Strategy Misunderstood: 
The ‘Broader Security’ Research Tradition and Strategic Studies

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Draft – Do not quote or cite without permission – Comments welcome
Abstract: Since the beginning of the 1990s, the “broader security” research tradition has vigorously contested the contribution of strategy to the study of international security and, more generally, of international relations. Specifically, the “broadeners” have offered five fundamental arguments for putting into question the contribution of strategic thought, understood as the leading ideas of military and civilian strategists about the threat and uses of force to fulfill the ends of policy. First, they held that strategic studies, as a creation of the Cold War, have been, and remain, crippled by their theoretically and empirically narrow focus. Second, for strategic thought the only referent object is allegedly the state, making it irrelevant for the wider range of issues shaped by non-state actors. Third, strategic thought is presumed to be ‘rationalist.’ Fourth, the “broadeners” also see strategy as inherently ‘materialist’. Fifth, strategic thought is considered by the “broader security” research program as mostly practical in its outlook and results and therefore unable to make any significant theoretical contributions. The goal of this paper is to refute the “broader security” critique of strategic thought. I argue that the “broadeners’” view of strategic thought is wrong and their underlying vision of strategy unwarranted. By conflating strategic thought with realism and rational choice theory, the “broadeners” misunderstand and misrepresent its core characteristics and its logics, missing its distinctive theoretical and empirical contribution, including to the issues of particular interest to them. The study of security and of international relations is therefore unduly and unnecessarily impoverished.

Keywords: Clausewitz (Carl von), Constructivism, International Relations Theory, International Security, Marxism, Materialism, Rationalism, Realism, Schelling (Thomas C.), Security, Strategy.
Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the advocates of the widening and deepening of the meaning of security have developed a wide ranging criticism of strategic thought, succinctly understood as the leading ideas of military and civilian strategists about the threat and uses of force to fulfill the ends of policy. Specifically, the “broadeners” have offered five fundamental arguments for putting into question the contribution of strategic thought to the study of security. First, they held that strategic studies, as a creation of the Cold War, are crippled by their theoretically and empirically narrow focus. Second, for strategic thought the only referent object is allegedly the state, making it irrelevant for a wider range of issues involving, or even shaped by, non-state actors. Third, the “broadeners” claim that strategic thought is, at heart, ‘rationalist’. Fourth, they also argue that strategic studies are inescapably ‘materialist.’ Fifth, strategic thought is considered by the “broader security” research program as mostly practical in its outlook and results and therefore deprived of any critical dimension. It is inherently conservative in the sense that it can only justify and reinforce the existing order.

This “broader security” view of strategic studies has become mainstream, particularly in Europe, and has remained virtually unchallenged theoretically and empirically. Yet, this conception is built on weak theoretical foundations and insufficient evidence. The goal of this article is to refute the “broader security” research program’s critique of strategic thought. I


2. It is important to note that I do not engage here in the debate of the early 1990s on whether, and to what extent, the study of international security should be broadened and deepened. I focus exclusively on the conception of strategic thought embedded in the work of “broader security” scholars – those who seek to widen and deepen the meaning of security – and on the limits of their critical assessment of strategy. One can perfectly support the widening and deepening of security and agree with my rebutal of the “broader security” view of strategy.

review the conception of strategy which lies at the heart of the “broader security” research tradition and conclude that it seriously misrepresents key characteristics of strategy. “Broadeners” have overlooked the fact that the Cold War era was a period of major broadening, not narrowing, of strategy. By artificially focusing on “Cold War strategic studies”, the “broader security” research program misrepresents the relation between strategy and the state. While “broader security” scholars correctly note the significance of reason in strategic thought, they ignore its multiple epistemological traditions, notably those who are not rationalists. The advocates of the “broadening” of security fail to acknowledge that some fundamental strands of strategic thought are not materialists, but idealists.

To rebut the core challenges of the “broader security” critics, I revisit and put to the task the insights of two prominent strategic thinkers, Carl von Clausewitz and Thomas Schelling, as the embodiment of core dimensions of strategic thought. I do so for four reasons. First, it is important to specify the reference point that I use to assess the “broader security” conception of strategy. If I do not, “broader security” advocates could rightfully claim that my rebuttal, loosely based on vague reference to multiple traditions of thinking, would remain unconvincing: it is always possible to find an ad hoc collection of heterogeneous thinkers and arguments to rebut this or that claim taken in isolation. Instead, by focusing mostly on Clausewitz’s and Schelling’s ideas, I anchor the discussion and facilitate a more pointed examination. Second, Clausewitz and Schelling are both widely considered as central strategic thinkers by International Relations theorists not only by students of war. If I had selected comparatively less well-known figures such as Sun Bin, Charles Ardant du Picq or Admiral J. C. Willies, “broader security” scholars could dismiss my claims as unrepresentative of the commonly accepted ways in which strategy is understood in IR. Three, because they are so central, Clausewitz and Schelling should be an easy
test for the “broader security” claims about strategy. If these “broader security” claims contradict core aspects of the work of Carl von Clausewitz and Thomas Schelling, they are likely to be flawed and unable to capture what strategy is all about. Fourth, while Clausewitz and Schelling cannot represent the entire range of existing strategic traditions, they belong to two very different historical and strategic contexts. In particular, they exemplify the differences between strategy in the pre-nuclear and the nuclear world. If I had selected only pre-1945 strategic thinkers, such as Sun Tzu, Alfred Mahan or Giulio Douhet, “broadeners” could rightfully complain that I stack the deck against them since they mostly focus on the nuclear age.

