
Why Policymakers Are Confused About Victory

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As the United States and its NATO and Gulf allies began Operation Odyssey Dawn against Muammar al-Qadhafi's loyalist forces in March 2011, policymakers and scholars from the start should have debated three central questions: what would victory look like, how would it be won, and what would be the cost? These questions are, of course, pertinent to the formulation and execution of decisions about every major case of military intervention. Increasingly, however, the United States and other major powers are finding it ever more difficult to articulate to their societies what victory means and whether their actions will produce the desired outcomes.

These same questions continue to preoccupy policymakers with regard to U.S. operations in Iraq and, to a greater extent, in Afghanistan. The central challenge for scholars and policymakers, therefore, is to define clearly and precisely what victory is and what it

means for the state. As events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Libya suggest, this is an area of critical and growing importance in the study of victory and the conduct of foreign policy.

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The central problem, historically, is that scholars and policymakers have failed to develop a theoretical framework that relates victory to real-world decisions about whether, and under what circumstances, it is prudent for the state to use military force. Why is this? What explains the historical failure to develop a theoretical framework to govern the term *victory*? One reason is that strategists throughout history placed overwhelming emphasis on the means that states devoted to knowing what is required to achieve victory. Which configuration of military and political resources should the state marshal? What is the ideal balance between the offense and defense? What are the proper tactics? What costs are the state and its public willing to accept?

FOUR CENTRAL QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Before articulating a more precise narrative on victory, it is essential to explore four central questions that are critical to the scholarship on strategy and security and to the decisions that policymakers routinely face.

First, why is it important to have a coherent definition of victory? The fundamental reason is that it is essential to provide a precise statement of the state's goals in terms of specific outcomes when it uses force. Establishing clearly what victory means is the first step in specifying precisely what policymakers seek to achieve. It also provides a measure of their commitment to those goals and whether, and for how long, they are willing to support that policy.

Second, who should determine how victory is defined? In practical terms, policymakers have the primary responsibility for determining what victory means, how to define it, what the state seeks to achieve, and how precisely the use of military force will meet those goals. Policymakers also have the greatest influence because they make the decision to use force, establish the guidelines that will govern what intervention should achieve, and determine how and for how long it will be conducted. Scholars, however, also have a decisive role in identifying the successes and failures that, in turn, will help policymakers translate a strategy for victory into effective policies.

Third, what are the possible consequences of the failure to define the conditions that govern victory? The most serious consequence is that this failure may contribute to the loss of public support, particularly when military intervention runs into the inevitable difficulties. For democracies, the state's ability to sustain public support builds directly on defining, from the outset, what policymakers mean by victory, what costs it will impose on the state, and whether the public supports the policy.

Fourth, what is the relationship between the concept of victory and the responsibilities assumed by the state for post-conflict reconstruction? Perhaps the most serious shortcoming in analyses of victory is the historic failure of scholars and policymakers to give serious and detailed attention to its implications for what are known as the state's post-conflict obligations.¹ In contemporary politics, the meaning of victory determines directly and consequentially the post-conflict tasks for which the state assumes responsibility—unless it chooses to abandon the defeated state and leave it in a state of chaos, which raises political difficulties in the modern era.

As noted above, two major and recent military interventions—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq²—have made understanding what constitutes victory increasingly critical to contemporary debates about national security.

The Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies provoked a debate about what it means when policymakers seek victory in such wars. The unresolved question is how to interpret whether the outcomes in these two events are consistent with victory.

At this writing, the consensus among scholars and policymakers is that the United States and its Afghan and NATO allies are fighting to a stalemate in Afghanistan as they continue to consolidate what gains have been made over the Taliban in the previous several months. The matter is complicated by the fact that scholars and policymakers seem uncertain about what victory would mean given the nation-building project in Afghanistan, questions about the future of the Taliban, and Pakistan's influence on the Afghan situation.

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TOWARD A MORE PRECISE DEFINITION OF VICTORY

For millennia, strategists from Sun Tzu and Thucydides to Clausewitz and Jomini have noted that *strategy* provides the linkage between means and ends, while *victory* presumably defines the end or outcome that policymakers seek to achieve when they use military force.³ Thus, the language of victory focused primarily on those mechanical steps that a state should take to achieve victory on the battlefield, but with significantly less emphasis on analyzing the outcomes of wars beyond the ambiguous observation that one side wins and the other loses.

Consequently, victory has become a symbolic expression of success in war that many mistakenly have come to believe cannot be calculated because its components are unknown. Thus, any categorical approach to victory is logically and conceptually inadequate. However, as decisions about Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq affirm, policymakers and scholars must reverse their historic aversion to developing a theoretical narrative on victory in order to more systematically organize our thinking about victory when using military force to achieve policy objectives.

A major issue confronting scholars and policymakers alike is that no realm of social, political, economic, or cultural affairs is immune from our tendency to use the term *victory* to describe outcomes that are generally believed to be successful or, at least, consistent with the state's goals and policies. Because the analytic foundations of victory are inadequate for describing the complex conditions, outcomes, and risks that scholars and policymakers ordinarily associate with war, both communities must develop concepts and language that will help them use the term with greater precision when states use military force.⁴

The aim should be to provide the units of analysis for further study of victory, while using these ideas to more deeply analyze interactions among the units. In a methodological sense, theory represents the next step for examining the interactions that are necessary to formulate hypotheses about victory.

