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Organizational strategy and its implications for strategic studies: A review essay

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ABSTRACT

In this review essay, we investigate how organisational strategy can help refresh traditional strategic and security studies debates. Despite their shared history, both disciplines have evolved in silos, lacking interdisciplinary engagement. To foster dialogue and mutual learning, the paper uses four key themes familiar to 'Clausewitzian' strategic studies – ends, ways, means, and friction – and introduces key thoughts of contemporary organisational strategy that engage with these themes. Drawing on a specific school of organisational strategy – the Strategy as Practice (SAP) approach – we attempt to broaden the vocabulary of strategic studies. We conclude with implications for future research as well as some critical, practical applications that result from the interdisciplinary encounter between organisational strategy and security studies.

KEYWORDS Interdisciplinary strategic studies; strategy implementation; business strategy; management; strategy as practice

Introduction

Strategy, as conventionally understood in the field of strategic and security studies, is concerned with the preparation and waging of war or the conduct of foreign policy. Modern strategic studies usually focuses on state-centred, conflict-ridden scenarios. Conversations in strategic studies exist in a silo and interact little, if at all, with one of the more dynamic areas in the study of strategy – modern management studies and, more specifically, organisational strategy. In this paper we argue that this lack of engagement is a lost opportunity on several levels. The two disciplines share original seminal texts such as the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* written around 2500 years ago, or the 4th century BCE Greek writer Tacticus' *How to Survive Under Siege*. In the wake of the disruptive Napoleonic Wars, the Prussian general and military thinker Carl von Clausewitz even suggested

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comparing war 'to commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale'.¹ More recently, US Army General Stanley McChrystal framed his strategic approach in the language of Silicon Valley start-ups when he identified 'management' as the biggest limiting factor in his attempt to fight non-hierarchical, decentralised and networked insurgents in Iraq.²

Yet, despite shared origins, what is missing is a dialogue and exchange of ideas on strategy and strategy-making between strategic and security studies on the one hand and organisational strategists on the other. In this review essay, we want to capitalise on this opportunity by (1) providing a review of organisational strategy literature and (2) bringing it to bear on strategic and security studies. We suggest that organisational strategy has developed a range of concepts and understandings of how strategy works. This has the potential to help critically examine strategic studies more generally. In particular, the Strategy as Practice (hereafter SAP) approach, a result of decades of empirical analyses of the strategy process, is chipping away at the dichotomy between planning and implementation by engaging with strategy as an emergent phenomenon in which implementation forms part of a dynamic co-creation process. One way to engage in conversation between SAP and strategic studies is to enquire what ground SAP has in common with the traditional, Clausewitzian vision of strategy and conflict. For instance, considerable military literature engages with the fundamental questions of the employment of Means in certain Ways to achieve specific Ends.³ This is what strategic thinker Colin Gray referred to as the 'enduring nature' of strategy and is the main paradigm through which state strategy is evaluated today.⁴ Historian Hew Strachan has written that strategy 'is a profoundly pragmatic business; it is about applying means to ends'.⁵ Indeed, for Strachan, it is the relationship between these factors that determines the ultimate value of a particular strategy. He is particularly critical of US strategy in the 'War on Terror', in a way that McChrystal might sympathise, because the lack of clarity in the intended ends provided such a poor context for utilising means – rendering the entire strategy 'illiterate'.⁶

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* ed. and trans. M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1832/1989), 149.

²Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: 2015), 32.

³Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's Concept of Strategy – Balancing Purpose, Aims and Means', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/6–7 (2014), 903–25.

⁴Colin Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: 2010), 6–7.

⁵Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: 2013), 12.

⁶Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 21.

Ends, ways, means, friction and research questions

To create a conversation between the different perspectives, we have divided the literature into themes which have been connected to the well-known strategic studies Ends-Ways-Means-Friction framework. We show how SAP ideas both map onto this structure while providing different, in some ways thought-provoking means of analysis for these concepts (or using Strachan's criticism – a different language through which to understand its strategic literacy).

We take as our point of departure the four cornerstones of the Ends-Ways-Means-Friction framework and elaborate on the following research questions: The first theme, which engages with the concept of strategic ends, is titled *Strategy is a Verb, Not a Noun*. It has as its research question: How do strategy-making practices and processes shape or alter outcomes and end goals? The second theme, which engages with strategic ways, is entitled *Focus on Discourse, Language, and their Performative Effects*. It has as its research question: How do performative expressions of strategy-making such as discourse and language determine or challenge the ways strategies are implemented? The third theme, which engages with strategic means, is entitled *Tools and Technologies*. It has as its research question: How do the physical and material tools and technologies available for implementing strategies both enable and constrain strategic activity? Finally, the fourth theme, which engages with the notion of friction, is entitled *Open or Co-creative Strategy*. It has as its research question: What are the most important elements of open, flexible structures which can allow for more effective adaptations to changing and unforeseen circumstances? Discussing the SAP literature in this way and using it to ask these research questions reveals fruitful areas for future scholarly discussion.