It is important to address extensively the conception of strategic thought underlying the “broader security” critique for one central reason. This view of strategy has consequences not only for the international security sub-field but for the study of international politics more broadly. If accepted, this critique, and the underlying conception of strategic thought that it reflects, would lead to, or reinforce, an inescapable conclusion: IR scholars (as opposed to those who study military technology or war, for example) have little to gain from a greater familiarity with strategic thought and can safely neglect it. It is best confined to a small band of highly specialized, technical, studies which, irrespective of their own merit, will remain relegated to the margins of IR. This would be unfortunate as strategic thought has become increasingly marginal in International Relations (IR) theorizing. Contrary to the 1950s and 1960s, IR theorists tend to make only the most limited use of strategic thought and often ignore pre-nuclear ideas and experiences, save for the isolated and conventional reference to Clausewitz. There is nothing new about my central claim that the relations between strategic thought and IR theory are, and

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4. The most prominent discussions of IR theorizing and its evolution often ignore the contribution of strategic thought as such and, when they do not, they address it as a separate subfield: Katzenstein, Keohane, Krasner, eds. 1999; Elman, Elman, eds. 2003; Reuss-Smit, Snidal, eds 2008; Wight, Hansen, Dunne, eds. 2013. In turn, the surveys and discussions of strategic thought rarely explore the relations with IR theorizing: Betts 1997, 2000; Ayson 2008.
should be, tighter. However, it has not been sufficiently systematized and, over time, has been partially lost. My argument is a plea for the intellectual reacquisition of, and critical reengagement with, the strategic thought heritage of scholars of international politics. Strategic thinking, with global roots and embedded in a long history, is one of the earliest form of knowledge about, and conceptualization of, international relations. It should become again a crucial component of IR theorizing.

In the first section, I provide a working definition of strategy and strategic thought, and specify the character of strategic knowledge. I also define the “broader security” research tradition. In the second, I examine and rebut in turn each of the main charge raised by the “broadeners” to strategic thought.

I / “Broader Security” and Strategy: Definitions

§ 1. Strategic Thought and International Relations Theory

While the use of the word ‘strategy’ is widespread its meaning is often confused. In most Western languages, the term “strategy” comes from the Greek stratēgos, made of stratos (army) and agein (to conduct, to push ahead). It originally meant the conduct of an army during a campaign and referred to the science and the art of the general (in Athens, the “strategos” was the head of the army). For IR scholars, strategy commonly presents itself as an intricate body of information, knowledge and concepts, partially universal and trans-historical and partially contextual (historically and culturally), accumulated over time and notably crystallized in the


discourses of strategic thinkers and in the acts of strategists. A key underlying assumption here is not so much rationality (a point to which I will return below) but agency. Strategy is about purposeful actors, their actions (not only their behavior or their experiences) and their consequences. By “strategic thought”, I mean two related, but distinct, modes of thinking. First, strategic thought refers to thinking in action, i.e. the thinking of practitioners engaged in a current action or in the conception and preparation of future actions (‘strategists’). It is important to include that mode of thinking because strategic thought is not always formally codified, nor does it always take the form of a book, for example. It can be embedded in plans, dispatches and orders. For example, historian Geoffrey Parker reconstituted Philip II of Spain’s strategy from the royal ‘billetes’ (memoranda), the king’s policy statements as well as the records of various government institutions.

Second, strategic thought also refers to thinking about action, meaning the explicit effort to constitute knowledge about strategy, to theorize it (‘strategic thinkers’). Conflictual events, past, present and future, hence become the objects of knowledge and explanation not of immediate action. Some of these strategic thinkers are well-known, such as Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, Alfred Thayer Mahan or Giulio Douhet, but many others while comparatively less well known are nevertheless significant and potentially useful to IR theorists, such as Nguyen Trai, Bernardino de Mendóza, Johann Jacob August Ruehle von Lilienstern, René Daveluy or

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J.C. Wyllie. While I focus here mostly on the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz and Thomas Schelling, it is important to note that strategic thought is remarkably diverse historically, culturally and theoretically.

Long before nuclear deterrence theory became a central element of the rapidly growing field of IR in the 1960s, strategy was one of the origins of theorizing in, and about, IR (diplomacy and law, for example, are others). A specific strategic tradition of international thought originally emerged as an international policy practice and a reflection by practitioners on their instrumental practices. The conflictual coexistence of interacting socio-political units in the international system gives strategy an essential role. It is notably (but not uniquely) through the specific practices and the idiom of strategy that political units strive to influence each other and to communicate among themselves. With a focus on the role of force, and constraint more generally, to advance collective objectives, it helps to explore war and peace, as well as the vast range of modes of action that use force (and other constraining means, such as sanctions) for policy ends without crossing the threshold of war. These phenomena are intrinsically significant and shaped the creation and the subsequent evolution of IR as a discipline.

When it is related to the study of international relations, strategic thought is often portrayed as a “branch”, a “sub-field” or a “partial theory.” While this way to locate strategic thought in the study of international relations might be useful for some purpose, it obfuscates another conception of strategy that puts it, not on the fringe, but at the heart of IR theorizing. In that view, strategic theory offers a distinctive conception of the very nature of international

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13. It is important to acknowledge that a number of scholars deny any and all usefulness to such a connection between IR and strategy. See in particular: Smith 2001 as well as the bargaining theory of war research tradition which does not grant to international relations any specificity compared to other types of social relations.
politics and, more specifically, a theory of political action in international relations. Thucydides, with his narrative of the Peloponnesian War focused on the systematic relationships between plans and outcomes and the constant interaction between calculation and chance, or the French general and strategic theorist André Beaufre, for example, approached the relation between strategy and international relations in this fashion. Raymond Aron’s international relations theory – that one could call ‘strategic realism’ – is one of the foremost example of this deep conceptual relation between strategy and IR theorizing. Aron explained that he found in Clausewitz’s On War “the secret of the theoretical elaboration of a domain of action”, hence the strategic underpinning of his theory of international relations.