Broadly, a general theory should define victory as an outcome and aspiration on three specific dimensions: how and to what extent it changes the status quo, as measured in political, economic, and military terms; how and to what extent the state mobilizes its economic, military, and political resources—notably including public support—for war; and how and to what extent victory imposes post-conflict military, political, economic, humanitarian, and moral obligations on the victorious state.

Although policymakers and scholars use *victory* synonymously to describe the outcome when the fighting stops and the war is arguably *won*, it must be argued that victory has broader, more complex, and more subtle meanings. This includes whether the state achieves its tactical and strategic goals, whether the outcome alters the status quo, and what economic and social costs of mobilization and post-conflict obligations are imposed upon the victor.⁵ Because victory is meaningful only when it is expressed as a continuum of outcomes, this theoretical narrative uses discrete levels of victory to describe war outcomes as well as the aspirations of policymakers.

From this analysis of victory, two conclusions can be drawn. First, the term connotes far more than a general desire on the state's part to

achieve its political objectives and, secondly, it can be described in terms of discrete categories about the outcome when the state uses force. Indeed, the United States has achieved a diverse array of victories, principally in the category of strategic victories; the consequences of these victories have differed radically, from establishing the United States to transforming the international system.

The American experience with war provides several categories of strategic victory including *existential* strategic victory, which pertains to wars of survival—notably the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War; *total* strategic victory, which describes the outcome of World War I; the special category of *grand* strategic victory to describe the outcome of World War II as one that transformed international politics; *limited* strategic victory and defeat in the cases of the Korean War and the Vietnam War, respectively; and *fortuitous* grand strategic victory to describe the unexpected but still transformational outcome of the Cold War.

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A noteworthy observation for scholars that emerges from this study is that higher levels of victory more strongly relate to generating greater postwar obligations for the victor. If we exclude the Cold War and the Civil War during the period of postwar reconstruction, the historical obligations on the victor in most wars ranged from quite limited to nonexistent. However, the cases of grand strategic victory in World War II and limited strategic victory in Iraq in 1991 are noteworthy because these wars, which produced radically different levels of victory, reestablished for policymakers the contemporary precedent in which victory influenced the state's policies in terms of protracted post-conflict obligations.

Another observation is that higher levels of victory generally relate to greater levels of societal mobilization. In the Cold War, the United States achieved a fortuitous grand strategic victory without engaging in direct combat with the Soviet Union. The United States used relatively moderate but sustained levels of mobilization of the industrial and technological infrastructure to maintain a higher peacetime level of military preparation. However, limited strategic victories (e.g., the military strike against Libya in 1986 and the invasion of Panama in 1989) involved much less mobilization than the comparable victories in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and

the 2003 Iraq War. As these cases affirm, scholars must be cautious about drawing casual linkages between the levels of mobilization and victories in specific wars.

IMPLICATIONS

In the final analysis, policymakers are more likely to make effective decisions about military intervention if they communicate their strategy for victory in a form that precisely defines what the state seeks to achieve. This framework for victory must be transparent to the public if it is to be sustainable in terms of public support, especially when policymakers encounter the inevitable difficulties that arise in all cases of intervention.

There could not be a more timely moment to study the meaning of victory than the present. For the past decade, the United States has been involved in intense and passionate public debates about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: whether these wars are being conducted effectively, and—ultimately—whether it is possible to achieve victory and in what form (tactical, strategic, or grand strategic). More recent developments such as U.S. intervention in Libya make a coherent analysis of the benefits, costs, and risks of victory increasingly relevant and an absolute necessity in all current and future operations.

Ultimately, policymakers and scholars must build far greater rigor into their strategy for victory. Unless guided by a coherent theoretical

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narrative, it will be difficult for them to move beyond the systemic confusion in ordinary language that surrounds the literature on victory and decisions about war. Alternatively, policymakers whose deliberations are informed by a theoretical narrative will more clearly understand the consequences of military intervention.

Victory on any level involves costs, benefits, and risks for both victorious and vanquished states. Thus, scholars must define victory in ways that help policymakers clearly understand the implications of their policies

for wars in terms of outcomes and aspirations. Anything less is a recipe for failure and public dissatisfaction with the decision to intervene militarily.

Moreover, a theoretical narrative helps both victor and defeated to determine what meaningful objectives they can, should, and will achieve from using military force and whether the state has sufficient political, economic, and human resources to achieve that outcome. The concepts of level of victory, change in the status quo, mobilization, and post-conflict obligations constitute the reference points in a systematic framework that moves beyond the muddled and ambiguous language currently used to describe what the state seeks to accomplish in war.

In the end, thinking more systematically about victory is the essential first step to helping policymakers think several steps ahead of where they are and where they want to be when they make decisions about intervention—or all decisions in foreign policy, for that matter. In strategic terms, decisions in foreign policy should begin with victory, which implies that policymakers should think about where they are, where they want to be, and what they have to do when they get there. The obligation of policymakers to make sound decisions in the conduct of state policy demands no less. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 For an analysis of post-conflict obligations, see William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50-54.
- 2 For analyses of victory in the Afghanistan and Iraq cases, see Martel, chapters 11 and 12.
- 3 See Martel, chapters 3 and 4.
- 4 See Martel, 17-55.
- 5 See Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 155-94; Bradford A. Lee, "Winning the War but Losing the Peace? The United States and the Strategic Issues of War Termination," in Bradford A. Lee and Karl F. Walling, eds., *Strategic Logic and Political Rationality: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 249-73.