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The Interlocking Trinity

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The basic instruments of statecraft are military force, diplomacy, and economic power. Looking more closely, we can see variants of each: military force is comprised of both use of force and threat of force; diplomacy encompasses both governmental contacts and public diplomacy; and economic power can range from sanctions to aid. Nonetheless, these are lesser distinctions. Like Caesar's Gaul, the means of national strategy only divide into three parts. Each instrument has its particular advantages and constraints, but it would be a mistake to evaluate the question of national power by focusing on these instruments in isolation from each other. They are interdependent and fundamentally inseparable. Together they form an interlocking trinity which explains the conduct of national strategy just as, on a lesser level, Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity illuminates the nature of war.

These elements rest on the same fundamental pillars of the nation as did Clausewitz's trinity: the people, the government, and the commander (with his forces). Economic force is the domain of the people, which harnesses the resources and productive capacity of the nation. Diplomacy is the domain of the government, which sets policy and engages in relations with other sovereign states. And military force, naturally, is the domain of the commander.

MILITARY FORCE  
(COMMANDER)

ECONOMIC  
(PEOPLE)  
POWER

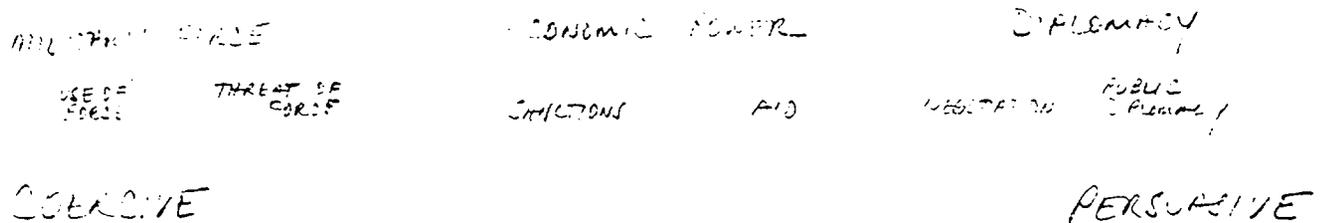
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The trinity is an interlocking one because each of these aspects of statecraft depends on the other for effectiveness. Diplomacy ultimately depends on military force: without that end point, negotiation loses credibility and urgency. Military force depends on economic power, for obvious reasons. And economic power in an increasingly interdependent world depends on diplomacy, to create the conditions of open markets, financial stability, and cultural interchange in which production can flourish.

In varying degrees, the instruments are coercive and persuasive, or in simpler shorthand, "hard" and "soft." In Clausewitzian terms, there is a polarity here. On the hard extreme is military power, at the soft pole is diplomacy, with economic power in the middle. At times, economic power is coercive (viz. embargoes), at times it is persuasive, as with development assistance.



The critical reader will note an omission thus far: covert action. Covert action is a special case. It is not a unique form of statecraft in its own right, but is the clandestine form of the other activities. CIA supply of the mujahidin and UNITA are quiet forms of military force; psyops, covert subsidy of political parties, and the like are clandestine aspects of persuasion. Covert action's uniqueness lies not in the manner in which it acts upon a foreign opponent -- targets a particular center of gravity, if you will -

- but in the flexibility and protection from domestic and international criticism it affords the nation using it.

The rise of covert action in world affairs coincides with the rise in legalism and stated national commitments to international law. Nations find it desirable to pay lip service (and sometimes more) to the principle of international law, yet realpolitik forces nations to use power in ways not sanctioned by formal codes of conduct. Covert action straddles the gap between the necessary and the legal. On occasion, though, the task is too great to carry off in a covert way, as with the invasion of another nation. The only recourse for the initiating country, then, is to choose a principle of international law and stretch that fig leaf to the breaking point. The favorite (pre-Gorbachev) Soviet way of doing this was to claim that the Red Army was answering a request for assistance (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan). America these days seems to favor protection of US citizens as a pretext (Grenada, Panama).

Taking a closer look at these instruments --

Diplomacy: There is a paradox at work here. It is both the weakest and the strongest of the instruments. Weakest, because it depends on the cooperation of the adversary for success. This cooperation is achieved after a search for common ground that is often long, complex, and frustrating. Yet successful diplomacy is the strongest instrument, because only it holds out the hope of permanent solutions to international problems. As Clausewitz observes,

"in war the result is never final." But negotiated settlements that address the concerns of all parties, and which have been enhanced by skillful public diplomacy aimed at each nation's citizenry, give a stability that no other instrument can match. The centerpiece of the Carter Administration's foreign policy, the Panama Canal Treaty, brought tremendous stability to a situation that was deteriorating despite any economic incentives the US could offer. And certainly in that case, a military solution would only have postponed and magnified the day of reckoning.