§ 2. The “Broader Security” Research Tradition

Following philosopher of science Larry Laudan, by “broader security” research tradition I mean a set of enduring epistemological commitments that shape the scope and content of research in the security field. Specifically, the “broader security” research tradition consists of: “(1) a set of beliefs about what sorts of entities and processes make up the domain of inquiry; and (2) a set of epistemic and methodological norms about how the domain is to be investigated, how theories are to be tested, how data are to be collected, and the like” (Laudan 1996, p. 83). By "broadeners" or "broader security" advocates, I mean those who argue “in favour of deepening the referent object beyond the state, widening the concept of security to include other sectors than the military, giving equal emphasis to domestic and trans-border threats, and allowing for a transformation of the Realist, conflictual logic of international security” (Buzan,


Hansen, 2009, 188). The “broader security” advocates usually see themselves as belonging to various approaches, theoretical traditions or schools of thought notably conventional constructivism, critical constructivism, human security, post-colonialism, critical security studies, the Copenhagen school, poststructuralism and feminism. To be sure, the “broader security” research tradition is made of diverse approaches and sub-groups often in disagreement with each other on a variety of issues. However, the broadeners are united by their challenge to what they see as “military state centrism” (Buzan and Hansen, 2009, p. 188). Their underlying conception of strategy is a key unifier and what helps the research tradition to coalesce.

II / Strategic Thought and the “Broader Security” Research Tradition

The “broadeners” have offered five fundamental arguments for putting into question the contribution of strategic thought to the study of security. First, they held that strategic studies, as a creation of the Cold War, are crippled by their theoretically and empirically narrow focus. Second, for strategic thought the only referent object is allegedly the state, making it irrelevant for a wider range of issues involving, or even shaped by, non-state actors. Third, the “broadeners” claim that strategic thought is, at heart, ‘rationalist’. Fourth, they also argue that strategic studies are inescapably ‘materialist.’ Fifth, strategic thought is considered by the “broader security” research program as mostly practical in its outlook and results and therefore deprived of any critical dimension. It is inherently conservative in the sense that it can only justify and reinforce the existing order. Below, I examine and rebut each of these arguments.
§ 1. Cold War Narrowing?

One of the most common «broader security» critique is to present the Cold War as the founding moment of «strategic studies» and to claim that it implied a drastic narrowing of its scope and of its understanding of security, “down to an obsessive concentration on the superpower military rivalry” (Buzan, Hansen, 2009, p. 105). This allegedly “narrow” focus then triggered a backlash notably after the end of the Cold War, particularly in Europe, leading to the widening and deepening of security and a shift away from “strategic” studies (concerned above all with the use of force, threats, weaponry, military organizations and so on) and toward “security” studies (concerned with economics, environment, identity, human security, food, gender, etc.). Since strategy is confined to a limited set of issues, fundamentally related to the Cold War period, it is allegedly of decreasing relevance in the study of international security and even less useful to analyze international relations as a whole.

This conventional wisdom does not hold up to careful scrutiny: it is based on a truncated history of strategic thought and conveys a mistaken view of its evolution throughout the Cold War. First, neither strategy, nor strategic thought, and not even the role of civilians in the analysis of war and strategy originated during the Cold War. Even if one restricts the focus to the narrower notion of “strategic studies” and “security studies” as a field of academic study, in the United States their roots go back to the 1930s.\(^\text{16}\) The Cold War was not the starting point of strategic thought but a critical juncture that pushed strategic practices and conceptions in new directions. The strategic ideas developed during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States,
whatever their significance and their influence, should not be confused with strategic thought as a whole.\textsuperscript{17}

Most importantly, instead of narrowing down during the Cold War, strategic thought went through a period of considerable expansion. It is precisely that remarkable expansion, although not completely unprecedented, that facilitated its productive interactions with IR theory. With the advent of nuclear weapons, strategy progressively became \textit{broader}, not narrower, both from a conceptual and from a practical standpoint. Until the end of WWII, strategists and strategic thinkers usually considered that the meaning and the finality of armed violence was embedded within wartime action. Between politics and tactics, strategy was mostly about the conduct of military operations on a particular theater of war. Generals and their staffs sought to maneuver, encircle and envelop their adversary. Carl von Clausewitz’s definition of strategy belongs to that conception: “Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war. The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose. In other words, he will draft the plan of the war, and the aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it: he will, in fact, shape the individual campaigns and, within these, decide on the individual engagements.”\textsuperscript{18} Strategy is what plans the different combats and connects them to each other so that they can contribute to attain the object, the main finality, of the war. This definition prevailed from the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century until World War II. Strategy, mainly understood in its specific military meaning of conduct of operations during declared and open hostilities, was embedded into war. To be sure,

\textsuperscript{17} Gray 2006 [1977]. Buzan and Hansen briefly acknowledge the existence of an « antecedent literature » and mention Clausewitz, Mahan, Richardson and Haushofer, but they do not engage in a systematic analysis of its distinctive contribution to the study of international security, let alone international politics. Buzan, Hansen 2009, p. 1.

the use of armed forces in peacetime, or in time of crisis, as well as the external actions related to colonial expansion, for example, all existed and were significant but they were usually not conceptualized in strategic terms (with some important exceptions like Mahan and Corbett). In short, “[…] one thought strategically only in the declared state of war.”

Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, especially with the end of the U.S. monopoly on nuclear weapons and the spread of ballistic missiles, this understanding of strategy started to change. The struggle between the superpowers, nuclear strategies and the different crises and wars that were an important part of this bipolar rivalry took center stage. War became embedded into strategy, a considerably enlarged concept. Strategic thought could not be confined to the specific mode of war anymore, since it came to incorporate nuclear deterrence that sought to make war impossible. Far from being ‘narrow’, the understanding of strategy developed by André Beaufre, Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling, for example, (as well as the practitioners, thinkers and analysts who for many of them were not soldiers but engineers, economists or mathematicians) took an extensive meaning. Broader and more abstract, André Beaufre’s definition, emphasizes the clash of two opposing will, more than the political dimension or the interplay of material factors, like the art of using weapons (tactics) or the science of supply and movement (logistics). Strategy is then understood as: “the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute.” Finally, Lucien Poirier’s definition is useful to identify the very characteristics of this “the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills.” Strategy is “[…] the set of

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mental and physical operations required to calculate, prepare and conduct any finalized collective action, conceived and developed in a conflictual environment.”