We believe that this engagement between strategic studies and SAP has also practical implications. Two major strategy documents have just been released by the US and UK governments: the *US National Security Strategic Guidance* and the *UK Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Both documents exhibit similar strengths and weaknesses as strategic statements. They provide fascinating glimpses into general directions of travel such as the UK's ongoing pivot against spending money on traditional ground forces towards investment in cyber security and scientific research. They also, through both commission and omission, reveal how the governmental structures of the two view global challenges. They work mostly as statements of strategic perception – because both are noticeably lacking in detail on the specific steps to be taken to achieve their strategic goals. It is arguable that in democracies, such reviews when published primarily serve to provide transparency in defence budgets and spending cuts and are meant for the consumption of the publics whose support remains integral to the

purposes of strategy. The problem from a practice perspective is that the release of these documents is seen as the main strategic accomplishment; yet the future is highly uncertain, and no plan can see five, let alone ten years ahead. Moreover, the plans are top-down, high level, and written with a linear view of implementation and certain inbuilt assumptions. There is little room for emergence, agility, and resilience. Finally, the current approach glosses over the interdisciplinary nature of strategic thought: both the US and UK plans are simultaneous economic, technological, and defence strategies. Indeed, strategic statements released by countries around the world, exemplify an almost universal desire by states to upgrade their cyber, space and scientific research strengths – all of which will require an increasingly close cooperation with a range of technology-based businesses. Japan's National Security Strategy, last updated in 2016 had in its first list of strategic priorities the strengthening of 'cyber security, international counterterrorism, intelligence capabilities, stable use of outer space, and technological capabilities'.⁷ To do this the Japanese military will 'accelerate its efforts' to work productively with private firms with expertise in 'space, cyberspace, electromagnetic spectrum, ocean, and science and technology'.⁸ Given these increasing complexities we aim to provide a strategy vocabulary that matches the practical task of crafting strategy.

With these aims, our article proceeds as follows. First, we will provide a brief overview of the institutional and intellectual trajectories of organisational strategy. We will then zoom in on current debates around SAP, introducing our four major themes with their research questions and discuss how they might challenge and change the conversation in traditional strategic studies. We will conclude with ideas for future research and opportunities for further engagement. Prior to commencing, one caveat: it is not possible to describe 'organisational strategy' as one body of knowledge within one review article. Organisational strategy itself is contested, diverse and too elaborate to allow one definite reading. Thus, we provide a necessarily subjective reading with the aim to spark curiosity, not closure.

The big picture: Institutional and intellectual trajectories of organisational strategy

Strategy has become firmly established as one of the flagship disciplines in business schools. While it traces its origins to military planning, contemporary notions of strategic management evolved out of business policy courses in business schools in the 1960s and 1970s, and a growing and influential

⁷'National Security Strategy', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html

⁸National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond', 18 December 2018, 8–9. Available at: http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/pdf/2019boueikeikaku_e.pdf

consulting industry, particularly in the United States. The Carnegie and Ford foundations are not only credited with influencing US foreign policy post-1945 but also produced studies in 1959 recommending how modern business schools should be organised, including with capstone 'corporate strategy' courses.⁹ But it was the writings of the business historian Alfred Chandler, business leader Alfred Sloan, and business theorist Igor Ansoff that established organisational strategy as an academic interest in its own right.¹⁰ Ansoff in particular credited military practice as well as industrial economics with informing his work. A conference convened in Pittsburgh in 1978 for scholars to gather and discuss developments in strategy research, and the publication that followed entitled *Strategic Management*, is viewed by many as the foundation of strategic management as a discipline in business schools.¹¹

The watershed year, however, came in 1980 with the publication of *Competitive Strategy* by Michael Porter. Porter had a background in industrial economics where a main concern was how organisations can gain a monopoly position from the perspective of industrial policy.¹² He turned this concern on its head by arguing that competitive strategy was about positioning, and where possible, leveraging powerful industry forces to give an organisation a competitive advantage over its rivals. This insight led to several influential analytic frameworks and generic strategies that could aid strategic managers in achieving superior competitive performance. While this 'outside-in' approach to strategy has remained a mainstay of strategy research, more recently it has broadened to incorporate competitive dynamics and the impact of a range of issues on competition including globalisation, sustainability, and growing stakeholder power.¹³

Where the 'outside-in' approach to strategy focuses on how organisations compete within their external environment, an 'inside-out' perspective was proposed, initially as a complement of, and subsequently as an alternative to the positioning perspective with the 1984 publication of the *Resource-Based View of the Firm*.¹⁴ Here, the focus was on how organisations can leverage unique configurations of tangible and intangible resources as a source of sustained competitive advantage. This approach became the dominant strategy paradigm in the 1990s. More specifically, organisations that held configurations of resources that are valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and organised

⁹Stephen Cummings and David Wilson, *Images of Strategy* (Oxford: 2003).

¹⁰Igor Ansoff, *Corporate Strategy: An Analytic Approach to Business Policy for Growth and Expansion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1965); Alfred Chandler, *Strategy and Structure. Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge: 1962); Alfred P. Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (London: 1963).

¹¹Dan E. Schendel and Charles Hofer, *Strategic Management* (Boston: 1979).

¹²M. E. Porter, *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors* (New York: 1980).

¹³Ming-Jer Chen and Danny Miller, 'Reconceptualizing Competitive Dynamics: A Multidimensional Framework', *Strategic Management Journal* 36 (2015), 758–75.

¹⁴Birger Wernerfelt, 'A Resource-based View of the Firm', *Strategic Management Journal* 5/2 (1984), 171–80.

(known as the VRIO framework)¹⁵ were more likely to outperform their competitors. The initially rather static portrayal of resources, however, led scholars to develop notions of core competencies and dynamic capabilities. Core competencies are harmonised combinations of resources and skills that distinguish organisations in the marketplace and give them competitive advantage. Dynamic capabilities are the abilities to build, integrate and reconfigure internal competencies to address the quickly changing external environment.¹⁶ Notions of core competencies and dynamic capabilities brought issues of adaptability, agility, learning and entrepreneurial management to the fore of thinking about how organisations can nurture and maintain competitive advantage in turbulent environments. The move advocated a shift from a focus on 'fit' with a given environment, towards the ability to thrive and innovate in turbulent, rapidly changing environments.

