military intervention, nor can every crisis come to resolution through diplomacy. Strategy requires a careful balance of each element, often in tandem.

Perhaps a striking example of the DIME balance is the U.S. and ally strategy vis-à-vis the expanded Russian invasion of Ukraine in March of 2022. Diplomacy helped to bring a unified response from NATO, the EU, and other nations. Operating in tandem, the U.S. and allies were able to impose economic sanctions, exposure of Russian atrocities in the information environment, and to the provision of military assistance from high-tech weapons to the sharing of information and intelligence.

Balancing Act 5: Today and Tomorrow. A coherent strategy must balance the needs of the present versus the needs of the future. Policymakers continually decide what capabilities to invest in, and the investment often includes capabilities not ready for employment years and decades into the future. Failing to prepare militaries for the future portends a force that may not be ready to fight and win the nation's next war. Inconveniently, the world does not stop while the military builds new systems, fields new weapons, and generates new concepts. The military must fight current conflicts, respond to ongoing natural disasters, and deter today's adversaries. For the strategist, it's not enough to see the future as Colin Grey advocates, rather one must anticipate what the future holds and prioritize accordingly.⁹

Within the U.S. Military, the balance of today and tomorrow manifests as a tension between combatant commands and the services. While fighting two simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, United States military was confronted with stark choices. Continue to field current capabilities to fight the current wars or invest in future technology. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates expressed frustrations with the U.S. military for not focusing on the current wars, exemplified by the failure to field Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs).¹⁰ It took specific direction from Secretary Gates for the services to acquire capabilities for the current conflicts at the expense of future conflicts. Combatant Commands desire readiness for today, services prefer tomorrow's capabilities. It was not until the U.S. military left Iraq in 2011 that U.S. defense priorities shifted once again to preparing for future wars and it is worth noting that the services have already identified that vehicles other than MRAPs will be required in large scale combat operations against the pacing and acute threats perceived in the NDS.¹¹ Balancing the needs of the present against the needs of the future creates a strategist's dilemma. It is not always clear how to balance or what needs balancing, and it is a difficult choice to sacrifice the known requirements of the present for a hypothetical need in the unknown future. As former Yankee catcher Yogi Berra once observed, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."

In contemporary strategy, the Department of Defense is balancing threats of today and tomorrow in recently published strategic guidance. Identifying Russia as an acute threat and China as the pacing challenge serves as a method to balance the two.¹² Balancing in the temporal sense of preparedness sometimes means hedging on some investment in today and some investment for tomorrow, but always keeping an eye on both.

Balancing Act 6: Enemy #1, Enemy #2, Enemy #3. In his book *The Strategy Bridge*, the late Colin Gray wrote that "strategy is easier when you know who the enemy is."¹³ Beginning in 2017, U.S. strategic guidance identified five adversaries or problem sets. The problems include China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs). The range of challenges is a marked departure from the Cold War when America had one chief adversary, and it is markedly different from the immediate post-Cold War decade when America struggled to define its enemies. Also, America as a global power today is unique in that it faces enemies and adversaries on a global scale. Regardless, each of the adversaries requires a certain amount of attention, much of which shift over time.

In the design of America's strategy for fighting World War II, President Roosevelt, in consultation with his allies and American military leadership decided on a Europe first strategy. Keeping the Soviet Union in the war meant prioritizing the European Theater over the Pacific Theater of Operations despite the fact that it was the Japanese who provoked the United States into conflict.¹⁴ Roosevelt's balance by prioritizing gave unequal weight to Europe without focusing exclusively on Europe. The inequities wrought by prioritization meant scrupulously maintaining the initiative in both theaters. More recently, the United States had to balance fighting the war in Iraq with the war in Afghanistan throughout the Global War on Terror. Indeed, every capability applied to Iraq, from brigade combat teams (BCTs) to ISR platforms were unavailable to the Afghanistan theater.

Beginning under the Obama administration, the panoply of security strategies spoke to a desire to pivot attention and resources to the Pacific region. Indeed, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance directed a shift of priorities towards Asia and the Pacific region.¹⁵ However, the rise of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and the expansion of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 brought the focus of strategic leaders to other parts of the globe. In a world of multiple challenges, achieving strategic balance becomes more difficult, and the strategist tries to strike balance through prioritization.¹⁶ Prioritization, though, always depends on the perception of threat. For a force with global responsibilities, this threat perception can often appear reactive and indeterminant.