This last definition is broader than the ones centered on the pure uses (and non uses) of military power, yet remains clearly focused on conflictual situations. It incorporated the vast range of virtual modes of employment of the capacity of action and reactions of weapons designed to influence the will of political and military actors in peace time as well as in times of crisis. As Robert Art notes: "The peaceful use of military power is akin to a gravitational field among large objects in space: it affects all motion that takes place, but it produces its effects imperceptibly. Most of the time the effect of military power looks more like gravity than a flood; therefore, the usefulness of military power should not be equated simply with its physical use.”

Deterrence, compellence and arms control, the three strategic modes emblematic of the Cold War, conceived force and its (non) uses in a much broader way than the earlier conceptions centered on the quest for the decisive battle.

In sum, far from being a time of narrowing down, the Cold War was a period of striking expansion for strategic thought. In addition to the focus on war, an entire body of knowledge about constraining means and action – military and otherwise -- in non-war settings was added. This included deterrence (particularly, but not uniquely, nuclear) but also indirect strategies, strategies of means based on the invention and deployment of weapon-systems, declaratory strategies connected to theories and doctrines of potential force employment, indirect supports to

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25. Art 1999, p. 3.

ally, crises maneuvers or coercive diplomacy.\textsuperscript{27} All the modes of action that use force (and not only military force) as a mean of political action without crossing the threshold of war were included into strategy. Contrary to the conventional “broader security” critique, these evolutions were the opposite of narrow. Instead, an extensive concept of strategy was amplified during the Cold War, even though it was already embedded notably in naval strategy and had been systematized with the notion of “grand strategy” during the last years of WWI and the 1920s and 1930s. This extensive understanding of strategy and strategic thought incorporated the entire range of conflictual states in which the possibility of armed violence still played a role but not necessarily warfare.

\textit{§ 2. Rationalist?}

Strategic thought is based on rationalist assumptions: this is what the “broader security” critics present as its second cardinal sin.\textsuperscript{28} For these critics, ‘rationalism’ usually refers to the substantive (or objective) conception of rationality, based on the assumption that every actor has a utility function that “induces a consistent ordering among all alternative choices that the actor faces, and, indeed, that he or she always chooses the alternative with the highest utility.”\textsuperscript{29} The premise of rational choice theory is that it is useful to assume political actors have exogenously defined preferences and are instrumentally rational. To be sure, one of the core assumptions of strategic thought and action is indeed that political and military actors intend to act rationally or,

\textsuperscript{27} Glaser.

\textsuperscript{28} Buzan, Hansen 2009, p. 73, 77, 89, 187.

\textsuperscript{29} Simon 1985, p. 296.
more accurately, reasonably, meaning thoughtfully and appropriately. They use reason in their assessments, decisions, actions and discourses.

However, this conception of rationality does not originate in, and is distinct from, the very specific assumptions of rational choice theory. It predates nuclear deterrence and rational choice theory, often presented as their most characteristics manifestations. Strategic rationality took historically many different forms and was, for example, at the heart of Thucydides’ analysis of the Peloponnesian war and a significant part of the tradition of reason of state.\textsuperscript{30} It was also deeply intertwined with early engineering and the techniques of fortifications and armaments in ancient Greece, in Rome as well as throughout the Middle-Ages and, most significantly, the Renaissance era and then the 17th century.\textsuperscript{31} It is within the expansion of reason during the Enlightenment period that the notion of strategy was reinvented. As Paul Joly de Maizeroy put it, waging war means « […] to ponder, to combine ideas, to anticipate, to reason profoundly, to use means […]».\textsuperscript{32} And he added: « to form its projects, (strategy) combines time, places, means, the various interests and puts into consideration all the things that belong to dialectic, meaning the most exalted (sublime) faculty of the mind, of reasoning.»\textsuperscript{33} Strategy implies the use of intelligence and not merely the mechanical application of rules.

Strategic rationality implies that the actors seek to assess comparatively their expected gain – the stakes, their chances to get them and their possibility to do so – and the risks that they face, i.e. the probability to pay the cost of operations designed to acquire or keep the stakes

\textsuperscript{30} Romilly 2012 (1956); Thuau 2000 [1966].
\textsuperscript{31} Vauban 2007; Vérin 1993; Bousquet 2009.
\textsuperscript{32} Joly de Maizeroy, 1777, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{33} Joly de Maizeroy, 1777, p. XXXV.
Despite the adversary.\textsuperscript{34} "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of its object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in \textit{magnitude} but also in \textit{duration}."\textsuperscript{35} In strategic action, rationality does not only originate in politics: two types of rationality are mainly at play.\textsuperscript{36} The first is located at the nexus between politics and military strategy. It implies the definition of the relations between political ends and military means and goals. The second, related to military organizations and the uses of force, is located at the nexus between the objectives of military operations (at the strategic, operational and tactical levels) and their required ways and means.

Does this strategic rationality imply "rationalism"? To be sure, numerous international phenomena, notably deterrence and war, are examined from the perspective of the bargaining theory of war, grounded in rational choice theory.\textsuperscript{37} During the 1950s and 1960s, mainly in the United States, strategic thought morphed into an effort to develop a theory of strategy, rooted in game theory.\textsuperscript{38} This particular perspective is ‘rationalist’ but ‘rationalist strategic thinking’ is not strategic thought as a whole. A close examination shows that the relationship between rationality and strategic thinking is both richer and more subtle than assumed by the conventional "new security" critique.\textsuperscript{39} The importance of reason does not imply "rationalism" or a thick rationality

\textsuperscript{34} Vendryès, 1997 [1952]; Schelling, 1966; Poirier, 1997, p. 72-73.