Where both the early 'outside-in' and 'inside-out' perspectives on strategy focused on strategy 'content', in parallel developments in strategic management research in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Canada and the United Kingdom, scholars were focusing on strategy as a process.¹⁷ Following this line of inquiry, scholars began challenging the notion that strategy development is purely a planned phenomenon, but also emerges through complex cultural, political and social dynamics inside and outside the organisation. As one of its early proponents Henry Mintzberg suggested, strategy research should spend less time imagining how strategy should be made and focus more on how strategies actually get made.¹⁸ Such a Machiavellian realism put attention on practices, processes and routines through which strategy was done in companies, often by middle managers, consultants, and aids (as opposed to top managers). This focus accelerated a move away from a portrayal of strategy as consistently intentional and rational, demarcated into distinct phases of formulation and implementation, towards how the content of strategies change over time as complex and continuously evolving processes of formation embedded in context. Process research into strategy also began to shift debates away from more linear and rational conceptualisations of strategy evolution, towards non-linear dynamics incorporating chaos, complexity, emotion and unintended consequences.¹⁹ More recently, a desire to open up these processes to understand precisely what it is that

¹⁵Jay Barney, 'Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage', *Journal of Management* 17/1 (1991), 99–120.

¹⁶C. K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, 'The Core Competence of the Corporation', *Harvard Business Review* 68/3 (1990), 79–91; David J. Teece, Gary Pisano and Amy Shuen, 'Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management', *Strategic Management Journal* 18/7 (1997), 509–33.

¹⁷Andrew Pettigrew, *The Awakening Giant. Continuity and Change in Imperial Chemical Industries* (Oxford: 1985).

¹⁸Henry Mintzberg, 'Crafting Strategy', *Harvard Business Review* 65 (1987), 66–75.

¹⁹Bradley MacKay and R. Chia, 'Choice, Chance, and Unintended Consequences in Strategic Change: A Process Understanding of the Rise and Fall of NorthCo Automotive', *Academy of Management Journal* 56/1 (2013): 208–30.

strategy practitioners *do* has led to a focus on the strategic practices employed by practitioners, the role that their praxis plays in shaping these dynamics, and their aggregation into wider processes.²⁰ Closely allied to the 'practice-turn' in strategic management is an interest in the micro-foundations of strategy, or how individual-level factors aggregate into collective, or organisational-wide performance outcomes.

Table 1 provides an overview of some of the most recent reviews of the field of organisational strategy. Without attempting to conduct a review of reviews the table evidences the plurality of perspectives and the increasing significance of internal practices and capabilities for performance.

Critical appreciation of the state of the art

Critically, some of the earlier frameworks were in search of the key to superior performance. They assumed that this key can be studied and formalised (preferably in models) and then disseminated in books, articles in practitioner-oriented journals, MBA programmes etc. These assumptions have not been without critics. For instance, the strategy scholar Powell argued, 'competitive advantage propositions [...] have the especially ironic feature that their entities and phenomena only function properly so long as no one observes or understands them'.²¹ This critique echoes Luttwak's discussion of the strategy paradox where a good road turns into a bad road precisely because the enemy assumes this is the road to be taken. In this sense, a strategy model could be true in a static world in which only one actor deploys it, but it turns false once shared.

In response, strategy scholars asked: if the secrets of strategy are available at Amazon for a few pounds, how come so many organisations fail?²² The search for an answer resulted in the practice approach which had been already seeded by process scholars such as Mintzberg and Pettigrew. The practice approach went further in analysing the 'doing' of strategy, paying close attention to the work of strategising as ongoing, distributed activity in and across organisations. In the remainder of this paper, we will discuss this SAP approach and how it could help rejuvenate current conversations in strategic studies. We will do so by highlighting four main themes of strategic studies (ends, ways, means and friction) and discuss them through the lens of the SAP agenda with the aim to reflect on the possibilities they open for strategic studies.

²⁰Robert A. Burgelman et al., 'Strategy Processes and Practices: Dialogues and Intersections', *Strategic Management Journal* 39/3 (2018), 531–58.

²¹Thomas Powell, 'Competitive advantage: logical and philosophical considerations', *Strategic Management Journal* 22/9 (2001), 884.

²²Richard Whittington, *What is Strategy – and Does it Matter?* (London: 2000).



Table 1. Current reviews of the strategic management field.

Authors	Year	Focus	Key Findings
Nag, R. Hambrick, D. C. Chen, M.-J.	2007	Defining the field of strategic management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Despite common assertions that the field is fragmented and lacks identity, its success is derived from an underlying consensus ● Its distinctiveness is forged from attracting a plurality of perspectives ● A significant body of research explores the impact of environmental and organisational determinants on strategic management ● There is a lack of research linking strategic planning to organisational outcomes or performance
Poister, T. H. Pitts, D. W. Hamilton Edwards, L.	2010	A review of strategic management literature in the public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategic decision-making is impacted by managerial cognition and both individual and corporate values ● Strategic competencies are deemed important, yet there is no consensus as to what those competencies are ● SAP research has offered alternatives to performance-centric analysis, broadened the scope of organisations studied, and provided important insights into practices, praxis, and practitioners
Steptoe-Warren, G. Howat, D. Hume, I.	2011	A review of management and psychological literature on decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Further study devoted to the analysis of social practices is needed ● Relating learning and change capabilities to firm performance emerges as the core research cluster ● Yet, the DCV is characterised by trends of both integration and differentiation in its research clusters, surfacing tensions in advancing a consensual understanding of dynamic capabilities
Vaara, E. Whittington, R.	2012	A review of strategy as practice literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The field of strategic management has some degree of convergence in theory but features a plurality in empirical measurement ● The result is that the field closely borders a state of fragmentation ● A dominant pragmatic view of strategy and tactics is identified, with strategy as a formalised plan implemented through subordinate tactics ● Two alternative distinctions are offered: tactics as sociological modes of resistance to controlling strategies, and a processual view favouring more fluid dynamics between strategy and tactics
Vogel, R. Güttel, W. H.	2013	A review of the dynamic capability view (DCV) of strategic management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Three perspectives on the relationship between strategy practice and process research are identified: complementary, critical, and combinatory ● A combinatory framework is developed and used as a basis to call for further research ● Research has moved from the structural control view to a more adaptive conception over time ● To address this fragmentation, an integrative approach is presented that combines these two complementary views, focusing on the interplay of conceptualising and enacting strategies
Durand, R. Grant, R. M. Madsen, T. L.	2017	Addresses the expanding domain of strategic management research	
Mackay, D. Zundel, M.	2017	A review of strategy and tactics in the business and management literature	
Burgelman, R. A. Floyd, S. W. Laamanen, T. Mantere, S. Vaara, E. Whittington, R. Weiser, A. K. Jarzabkowski, P. Laamanen, T.	2018 2020	A review of strategy practice and strategy process literature A review of strategy implementation literature	