Economic power as a tool of statecraft has unusual limitations and advantages. When circumstances call for it -- as in reconstituting postwar Europe -- there is nothing that will take its place. But when a nation seeks to induce changes in political behavior, assistance can play only a supporting role, as with the Camp David Accords. Assistance alone cannot bring about lasting policy change. In that respect, nations are like politicians: they can be rented but not bought. America has paid several billion dollars for a future lesson on this from Mobutu (or his successors).

Sanctions are effective in inducing change at the margin (Romania and MFN status) and in reinforcing a nation's role in long-term strategic competition (COCOM). But they are rarely effective in the long term -- Marxism-Leninism has proved a far more destructive weapon against Cuba than the US embargo -- because of the multiplicity of world suppliers, all of whom must share common interests for the sanction to work. American Presidents, however, turn to sanctions

as a first weapon of choice because of their high potential effectiveness and the fact that they are low in cost, quick to set in place, and generally carry a low risk of retaliation against great economic powers such as the US. Sanctions, in sum, are consistently oversold. Iraq will be the great test case for the ability of economic coercion to induce major change. Yet even if sanctions succeed in forcing Iraq out of Kuwait, they are not powerful enough to attack the root cause of the problem: Saddam Hussein and his army.

Only the military instrument can prevail against some challenges. But this is a high-risk instrument ("the road to survival or ruin" -- Sun Tzu) and a high cost one. Sometimes a society has no realistic option, as with World War II. The interesting cases, however, are when military force is used more selectively to advance national policy.

Note the salutary effect the Christmas Bombing of 1972 had on North Vietnamese willingness to reach agreement in Paris. Or the push that Congressional funding of the Safeguard ABM system gave to SALT I negotiations. (One keeps coming back to the Nixon Administration to illustrate the point. Nixon, more than any other President, knew how to array military power in support of diplomatic objectives.) Turning to a truly fundamental level, the threat posed by nuclear weapons is the driving force of US-Soviet diplomatic dialogue and cooperation. Were it not for the formidable destructive power each side possesses, there would be a far lesser interest in seeking common ground. But absent a good fit with national goals and without

close coordination with diplomacy, military power is like a runaway freight train: it has an equal chance of reaching its destination or plunging off the cliff, as in Beirut in 1982.

Statesmen often come to power with a predisposition for one instrument of statecraft. Tempered with flexibility, the predisposition does no harm. But history does not treat kindly those who refuse to let the facts get in the way. The Carter-Vance team is the outstanding example. Determined to use reason and persuasion in foreign affairs, they found themselves steamrollered and stampeded in the Horn of Africa, Iran, and ultimately, Afghanistan. The lesson to be drawn from this is not that diplomacy is ineffective. It is that the tool must fit the times. No one method of statecraft has a net advantage over another. Context and skillful coordination determine the outcome.

Polarity again is at work when it comes to the choice of a particular instrument. Disillusionment with force leads to negotiations. Failed negotiations lead to force. Consider the US experience after each World War. The carnage of the First gave a powerful push to collective security through the League of Nations. Though this "push" wasn't enough to compel ratification, it's interesting to speculate what would have happened had Wilson been less arrogant or had the US spent more than nineteen months in the war. The First World War also inspired the Washington Treaties, an ambitious set of arms control commitments shaped by Harding's Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes. Considering the ideological

divide between the Wilson and Harding Administrations, this similarity in outlook is noteworthy. Contrast this with the situation after the Second World War. The inadequacies of Teheran and Yalta lay the groundwork for American rearmament and containment.

To summarize the analysis, two things are of paramount concern at the "grand" strategic level:

-- Correctly matching the instrument to the problem, the means to the end. One instrument, more or less, tends to predominate at a given time, and the right choice is crucial.

-- Skillfully orchestrating the instruments of national power so that they reinforce each other.

On these two precepts of national strategy hang all the law and the prophets.

Interestingly, the principles at work here have their echo at the rung of purely military, "operational" strategy. Throughout the century, partisans of each of the services have debated which is the most effective in the conduct of war. Mahan, then Douhet, claimed predominant value for their preferred form of power, seeking to wrest the laurels from the Army. But experience finally taught the United States that no one mode of combat can be predominant. Each has its role, and each reaches its maximum effectiveness when used to complement the other.

So too with the instruments of statecraft. Each instrument of the interlocking trinity has its individual advantages, yet each depends on the other to reinforce its own strengths and operate most effectively. In national strategy as in military affairs, the combined arms approach is irreplaceable.