\textsuperscript{35} Clausewitz, 1976 [1832-1834], p. 92.

\textsuperscript{36} Poirier, 1996a [1988], p. 92.


\textsuperscript{38} Quade 1964.

\textsuperscript{39} Like some insights about international politics embedded in the seminal realist work were lost in the 1960s in the field’s attempt to become more « scientific » during the behavioral revolution, a number of insights about strategy were lost as well in the same process. Guilhot 2011.
What the “broader security” research tradition overlooks is that there is not just one intellectual tradition in strategic thought but several. Strategic thinking took historically, and continues to take, a variety of forms. Azar Gat has showed that one tradition of military and strategic thought, rooted in the Enlightenment has a close affinity to the scientific project and seek to create a universal theory of war. It has descendants in the social sciences since 1945. Yet, another tradition, connected to Romanticism, stresses the gap between sciences and humanities and the enduring influence of history and psychology making strategy impossible to reduce to abstract formulas (Gat 2001, 255-256, 269-272. See also on rationality in strategic thought: Michael Howard, “Jomini and the Classical Tradition in Military Thought” in Studies in War and Peace; Allison, Zelikow, Essence of Decision).

In fact, one finds among strategists and strategic thinkers vigorous criticisms of rationalism and clear-headed assessments of the limits of strategic reason. At the heart of the Enlightenment, for example, the Field Marshal and writer Prince de Ligne noted: “the death of an Aide-de-Camp, a fall from one’s horse, one word for another, above all a speech defect in one of the languages that speak our Army, put into question at once the momentum of genius and the calculations of the mind.”

Carl von Clausewitz was vehemently opposed to the pseudo-rationalists of his age, like Heinrich von Bülow, who thought that they could reduce strategy to trigonometric calculations. His theory of war systematizes the role and the limits of reason in strategy. War, he argued, is not only made of rational assessments: emotions interact with the calculations and probabilities of military art as well as the rational finality that shape action.

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41. Prince de Ligne, 1914 [1783], p. 36.
Moreover, “friction” is a core component of his conceptual system to designate the imponderable elements, like the imperfection of knowledge, the uncertainty vis-à-vis one’s own army and the army of the enemy, spatial and temporal inaccuracies, or the resistances due to the characteristics of organizations, that insert themselves between the reasonable calculations of the political and military actors and their, often problematic, implementation.\footnote{Clausewitz, 1976 [1832-1834], p. 69; Beyerchen, 1992-93.}

Thomas Schelling, one of the most prominent Cold War era strategic thinkers is commonly considered as a proponent of a thick version of ‘rationalism.’ Ned Lebow, for example, considers that Schelling’s writings “illustrate the intellectual and policy dangers of ignoring politics, culture and morality in search of deductive, rational understanding.” (Lebow). His long-standing goal, it is claimed, is to develop a parsimonious and universal theory of bargaining based on 20\textsuperscript{th} century Western microeconomics (Lebow). In fact, Thomas Schelling is much more prudent and subtle in that regard, and never confused reflective and rational conduct of war.\footnote{Schelling, 1986 [1960], p. 162-167; 1966, p. vii, 180.} First, it is important to realize that the work of Thomas Schelling was vigorously criticized by prominent economists and specialists of game theory for not using, or not properly using, game theory. Economist Martin Shubik, for example, noted about \textit{Strategy of Conflict}: « It is my opinion that this book would have been a much stronger contribution had most of the references to game theory been deleted. Although the formal structure of that topic could have been of considerable assistance to the type of analysis presented by Schelling, there is little evidence that it has been used. » (Journal of Political Economy vol 69, 5, October 1961). Shubik later confirmed his harsh assessment: “I was deeply opposed to [\textit{Strategy of Conflict}] at the time because it was (and still is) loaded with basic errors and a misunderstanding of elementary game
theory. But what I failed to appreciate at that time was that it was the work of a social scientist willing to take the mindset of game theory seriously but not willing to accept the rules of the game as given.” Another prominent game theorist, John Harsanyi was equally critical of Schelling (Harsanyi, JC, 1961, «On the rationality postulates underlying the theory of cooperative games, JCR 5). Most importantly, Thomas Schelling himself constantly distanced himself from the ‘rationalist’ conceptions. He repeatedly noted that he thought the contribution of game theory had been very limited: “I believe that rudimentary game theory has been to some security theorists a help in formulating ideas; it has provided some useful terminology; but I do not believe that any theoretical contributions to security studies has been the least dependent on “game theory.””

In striking contrast with the upbeat assessment of the contribution of game theory by David Lake and Jeffrey Frieden, for example, Thomas Schelling’s view has remained cautious and modest. He explains: “The fact is that for most American strategists, the influence of game theory has been modest and indirect” (quoted in Robert Ayson, Thomas Schelling and the Nuclear Age, p. 130).