Strategy as practice: Four themes as tools for rethinking military strategy

The SAP school of thought took shape around the turn of the millennium.²³ The basic idea of SAP is to study strategy not as a document, plan, or blueprint but as an ongoing activity, as something that strategy practitioners *do*. In short, it turns strategy from a noun into a verb – strategising – that is performed, in practice. The promise of this turn towards practice is that the analysis of everyday practices, processes, routines, and rituals of strategy-making can deliver important clues about strategy; and by extension, how it may be done more effectively. In many respects, this agenda follows Machiavelli's realist dictum that we ought to analyse what an effective leader actually does to stay in power as opposed to debate what an ideal leader ought to do. In what follows, we use the key themes of military strategy of ends, ways, means and friction as discursive devices to structure and reframe conversations between military and organisational strategy.

Theme 1: Strategy is a verb, not a noun

How do strategy-making practices and processes shape or alter outcomes/end goals? The notion of 'doing' strategy (its practices and processes) is key to the SAP agenda. Much of the empirical work highlights the 'lived experience' of those involved in strategising.²⁴ The approach dissects the ongoing work that goes into thinking, writing, implementing, and re-thinking strategies. For instance, MacKay and Chia showed how the ongoing strategy process in a North American automotive supplier was patterned by strategic choice and chance, resulting in unintended consequences and the ultimate demise of the firm.²⁵ In these and other studies, the concept of practice carries much of the analytical weight of the agenda. Whittington developed a three-fold heuristic to define the meaning of practice: 'Practices refer to the various tools, norms, and procedures of strategy work, from analytical frameworks such as Porter's Five Forces to strategic planning routines such as strategy workshops. Praxis refers to the activity involved in strategy-making, for example, in strategic planning processes or meetings. Practitioners are all

²³Richard Whittington, 'Strategy as Practice', *Long Range Planning*, 29/5 (1996), 731–35; Eero Vaara, and Richard Whittington, 'Strategy-as-Practice: Taking Social Practices Seriously', *Academy of Management Annals* 6/1 (2012), 285–336.

²⁴Dalvir Samra-Fredericks, 'Strategizing as Lived Experience and Strategists' Everyday Efforts to Shape Strategic Direction', *Journal of Management Studies* 40/1 (2003); Brad MacKay et al., 'Strategy-in-Practices: A process philosophical approach to understanding strategy emergence and organizational outcomes', *Human Relations* 74/9 (2021), 1337–1339.

²⁵Bradley MacKay and Robert Chia, 'Choice, Chance, and Unintended Consequences in Strategic Change'.

those involved in, or seeking to influence, strategy-making'.²⁶ More critically, scholars proposed to anchor the notion of practice in Foucauldian tradition²⁷ suggesting a focus on how practices constitute strategy.

This focus on practices includes studying sites of strategising such as retreats, workshops, or meetings where strategy work is done. The idea here is that these sites condition actors' capacities to think strategically. Equally, time is an important structuring device that shapes how strategy work is accomplished. Planning cycles or engagement with history are important constraints or enablers for strategy development.²⁸ Last but not least, tools such as maps or digital visualisations are important building blocks of strategy practices that bring specific affordances.²⁹ The basic claim of the practice approach is that only through understanding spaces, temporal structures and artefacts do we arrive at an understanding of how strategy work is accomplished and how it becomes effective.

Possible implications for strategic ends

The practice agenda suggests such a focus on shifting ends as part and parcel of dynamic strategising. Within strategic studies itself, there are diverging views of what an end means. For instance, as Tom Mahnken points out, while Clausewitz held that destroying the enemy's army most often leads to victory, Sun Tzu was more interested in attacking the enemy's strategy and their alliances before seeking to destroy the opponent's army ranks.³⁰ The SAP approach invites an anthropological sensibility by understanding strategists as a 'tribe' with its own language and practices that in turn shape their way of defining possible ends and getting out of dead ends. Thus, one of the most intriguing aspects of the SAP literature is its focus on how ends in and of themselves are dynamic. Ends can change rapidly in response to the unexpected, and the practices of instituting strategy need to be able to adjust to such changes to be truly effective. In such a world, practices determine strategy and strategic ends in a way that is more profound than the stated aim of a conflict when it commences. In the First World War, when decisive victory proved elusive, military planners failed to effectively strategise how they could use the material and manpower at their disposal. Michael Geyer has argued that the absence of a particular strategy meant that the internal and external antagonisms unleashed by the decision to go to war

²⁶Vaara and Whittington, 'Strategy-as-Practice', 290.