Balancing Act 7: Technology and People. The U.S. military seeks to maintain a decisive advantage in technology over adversaries. Indeed, advanced technologies provide unique advantages during conflict from the tactical through the strategic levels of war. More importantly, perhaps, is that military professionals believe having the best and the brightest people is an asymmetric advantage the U.S. holds over adversaries. Indeed, investments in recruiting, retention, and professional military education make the force more agile and adaptable compared to an adversary.

In her book, *The Inheritance*, Dr. Mara Karlin describes how Dr. Kathleen Hicks, the current Deputy Secretary of Defense, often remarks on the conflict between readiness, modernization, and end-strength.¹⁷ Indeed, Dr. Hicks refers to this as “the iron triangle of painful trade-offs.”¹⁸ Leaders will often get to choose two of the areas at the expense of the third. For example, raising the end-strength will lead to dollars applied to salaries, healthcare, and other personnel costs reducing the funds available for collective training or for investments in new technology. Attempts to apply funds to all three tend to lead to not having the right amount of any of them.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the future battlefield will contain numerous unmanned systems, from aerial drones to unmanned ground vehicles and undersea vessels. Investments in the unmanned systems will drive the military to rebalance force structure, including end strength to pursue and field the new and emerging technologies. As the nature of war is constant, and a human endeavor, Investments in technology can provide asymmetric advantage, but new technology requires human to conceive of the right operational concepts. On the scales of technology, concepts, and people, military leaders tend to bias towards people as they are the crucial connection between fielding, testing, conceptualizing, and employing.

Balancing Act 8: Mission Sets. The United States learned the hard lessons in the early years in Iraq and Afghanistan that a force cannot rapidly shift from major combat operations to the execution of counterinsurgency. Different types of mission sets require different individual and different collective training. Different mission sets demand different doctrine. And different mission sets require different material capabilities. The difficulty in this balance is that war is not limited to major combat operations. The follow-on phases of reconstruction, governance, and counterinsurgency are all a part of war.¹⁹ Moreover, employing capabilities to respond to natural disasters, non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs), or domestic operations pulls away from training and maintenance on capabilities required for major combat operations. When one rolls the iron dice, any side is a possibility.

From the onset of the global war on terrorism, the U.S. military did its best to balance the needs to fight and win in counterinsurgency environments in Iraq and Afghanistan against the need to maintain its ability to fight and win in major combat operations that might occur in other areas of the globe such as the Korean Peninsula. On the institutional side, the U.S. Army transitioned the focus of combat training centers (CTCs) such as the Joint Readiness Training Center and the National Training Center to counterinsurgency scenarios at the expense of major combat operations. Towards the end of 2003, the force ratio for counterinsurgency was unsustainable to force management planners. This resulted in the deployment of Second Infantry Division brigade combat teams from the Korean Peninsula to the Middle East.²⁰ This was an option that was nearly unthinkable prior to the start of the Iraq War. Mission sets are a zero-sum aspect of strategy.

Balancing Act 9: Deterrence, Compulsion. The aspects of this balancing act are the carrots and sticks one nation uses against another to prevent or force another country to behave in a particular way. Nations apply both deterrence and compulsion to achieve and maintain their interests; however, reliance on one may come at the expense of the other. One may use violence against an adversary to compel behavioral change but using force may expose a nation's weakness or reduce its military capability, reducing its ability to deter elsewhere or in the future. Conversely, an overreliance on deterrence without ever demonstrating the capability to compel can lead to an adversary acting without fear of consequence. In his book *Deterrence*, scholar and strategist Lawrence Freedman asserted that "there is an idea that occasional wars are necessary to reinforce deterrence."²¹

In 2003, the U.S. military demonstrated the ability to rapidly compel Iraq to change its government. However, deploying a significant amount of its land forces in a second war reduced the ability of the U.S. to deter other nations, such as Iran, from taking aggressive measures against the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East. With America's reduced ability to deter its adversaries, Iran sponsored elements of the Iraq insurgency, including supplying explosive formed projectiles (EFPs) to those fighting and killing American troops in Iraq.²² Balancing compulsion and deterrence then, is not always focused solely on the same actor. Employing forces against one adversary may mean creating opportunity or strategic advantage for a different adversary.