As Robert Ayson correctly argues, instead of being a “rationalist”, Schelling as a ‘non-orthodox game theorist’ often emphasized the non-formal elements of games (Schelling 1958, pp. 256-257, Strategy of Conflict). Schelling explains: “Some essential part of the study of mixed-motive games is necessarily empirical. This is not to say just that it is an empirical question how people do actually perform in mixed- motives games, especially games too complicated for intellectual mastery. It is a stronger statement: that the principles relevant to successful play, the strategic principles, the propositions of a normative theory, cannot be derived by purely analytical means from a priori considerations.” (Schelling, The Strategy of

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Moreover, he explores in creative and stimulating ways the strategic uses of non-rational attitudes and behavior and their effects.45

Besides the specific characteristics of Thomas Schelling’s writings, even during the Cold War, the influence of rationalism in general and of game theory in particularly in strategic thought is exaggerated by the “broader security” research tradition. The most thorough historical empirical investigations of RAND from the late 1940s until the 1960s provide a much more nuanced picture (Digby 1990, Hounshell 1998, Mirowski 2002, Leonard 2010, Jardini 2013). First, the intellectual milieu at RAND remained diverse and fluid: no single discipline gained an upper hand, certainly not economics (Mirowski 2002). Some engineers, physicists and mathematicians shared a ‘rationalist’ epistemology but RAND also incorporated psychologists or political sociologists, like Hans Speier, who had an in-depth engagement with social theories, ranging from Hegel and Marx to Spengler and Mannheim, would develop insightful history of ideas and would also discuss ‘court and tavern in the German baroque novel’ (Speier 1952, 1969). Moreover, the “broadeners” miss the fact that the reactions to game theory at RAND were quite skeptical as a number of researchers contested von Neumann's conception of the solution of a game while many others concluded that, contrary to their initial expectations, the contribution of game theoretical insights to military strategy and tactics proved much more limited. As Mirowski argues: “(...) few analysts at RAND were persuaded that game theory was at all ideally suited to military applications; and for their own part, the military officers were distinctly reserved in their enthusiasm.” (Mirowski 2002) Charles J. Hitch, the Head of RAND’s Economics Division from 1948 until 1961 noted: "For our purposes, game theory has been quite disappointing" (quoted in Poundstone, 1992, p.168). One of the most well-known physicists

involved in defense policy in the United Kingdom, Patrick M. S. Blackett complained that: "the theory of games has been almost wholly detrimental" (P. M. S. Blackett, “Critique of Some Contemporary Defence Thinking,” *Encounter* 16 (4) (April 1961), p. 16; Solly Zuckerman, “Judgement and Control in Modern Warfare,” *FA* 40 (2) January 1960, pp. 209-12). Even Albert Wohlstetter, one of the important defender and users of game theory admitted its key limits: "I would say that game theory has been useful in some conceptual studies, of trivial use in the empirical analysis of tactics and, as a theory, hardly used at all in the complex empirical work on strategic alternatives" (quoted in Shubik, 1964, p.218). In short, the “broader security” research tradition mistakenly conflates strategic studies and rationalism when, even at the height of the Cold War at RAND, the connection was much more limited and contested.

It is precisely because of this awareness of the limits of rationality that, in addition, to logical and algorithmic models, like the equations of Lanchester or Richardson, or operational research, the history of conflicts, case studies and the genealogy of strategic thought remain fundamental components of strategic studies and their methods.\(^\text{46}\) Instead of being deductive, strategic thought often proceeded through historical inference, scrutinizing experience to distil some underlying logic capable of explain military and political outcomes. There are also different ways to approach theoretically and to study empirically strategic rationality.\(^\text{47}\) Some analyses of strategic conceptions and actions are inspired by economic models of rationality, notably expected utility theory. Others, closer to the actual behavior of strategists, are inspired by Herbert Simon’s model of bounded rationality.\(^\text{48}\) Strategic thinkers such as Edward Luttwak

\(^{46}\) Quade, 1967 [1964].


\(^{48}\) Vennesson, 2000.
recognize that the systematic quest for the most effective action, apparently ‘rational’, is often not strategically reasonable since it is too predictable and can therefore be easily anticipated, neutralized or bypassed.\textsuperscript{49} In sum, while reason is embedded in strategic thought, strategists and strategic thinkers cannot ignore that: “fortune never loses its rights, and despite the good disposition that depends on the general, there is always uncertainty entering in the event.”\textsuperscript{50}

\section*{§ 3. Materialist?}

The third «broader security» critique of strategic thought is its alleged ‘materialism’ meaning that it accepts only the material as reality and, by extension, that human and social behavior is motivated by material conditions (rather than ideas and discourses constituting identities and interests).\textsuperscript{51} This materialism is rooted in part in the importance of technology and armaments in modern warfare, and accentuated by nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{52} Quite apart from the fact that the idealism/materialism dichotomy is deeply problematic and might make no sense, this view is mistaken. While technology and armaments are a significant aspect of strategic thought in general, and a crucial part of specific strategic theories, strategic thought as a whole is not inherently ‘materialist’.\textsuperscript{53} Strategic thinkers frequently include at the heart of their conceptual systems non-material factors.

Clausewitz is one of the most well-known examples of such a conceptual integration of non-material elements. Political theorist John Pocock famously called Carl von Clausewitz’s


\textsuperscript{50} Joly de Mayzeroy, 1777, p. xxxiv.


\textsuperscript{52} Vérin, Gat, Bousquet, Colin S. Gray; Henrotin, 2008.

\textsuperscript{53} John Fuller, Camille Rougeron, Martin Van Creveld.
work “(…) a great idealist theory of war (…)”.$^{54}$ Although it pre-existed, Clausewitz formally introduced in strategic theory the notion of morale (of an army), or moral strengths. The warlike virtue of the army, the popular enthusiasm and the genius of the war leader are the three moral potential of his theory.$^{55}$ He explained that *On War* was fundamentally about both material and non-material factors: “Hence most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed in equal parts of physical and of moral causes and effects” (*On War*, pp. 184-185). This is because the conduct of war is shaped by both: “Success in attack results from the availability of superior strength, including of course both physical and moral” (*On War*, p. 528). Clausewitz also notes: “When we speak of destroying the enemy’s forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered. The two interact throughout: they are inseparable.” (*On War*, Book I, chapter 2, p. 97) He also acknowledged that in the experience of combat: “Physical casualties are not the only losses incurred by both sides in the course of the engagement: their moral strength is also shaken, broken and ruined” (*On War*, Book IV, Chap. 4, p. 231).$^{56}$ Clausewitz was critical of the practitioners and analysts who seek to base their analysis on material factors alone (p. 184). “The effects of physical and psychological factors form an organic whole which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes” (p. 184; *On War*, Chap 3 “Moral Factors”, pp. 184-185).