²⁷Chris Carter et al., 'Strategy as Practice?' *Strategic Organisation* 6/1 (2008), 83–99.

²⁸Sarah Kaplan and Wanda Orlikowski, 'Temporal Work in Strategy Making', *Organization Science* 24/4 (2013), 965–95; Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, 'Toward a Theory of Using History Authentically: Historicizing in the Carlsberg Group', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 62/4 (2017), 657–97.

²⁹Martin Eppler and Ken Platts, 'Visual Strategizing: the Systematic Use of Visualization in the Strategic-Planning Process', *Long Range Planning* 42/1 (2009), 42–74.

³⁰Thomas Mahnken, 'Strategic Theory' in Baylis et al., *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies* (Oxford: 2016), 62.

perpetuated the conflict on the strength of micro politics and micro strategies with far-reaching repercussions.³¹ This is also a lesson that the USA is only now trying to come to terms with as the 'War on Terror' ends one of its most important phases. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has highlighted the reality that, whatever the supposed aims of the US when the administration of George W. Bush launched the US led invasion in 2001 (and even at the time these remain obscured and open to debate), the reality of the aim today has resulted in something rather different. In many ways, it was the USA's inability to systematically interrogate and adjust the aims of their war in Afghanistan in the face of growing quagmire that left the country with a terrible binary choice; stay in a permanent war or abandon a weak government and see it collapse (as it just has at the time of writing).

Theme 2: Focus on discourse, language and their performative effects

How do performative expressions of strategy-making such as discourse and language determine or challenge the ways strategies are implemented? This question problematises the ways in which strategy is accomplished. In response, SAP focuses on how discourse and language structure work on strategy.³² The underpinning assumption is that strategy work is first and foremost a linguistic accomplishment.³³ Strategy can be analysed as a language game that is distinct from other modes of making sense of the future.³⁴ It is an albeit costly form of storytelling in which narratives are crafted to make sense of an uncertain future and an equally ambiguous past.³⁵ Rather than being a decision-making tool, strategy is analysed as storytelling that rationalises and legitimises specific courses of action.³⁶ Here, discourse is analysed as one of the main linkages between power and knowledge: through framing challenges and opportunities, weaknesses and strengths, short and long-term, etc., strategy work enacts ways of thinking about the future. Critically, the specific way of seeing engendered by strategy might have performative effects, i.e., strategy brings about the reality it

³¹Michael Geyer, 'German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945', in Peter Paret et al., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: 1986), 533.

³²Christopher Fenton and Ann Langley, 'Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn', *Organization Studies* 32/9 (2011); Martin Giraudeau 'The Drafts of Strategy: Opening up Plans and their Uses', *Long Range Planning* 41/3 (2008).

³³Saku Mantere, 'What is Organizational Strategy? A Language-based View', *Journal of Management Studies*, 50/ 8 (2013).

³⁴Liliana Doganova and Martin Kornberger, 'Strategy's Futures', *Futures* 125 (2021).

³⁵David Barry and Michael Elmes, 'Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse', *Academy of Management Review* 22/2 (1997), 429–452.

³⁶Küpers et al. 'Strategy as Storytelling: A Phenomenological Collaboration', *Journal of Management Inquiry* 22/1 (2013), 83–100.

envisioned through its process.³⁷ This performative effect is at play in self-fulfilling prophecies as well as other forms of recursivity where the future shapes the present.³⁸

On a micro-level, SAP investigated plans as a 'genre' that follows an inherent logic (rather than responding to external necessity).³⁹ The genre drives the argument and constrains the imagination of the strategist as their work would not be recognisable if it did not adhere to the discursive rules of the genre. Equally, metaphors (such as the Darwinian struggle for survival; disruption; or in military terms: the Cold War dominos or the Axis of Evil) pattern strategic thought and invite certain conclusions whilst making others seem far-fetched.⁴⁰ Metaphors and other tropes have been analysed as forms of rhetoric and ambiguity that are not necessarily detrimental to strategy work.⁴¹ Ambiguity in strategic planning, for instance, has been described as a double-edged sword: while it may initially accommodate different, even conflicting perspectives, the resulting effects further down the line might lead to overextension and instigate a recurring pattern of adjustments.⁴²

Strategy is a discourse with which those in power extend their reach into the future. Strategy is a way to divide the world into friends and foes, opportunities and threats, strengths and weaknesses etc. As a linguistically informed strategy analysis showed, to name things is to exercise power over them: indeed, by categorising the environment in a specific way (e.g., axis of evil; domino theory; various framings of game theory, etc.), we construct a specific strategic reality – a reality that always could be otherwise, and hence a reality that warrants critical scrutiny. This point highlights that one of the fundamental tasks of scholarship is to speak truth to power.

This critical edge is part of the SAP school of strategic thought. For instance, Knights and Morgan posited that strategy is a discourse that formats reality in specific ways and ascribes specific subject positions to organisational managers.⁴³ In a further seminal contribution, Oakes et al. empirically described business planning as a form of 'pedagogy' that forced professional staff to submit to the language game of strategy.⁴⁴ Framing of problems and

³⁷D. Knights and G. Morgan, 'Corporate Strategy, Organizations, and Subjectivity: A Critique', *Organization Studies*, 12/2 (1991): 251–73.

³⁸Martin Kornberger and Stewart Clegg 'Strategy as Performative Practice: The Case of Sydney 2030', *Strategic Organization* 9/2 (2011), 136–62.