Balancing Act 10: Unilateralism and Multilateralism. Nations must choose unilateralism or multilateralism when pursuing their national interests. The United States is a part of multiple alliances, defense agreements, and partnerships across the globe. The larger the tent, the thinking goes, the more complicated and time-consuming decision making becomes. Indeed, as Dr. Nadia Schadlow writes in her book, *War and the Art of Governance*, one of the failures of Afghanistan was each nation pursuing its own priorities executed with an individual approach creating the conditions of competing priorities and overlapping resources.²³ Nations in multilateral agreements will have similar but not identical interests to pursue when responding to global or regional crisis. Regardless of the potential difficulties, it is generally better to fight with friends than without.

In *American Pendulum*, author and scholar Dr. Christopher Hemmer uses the George H.W. Bush administration as an example of a President who made concessions in foreign policy to sustain global support for his initiatives.²⁴ Most famously, President Bush made significant efforts to maintain the coalition to liberate Kuwait. The effort to maintain the coalition meant that he made several concessions to allies. For instance, the Gulf War did not include regime change, and allies demanded he keep Israel out of the war, even after Iraq launched Scud missiles in their direction. The necessity of allies and partners was reiterated in the Clinton administration whose strategies centered on the concept of engagement and enlargement which included engagement with allies, partners, and even competitors on security and economic issues.²⁵ Comparatively, the *2002 National Security Strategy* of the George W. Bush administration did not reject working with allies and partners, rather it expressed that the United States reserved the right to “act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country.”²⁶ The George W. Bush administration balanced unilateralism and multilateralism by explicitly stating specific rights under certain conditions.

Conclusion: Balancing it All. At its core, strategy is a balancing act. This is not an all-inclusive list of the balancing acts of strategy. Others to consider include the balance of security and economics, the balance of values and interests, and the balance of escalation and de-escalation to name a few. Indeed, strategy development is often a series of trade-offs; one strategic decision typical trades one weight on the scale for another weight on the opposing side of the scale. Further, understanding strategy requires more than a top-ten list of actions or axioms that will lead the strategist to the desired outcome. Understanding the balancing acts serves as a guide to the complexities and complications of developing and implementing strategy, highlighting the effects associated with each choice.

Notes

¹ Quote from *The Karate Kid*. Retrieved from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087538/quotes/qt0449980>

² David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 306-313.

³ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 251.

⁴ Ash Carter, *Inside the Five-Sided Box: Lessons from a Lifetime of Leadership in the Pentagon*. (Dutton Press: 2019). Kindle.

⁵ Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 78-79.

⁶ Nathan P. Frier, Charles R. Burnett, William J. Cain Jr., Christopher D. Compton, and Sean M. Hankard, *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone, A Report Sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center in Coordination with the Joint Staff J-39 / Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch*. (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 77.

⁷ Harry R. Yarger, “Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model,” In *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues*. 5th ed. Vol. II, ed. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, June 2012), 45-50.

⁸ Brands, 148.

⁹ Colin S Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 236.

¹⁰ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 20.

- ¹¹ Catherine Dale and Pat Towell, “In Brief: Assessing the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG).” Congressional Research Service, (Washington D.C.: 13 August 2013), 2.
- ¹² U.S. Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy*. (28 March 2022). Retrieved from <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>
- ¹³ Colin S Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 132.
- ¹⁴ Maurice Matloff, “Allied Strategy in Europe, 1939-1945.” In *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Ed. Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 681.
- ¹⁵ Dale and Towell, 2.
- ¹⁶ Prioritization is a key element of the U.S. Military’s concept of Global Integration. [CJCSI 3141.01F, Management and Review of Campaign and Contingency Plans](#) dated 31 January 2019 provides a detailed view of how prioritization fits into global planning.
- ¹⁷ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military After Two Decades of War*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2022), 111.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. Dr. Hicks specifically identifies these as ready for today (readiness), ready for tomorrow (investment), and sizing the force (structure).
- ¹⁹ Nadia Schadlow, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory*. (Georgetown University Press, 2017), 241.
- ²⁰ 2nd Infantry Division History. Retrieved from: <https://www.2id.korea.army.mil/About-Us/History/>
- ²¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence*. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 38.
- ²² Frank Sobchak, “The Tortured Path of Strategic Failure: U.S. Landpower in Iraq, 2003 – 2011,” in *Land-Power in the Long War: Projecting the Force After 9/11*. ed. Jason W. Warren. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 97.
- ²³ Schadlow, 229.
- ²⁴ Christopher Hemmer, *American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015.), 113.
- ²⁵ Rothkopf, 352.
- ²⁶ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington D.C.: September 2002), 6.