Thomas Schelling as an economist might have been expected to privilege material capabilities in his strategic analysis, particularly in the context of the Cold War in which military technology played a central role. For example, in *Arms and Influence* he observes that “with

$^{54}$ Pocock 1975, 536.


$^{56}$ “Every engagement is a bloody and destructive test of physical and moral strength.” (p. 231)
enough military force a country may not need to bargain.” However, his core argument is that war is a contest of wills and the outcomes of the strategic interaction do not necessarily reflect the balance of material capabilities. For Schelling, one of the most important factors shaping the outcomes is the willingness to suffer. Air power and nuclear weapons allow states to envision war no longer as a contest of strength but as a contest of nerve and risk-taking, of pain and endurance. For purposes of bargaining, the ability to absorb pain counts just as much as the capability to inflict it. Schelling noted that the focus should be on the: “(…) psychological process by which particular things become identified with courage or appeasement or how particular things get included in or left out of a diplomatic package.” (Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*: pp. 93-94). Similarly, “Whether the removal of their missiles from Cuba while leaving behind 15,000 troops is a “defeat” for the Soviets or a “defeat” for the United States depends more on how it is construed than on the military significance of the troops, and the construction placed on the outcome is not easily foreseeable.” (p. 94).

Besides Clausewitz and Schelling, a range of multiple sources and insights show that strategic thoughts and practices are never purely materialist as the «broadeners» suggest. It is even the very heart of strategy to overcome unfavorable material situations. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant traced the genealogy in ancient Greece of what they call “metis”, the use of methods of a different order in confrontation or competitive situations whose effect is to reverse the outcome of the encounter which seem pre-ordained by material factors and allow victory to fall to the party whose defeat had appeared inevitable. They note that metis: “is, in a sense, the absolute weapon, the only one that has the power to ensure victory and domination over others, whatever the circumstances, whatever the conditions of the conflict.” (p. 13) Many practitioners

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and strategic theorists also note the mixture of material and non-material factors. As Foch put it, strategic practices are characterized by a « (...) combined use of moral and material factors employed simultaneously (...).”\textsuperscript{58} While John Mearsheimer’s offensive realist theory is largely materialist, he acknowledges that strategy is the most important non-material factors that can alter the effects of the balance of power.\textsuperscript{59}

If anything, the materialist-idealist cleavage has been historically, and remains today, an important dividing line within strategic thought. By conflating strategic thought and materialism, the “broader security” critics make it more difficult, if not impossible, to analyze the cleavage opposing among strategists and strategic thinkers those who privilege technical and material factors to those who emphasize morale forces. These struggles regarding the relative importance of material factors were, for example, vigorous in Europe before World War I as well as in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{60} Discourses and norms clashed about the need to modernize the military establishment in equipment and organization or to reject materialistic means and rely on spiritual resources instead. More recently, Stephen Biddle’s critique of the “revolution in military affairs” argument, and his conception of military power, is grounded in the non-material notion of skill, the capacity to implement “(...) a tightly interrelated complex of cover, concealment, dispersion, suppression, small-unit independent manoeuvre, and combined arms at the tactical level, and depth, reserves, and differential concentration at the operational level of war.”\textsuperscript{61} Biddle

\textsuperscript{58} Foch 1918 [1903], p. 9; Beaufre 1985 [1963], p. 23. On the subtle combination of material and non-material factors: Colin 1911, pp. 347-355.

\textsuperscript{59} Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{60} On this struggle in pre-WWI Europe: Colin 1911; Gros Long 1922; Snyder 1984. On Japan: Peattie 1975.

\textsuperscript{61} Biddle, 2004, p. 3.
notes: “the importance of material preponderance has been exaggerated, and the role of variations in the use of that materiel has been underappreciated.”

Directly related to the problem of materialism in strategic thought, is the way in which the “broader security” research tradition link strategic thought and realism. Most “broadeners” see this connection as deep and rather obvious. Buzan and Hansen consider strategy as “(…) the specialist military-technical wing of the Realist approach to IR.” According to Michael Williams, the tradition of strategic thinking which has grown up during the Cold War is “deeply indebted to (perhaps quintessentially representative of) the neo-realist tradition of international relations theory (…)”. I suggest instead that the relation between some aspects of the realist research tradition and strategic thought, especially neo-realism (or structural realism), is much more problematic than it appears initially. The central assumption of strategic theorizing is that the process of interaction (violence, bargaining and signalling) between the partners-adversaries and its outcome is autonomous, at least to some degree, from its initial conditions. The outcome of the interaction depends on the dynamic of the process itself, on the dialectic of will and cannot be reduced to the initial conditions of the interaction, notably the distribution of power among the actors. As Maoz notes: “(…) the distribution of capabilities in a system is only a starting point for strategy planning, not the end result.” Strategy is what the actors involved can adjust to compensate for their inferiority in capabilities. The relevant question becomes the range of options available to (relatively) weak actors and the ways in which strategy can compensate for

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64. Michael C. Williams, “Neo-Realism and the future of strategy, RIS 1993, 19, p. 103.

inferiority in capabilities. As Edward Luttwak notes, those who need the ingenuities of strategy are “(…) those who fight against the odds, outweighed defenders or overambitious attackers, who must try to circumvent enemy strengths and exploit enemy weaknesses by obeying the paradoxical (seemingly contradictory) logic of strategy (…).”66 In sum, strategic thought helps to put into question the notion that there is a linear relationship between the amount of resources an actor controls, its capacity to control the behavior of other actors and its overall power over outcomes in its environment.67 Strategic thought is an important facet of the notion that agents are the creative motors of change. From the perspective of strategic thought, the problem is not anarchy as such or disagreements regarding the interpretation of the distribution of resources. We should examine instead the different conclusions that the actors involved draw from anarchy “in terms of what must be done to control outcomes.”68 It is via strategy that they seek to change these outcomes. As Maoz notes: “A structure that cannot be destroyed by bad choices or a structure that cannot be manipulated by smart strategies has yet to be invented.”69

§ 4. Purely practical and a-critical?