³⁹Francis Cornut et al., 'The Strategic Plan as a Genre', *Discourse and Communication* 6/1 (2012).

⁴⁰Loizos Heracleous and Claus Jacobs, 'Crafting Strategy: The Role of Embodied Metaphors', *Long Range Planning* 41/3 (2008), 309–25.

⁴¹John Sillince et al., 'Shaping Strategic Action through the Rhetorical Construction and Exploitation of Ambiguity', *Organization Science* 23/3 (2012), 630–50.

⁴²Chahrazad Abdallah and Ann Langley, 'The Double Edge of Ambiguity in Strategic Planning', *Journal of Management Studies* 51/2 (2014), 235–64.

⁴³Penny Dick and David Collings, 'Discipline and Punish? Strategy Discourse, Senior Manager Subjectivity and Contradictory Power Effects', *Human Relations* 67/12 (2014), 1513–36.

⁴⁴Leslie Oakes et al., 'Business Planning as Pedagogy: Language and Control in a Changing Institutional Field', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43/2 (1998), 257–92.

legitimacy of solutions occurred in the language of strategy, casting the world in rivals, opportunities, and weaknesses. Similarly, Kornberger and Clegg have argued that strategy-making in the context of public administration was a powerful device to shift frames of reference, mobilise the public, and articulate political will.⁴⁵ Fenton and Langley summarised much of this critical work when they pointed out that strategy narratives 'select and prioritise' – indeed, this is their ostensible managerial purpose.⁴⁶ However, as they achieve this, they also implicitly express, construct and reproduce legitimate power structures, organisational roles, and ideologies.⁴⁷ Processes of framing in which meanings are bestowed upon events as well as language are key to understanding how strategic realities are defined.

Possible implications for strategic ways

The single most important task for strategy, Strachan has argued, is to understand the nature of the war it is addressing and then, to manage and direct that war.⁴⁸ In practice, therefore, strategy is inherently pragmatic. Distinct from wartime, however, where strategy is primarily concerned with interaction with an enemy and the pursuit of a chosen set of ends in the face of determined opposition, peacetime strategy takes a different form. It is proactive and driven by language with the aim of matching means and ends as anticipated in the near future.⁴⁹ Based on SAP's focus on discourse, language and their performative effects military strategy can analyse how the language an institution employs may shape its perception of reality. In extreme cases, this can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. This focus is often overlooked in strategic studies, which can imply an assumed rationality or clarity in its linguistic construction of strategic plans that does not, in fact, exist. This is particularly the case with strategy documents, which often lay out seemingly rational, comprehensive plans that are flawed or destined to fail because of linguistic deceptions. For instance, public strategic reviews released to great fanfare, such as the UK's 2021 *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, often have ambitious strategic goals with stunted strategic ways. For instance, in its strategic review, the UK government said the nation would aim to be a high-tech superpower in the next decade but provided little useful language on how this was to be achieved (beyond the spending of vague sums of money). This is at least better than instances where the language is entirely deceptive. If a certain credit could be paid to Donald Trump, it is in his disinterest in pretending that strategic ways

⁴⁵Kornberger and Clegg, 'Strategy as Performative Practice'.

⁴⁶Fenton and Langley, 'Strategy as Practice'.

⁴⁷Dennis Mumby, 'The Political Function of Narrative in Organizations', *Communication Monographs* 54/2 (1987), 113–27.

⁴⁸Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 103.

⁴⁹Wess Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton, NJ: 2018), 73.

were in the 'national' interest as opposed to what was considered best for his personal or political fortunes. The state has an entire bureaucracy in control of language to create ways that are supposedly serving the national interest, when indeed the whole concept is open to question. If we start questioning such linguistic constructs, we can be analytically more clear and perhaps morally more honest about what our strategies are and how they are supposed to achieve their aims.

Theme 3: Focus on tools and technologies

How do the material tools and technologies available for crafting and implementing strategies both enable and constrain strategic activity? SAP does not depict strategic thinking as an abstract, Cartesian form of cognition; rather, the practice approach suggests strategy making to be facilitated, mediated, and thus structured, by tools and technologies.⁵⁰ These tools form the material base of how strategies are made.⁵¹ For instance, Kaplan analysed the Microsoft PowerPoint software, commonly used by organisational strategists as part and parcel of the 'epistemic machinery of strategy culture'.⁵² In her study, she dissects how the technology affords certain forms of 'collaboration and cartography', thus providing boundary conditions for the strategy process and its outcomes. In a further contribution, Knight and colleagues studied how PowerPoint creates 'strategic visibility': here, the technology is a tool that frames what matters and what remains excluded; such framing is an inextricable part and parcel of the strategic process in which power and knowledge are brought to bear on a specific situation.⁵³

This relation between tools and technologies of strategy making and their power effects has been discussed as performativity: the core idea is that tools format the world in a specific way, so they propose themselves as the answer.⁵⁴ Thus organisational strategy suggests that charts, maps, diagrams and other visualisations do not just analyse the world as it is; but as they format the world into certain categories, they subtly structure the space in which options present themselves.⁵⁵ In so doing, models of the world become models for the world.⁵⁶

⁵⁰Paula Jarzabkowski and Sarah Kaplan, 'Strategy Tools-in-Use: A Framework for Understanding "Technologies of Rationality" in Practice', *Strategic Management Journal* 36/4 (2015), 537–558.

⁵¹Stéphanie Dameron et al., 'Materializing Strategy and Strategizing Materials: Why Matter Matters', *British Journal of Management* 26/1 (2015), S1–S12.

⁵²Sarah Kaplan, 'Strategy and PowerPoint: An Inquiry into the Epistemic Culture and Machinery of Strategy Making', *Organization Science* 22/2 (2011), 320–346.