The fourth widely held, but not unprecedented, misconception about strategy is that since it is inevitably linked to action, and practices, it can only be in its mode of analysis and its

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69. Maoz 1989, 263.
conclusions “pragmatic” and therefore deprived of any critical dimension. It is inherently conservative in the sense that it can only justify and reinforce the existing order.

To be sure, as thinking upon action and of action, strategy is intimately connected to the practices of political and military actors. Those who approach the practice of war from a distance and underestimate the logics and constraints of action can easily fall prey of naïve intellectualism. It is also correct to note that strategic thinkers do not usually make a fetish out of the distinction between theory and practice. Many prominent strategic theorists were also, in different ways and to different degrees, practitioners. However, strategic thought cannot be reduced to a pure practice or to an absolute pragmatism, dependent on the whims of sudden inspiration. Strategic thought questions and reflects upon actions and practices. It helps to reconstitute the system of mental operations that conceive and implement political-military action. The history of strategic thought shows, not the absence of theories or theorizations, but the rejection of the easy way out of improvisation born out of circumstances. Strategists and strategic thinkers strive to formulate praxeologies: they seek to extract from contingent conflictual practices some regularity, however limited, allowing them to elaborate, within boundary conditions, theories of war and strategy. They have a sober view of what theories can and cannot do, but they certainly not discard them. Strategists often are reflective practitioners like T. E. Lawrence, for example. Initially ill-prepared to a political or military role, embarked in the Arab revolt, he put hastily together, in the course of action, a theory of war better adapted to the population and the geography of the Hejaz that led to results out of proportion with the very


low means granted to him.\textsuperscript{72} It is important to note that his theory was deeply embedded in actual event in order to inform real-time deliberations but it combines a concern with overarching syntheses and case-specific particularities.

Strategy is a project of knowledge-building, knowledge-accumulation and theorization, not only an action or a practice. It is dependent upon, and shaped by, the dialogue between experience and theory, the ideal and practical. While their modes of thinking and their temporalities might be different, neither those who think action nor the practitioners engaged in action, can dispense with theories, as implicit as they sometimes are. The strategic praxeology requires a constant work of conceptualization.

According to many “broadeners”, strategic thinkers almost always adopt the language of the dominant powers and, when they do so, strategic theory becomes political ideology. Strategic thinking is supposed to decrypt wars and international relations but it certainly can be a critical project which questions the existing status quo. Contrary to the commonly held view of many “security broadeners”, the quest for emancipation, understood as freeing individuals from a power structure, is not incompatible with the logics of strategy, quite the contrary.\textsuperscript{73} The Marxist and neo-Marxist research tradition in IR never ceased to think together international politics and strategy since Engels (nicknamed ‘the general’) and Marx as well as Lenin (a careful reader of Clausewitz), Trotsky, Mao Zedong and Che Guevara.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, strategy can also help decrypt and contest the distribution of power domestically. Michel Foucault, for example, one of the foremost theorist of the notion that forms of power are present and at work in any situation,

\textsuperscript{72} Lawrence, 1993 [1922], Book III, Chap. XXXIII, p. XXX.

\textsuperscript{73} Booth 2005.

\textsuperscript{74} Neumann, von Hagen 1986.
explicitly addressed war and borrowed from strategic thought. In particular, like Lenin, Ludendorff and Schmitt before him, he famously reversed Carl von Clausewitz’s well-known aphorism on the continuity between politics and war and asked whether power and politics were war conducted with other means. He also claimed that the notion that politics is war conducted with other means was widespread during the 17th and 18th century and sought to explore the principle that, he claimed, Clausewitz himself reversed. Foucault envisioned war and strategy as the grid of intelligibility of power relations and it is through strategic and tactical categories and concepts, that he explored the logics of power and, particularly, its contextual contingency. Most importantly, he acknowledged the significance of violence (not only as an experience but as a political instrument), force as well as war and the military as constitutive and fundamental dimensions of politics and power.

**Conclusion**

The connections between strategic thought and IR theorizing have nearly vanished. To the «broader security» advocates, strategic thought necessarily means Cold War, realism and the state. However, what is “traditionalist” in the end is neither strategy nor strategic studies but the confined theoretical and historical perspectives of their critics. IR theorists are better off to put into question this straightjacket that lead them to neglect a range of theories and concepts indispensable to a proper understanding of international relations.

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76. Foucault 1997, 41-42.

One could raise several objections to my argument. For example, one could claim that the body of ideas and practices on the use of organized violence from the earliest time to the present is much more amorphous, uneven and problematic than I make it to be. Many of these strategic ideas might appear as being based on flimsy analysis of weak evidence, some paved the way to national disasters. In the writings of professional military officers or civilian defense intellectuals, distortions and dubious logic might be rampant. If so, is there a real need for IR theorist to re-engage with such a poor (or at least uneven in quality) source of insights on international politics? My argument is not that IR theorists should take at face value the insights of the strategic mind. I favor instead the intellectual reacquisition of, and critical reengagement with, strategic thought. While it is not perfect, strategic thought as a body of knowledge is no better and no worse as a source of inspiration for IR theorists than micro-economics, for example.

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