⁵³Eric Knight, et al., 'The Power of PowerPoint: A Visual Perspective on Meaning Making in Strategy', *Strategic Management Journal* 39/3 (2018), 894–921.

⁵⁴David Knights and Glenn Morgan, 'Corporate Strategy, Organizations, and Subjectivity: A Critique', *Organisation Studies* 12/2 (1991), 251–73; Kornberger and Clegg, 'Strategy as Performative Practice'.

⁵⁵Eppler and Platts 'Visual Strategizing'.

⁵⁶James Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: 1999).

A further implication of the emphasis on strategy tools and technologies is a reflection on the notion of strategy agency and actor hood. Rather than assuming strategy as resulting from strategists' will and representation, the practice approach analyses strategy as an outcome of distributed agency. The 'capacity for strategy is an effect of a more or less stable arrangement of material', and strategic action is a 'collective property', as science and technology scholars Callon and Law argued.⁵⁷ The practice agenda suggests that tools and technologies connect a distributed set of actors and institutions, de facto acting as boundary spanners that enable specific forms of communication and collaboration.⁵⁸

Possible implications for strategic means

The interrelationship between the tools and technologies available as a means to achieve strategic aims has been vital in strategic history. Eighteenth-century Habsburg leaders, for strategic more than commercial or artistic purposes, devoted significant resources to the creation of maps as well as the institutional and scientific infrastructure for advanced cartography.⁵⁹ Maps helped the leadership visualise and calculate the range of resources at their disposal, fight battles effectively, and reach favourable deals in postwar negotiations. The Habsburgs thus leveraged the means in natural and human resources to make their empire a unified polity and achieve victory over Prussia. In the case of the Second World War, be it the strategic bombing of Germany or Japan, the strategies were to a large degree determined by the technologies or tools at hand. Too often, however, strategic studies are based on the premise that the means can be adapted through ways to achieve an aim, when in reality the means and tools themselves determine strategic choice. The SAP literature has delved into that conundrum in detail, which could help in the future of cyber strategy for instance. The tools of cyber conflict are themselves various and determinative – stretching from open access websites such as Facebook to spread disinformation to AI controlled platforms that will soon be programmed to act on their own. Hence, to understand the future of cyber strategy, it is essential to recognise that tools have considerable potential to determine strategies and how they are crafted.

Theme 4: Open strategy and co-creative ecosystems

What are the most important elements of open, flexible structures which can allow for more effective adaptations to changing and unforeseen circumstances? As part of the SAP agenda, open strategy has been

⁵⁷ Michel Callon and John Law, 'After the Individual in Society: Lessons on Collectivity from Science, Technology and Society', *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 22/2 (1997), 165–82.

⁵⁸ Andreas Paul Spee and Paula Jarzabkowski, 'Strategy Tools as Boundary Objects', *Strategic Organization* 7/2 (2009), 223–232.

⁵⁹ Mitchell, *Grand Strategy of the Hapsburg Empire*, 43.

defined as 'a practice that involves upper echelon and non-upper-echelon organisational members as well as stakeholders from outside the organisation'.⁶⁰ It is premised on the idea that strategy may be a collective endeavour, harnessing rather than restricting strategic contributions from practitioners located across a wide organisational and institutional ecosystem. Consequently, it eschews a more traditional view of strategy work as residing within the exclusive remit of the most senior executives or top management team, i.e., the CEO (or the general) and their direct reports. Open strategy has received growing attention from organisational strategy scholars in recent years, mirroring the rise in popularity of open and co-creative organisational forms in practice such as Wikimedia.⁶¹

Commonly enabled by technology platforms including the increasingly pervasive communication services such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams in addition to the progressively influential social media sites, open strategy can imbue a range of benefits oftentimes lacking in more traditional, hierarchical topologies.⁶² Specifically, it may help in breaking-down conventional participatory boundaries, increasing the diversity of strategy's practitioners and reducing information asymmetries amongst stakeholders both internal and external to the organisation.⁶³ Improving practitioner involvement enables skillsets and experiences to be leveraged in ways that may previously have been either under-utilised or omitted entirely and a promise of 'increased transparency and inclusion regarding strategic issues'.⁶⁴ Organisations can thus develop more holistic understandings of their internal and external environments, and strengthen their ability to recognise and strategically respond to emergent events.

In shifting the dominant focus of strategy away from abstract macro-level phenomena towards a more holistic understanding encompassing the micro activities of strategy work enacted by a growingly diverse range of practitioners, a myriad of new methodological, conceptual, and interdisciplinary avenues are accessible to the scholarly and practitioner communities.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Asin Tavakoli et al., 'Open strategy: Literature Review, Re-analysis of Cases and Conceptualisation as a practice', *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 26/3 (2017), 178.

⁶¹Laura Dobusch et al., 'Closing for the Benefit of Openness? The Case of Wikimedia's Open Strategy Process', *Organization Studies* 40/3 (2019), 343–370.

⁶²João Baptista et al., 'Social Media and the Emergence of Reflexiveness as a New Capability for Open Strategy', *Long Range Planning* 50/3 (2017), 322–36.

⁶³Richard Whittington, *Opening Strategy: Professional Strategists and Practice Change, 1960 to Today* (Oxford: 2019).

⁶⁴Julia Hautz et al., 'Open Strategy', *Long Range Planning* 50/3 (2017), 298.

⁶⁵Jeffrey Hughes and Joe McDonagh, 'SISP as Practice: De-isolating SISP Activity across Multiple Levels', *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 30/2 (2021).

Possible Implications for Strategic Friction

Scholars have recognised strategy as an essential link between the military and policy worlds but also, as a dialogue lacking in equity.⁶⁶ This is so because policy must ultimately determine the direction of war but must also adjust itself to what is possible with the means available. Edward Luttwak conceptualised strategy on multiple horizontal and vertical levels which, he argued, constantly interacted with and reacted to each other.⁶⁷ This 'logic of strategy' unfolded in two dimensions: vertically, with the interplay of different levels of conflict, such as tactical, operational, technical and higher, amongst which there is no harmony, and horizontally, with the contentions of adversaries who sought to oppose, deflect, and reverse each other's moves making strategy paradoxical. A recent discussion in SAP literature has been on the importance of integrating outside factors, some largely outside of institutional control and the reach and reality of strategic planning (let alone imagination). This ability to cope with the unexpected and challenging Clausewitzian form of friction requires the construction of a flexible strategic structure. SAP argues that the best way to contend with such friction is to have in place an open-minded and diverse culture that can best understand what these unexpected challenges represent and how to respond to them.⁶⁸ This runs counter in many ways to traditional realist thinking which is based on power balances and calculations based on force. As Germany before the First World War demonstrates, and perhaps China today, trying to force a strategy into life based almost entirely on the reality of the application of national power or force can be counterproductive. In both cases, great powers, because they were not flexible enough to understand and integrate the concerns of others, ended up knitting together powerful coalitions to oppose their strategic plans. For instance, the British, French and Russians came together to oppose Germany before 1914, and more recently, the USA, India, Japan, Australia and Vietnam are acting increasingly together to contain China. Relying on force alone to achieve a successful strategy can be counterproductive. In both cases, being flexible and incorporating outside concerns would have benefited the strategic actor.

Future research: How organisational strategy challenges and may change security studies

Mark Twain once wrote that 'to a man with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail'. This observation underlines the temptations and traps that bedeviled the use of military forces in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; the

⁶⁶David Lonsdale, *Alexander the Great: Lessons in Strategy* (London: 2007), 6.

⁶⁷Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: 2003), xii.

⁶⁸Martin Kornberger et al., 'Exploring the Long-term Effect of Strategy Work: The Case of *Sustainable Sydney 2030*'. *Urban Studies*, 0042098020979546.

instinctive need to use them to try and solve difficult problems and in doing so often making things far worse. Strategy properly understood should be more about limiting the use of military power and the de-escalation of crises. Too often, however, it results in the employment of military force in conflicts. In this way, strategy has evolved into a tool to allow those in power to try and impose solutions on a problem using military forces in entirely inappropriate ways often leading to disasters from the US in Vietnam and the USSR in Afghanistan during the Cold War to what seemed a never-ending globalised 'War on Terror' that the USA waged until it evacuated its troops out of Afghanistan, leaving the country and its peoples in a rather disparate state. To address these failures, we have to address the way we think and conceive of strategy. Many of the issues that management and organisation theorists have identified in the SAP literature open fresh, perhaps even challenging perspectives that can help spur dialogue with more traditional, state-based, military strategy makers and scholars. Much of this dialogue concerns the importance of understanding and responding to the unexpected and unintended which can have profound influence on the ends, ways, means and friction of strategy making.

Future research in military strategy could study the actual practices, procedures, routines, and rituals of strategy work: what do strategy practices look like? How have they evolved over time? What are their effects? Who are the practitioners that play the role of experts in strategy making processes? What knowledge do they bring? Which discourses, which metaphors (think again axis of evil, war on terror) dominate strategic thought? What types of genres (e.g., national strategy, grand strategy, doctrines, manuals) delimit the space for strategic thought? How do new forms and formats for strategy making evolve and gain legitimacy? With regards to space and time, questions to study could include the temporality (frequency) of strategy, the sequencing of strategic 'episodes' (meetings) as well as the spaces for strategy making: are strategies discussed in situation rooms during crises, or in government retreats, corporate think tanks or NGO arenas? What are the tools and technologies that underpin strategy making? What performative effects do these tools have? How do new technologies (such as social media) change strategy-making capacity? What are the benefits of a more open and inclusive approach to military strategy? Which technologies could be utilised to enable open forms of military strategising? How could external partners be facilitated through more collaborative approaches to military strategy? How could open forms of strategy affect communications both between and across military ranks? What are the security considerations particular to more open approaches to military strategy? What are the 'dark sites' of strategy? What issues, which people, are silenced in the processes and practices of strategising? What futures are imagined and mobilised to change the present?

These concerns, well rehearsed in the SAP agenda, also invite methodological reflections. Rather than looking at strategy documents or plans, a practice agenda suggests looking at their making: in how far does the set of practices that result in 'a strategy' pattern this strategy? How could practices change to create the conditions for more desirable outcomes? Answering these central questions means engaging with the 'how' of strategy work, deploying the methods of qualitative social inquiry and fieldwork. It means bringing the sensibility of the anthropologist to the making of strategy. Critically, the SAP approach can help increase the researchers' sensibility towards this relationship between politics and strategy by analysing the implicit power relationships connecting strategy making and its effects. SAP can help to understand how this power is created, sustained and what its (unintended) consequences are or can be. The locus here is not on the power effect of a plan or a doctrine executed; rather, the realisation that the locus of power is backstage, often hidden, and working through practices, structures, languages, metaphors, technologies, and other practices of strategising.

Last but not least, SAP suggests a specific ethos of research: strategy research is not at the service of those in power; nor is its task to develop 'better' strategies (as one actor's better strategy might be another actor's decreasing room to manoeuvre). Rather, SAP research is critical in that it points out the unintended effects of strategy work and it does not shy away from speaking truth to power.

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