

The Perils of Limited War

Three challenges to success for a superpower

by LTC Jessica Farrell

Three challenges that pose the greatest obstacles to success for a superpower engaged in a limited war are hubris, ill-defined strategy, and restrictions. Limited war is military engagement in which a nation does not use all its weaponry to prevail. It reflects the sensibilities of an era of strategists who grappled with the realities of nuclear war, global power, and rapidly changing threats.¹ The Korean War and the Vietnam War provide useful examples of how hubris, ill-defined strategy, and restrictions can lead to defeat for a superpower engaged in limited war.

As Mao Tse-tung observed,

Everyone knows that, in doing a thing, if one does not understand its circumstances, its characteristics and its relations to other things, then one cannot know its laws, cannot know how to do it, and cannot do it well.²

This quote speaks to a frequently ignored reality for superpowers engaging the enemy: too much confidence can be fatal. Hubris leads to the assumption that one knows and understands the enemy and the conflict. It is easy for a superpower, a nation with lethal superiority and proven success, to underestimate smaller or seemingly less militarily capable enemies. To use a mythological analogy, limited war plays the Nemesis to superpower hubris.

The United States exhibited hubris in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Strategists underestimated the force necessary to obtain the military end state in both conflicts. They were convinced that American military force would trample a backward people with rudimentary weapons and a fledgling

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economy. In the Korean War, GEN MacArthur did not appreciate the Chinese threat and had contempt for Koreans who he considered childlike.³ In Vietnam, just like the French a decade earlier, the United States overlooked the industrious patriotism of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh to its peril.

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Hubris is not unique to limited war, but—if unchecked by good intelligence or good strategy—it has the dangerous consequence of allowing a superpower to engage without sufficient force. When that happens, the risk is an embarrassing defeat or a warped vision of the future that results in a poor exit strategy, costing more lives and resources than originally intended. Hubris can also produce messianic tendencies in a superpower. As seen in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, superpowers often act on the belief that other cultures can be molded and trained to adopt the “right” form of government or ideals. Hubris

also contributes to the second obstacle to superpower success: improper strategy.

Ill-defined strategy is immensely costly and unfortunately quite common in limited war. An existential threat seems to streamline ends, ways, and means in a way that limited war does not. When faced with an existential threat, survival is the end state—and all means and ways necessary to achieve survival are embraced. Limited war responds to a threat that does not rise to an existential level. It does not merit an “all out” approach, which is why the nuclear option is off the table.⁴ In limited war, strategists are left with the Sisyphean task of defining a “limited, local, patient, and flexible” strategy. As GEN George Marshall said, “Don’t fight the problem, decide it!”⁵

For some strategists, it is easier to focus on the costs or means of war than on the end. If strategists do not properly balance this tendency, however, the objectives may become too limited. Ignoring the ends to spend more time analyzing an area that is less nebulous and more data focused, while understandable, results in undeveloped dangerously ill-defined measures of success. Many argue, like Clausewitz, that political objectives should serve as ends because they provide the basis for the conflict.⁶ This has the effect of putting the onus on political leaders to explain the war and its strategy to the public. In any case, a cogent strategy is essential for success in limited war.

Linking strategy and political objectives may be helpful in creating sound strategy, but it is certainly not a panacea. During the Korean War, the Truman

administration failed to proffer a solid political objective as the leadership attempted to avoid war with China. In addition, miscommunication and mistrust between GEN MacArthur, his staff, and the White House adversely affected the operation. During Vietnam, military members and society at large felt betrayed by a political commitment to fight “a limited war with limited means.”⁷ Like Afghanistan, to the military and the public, victory in Vietnam seemed to be defined and accepted as a stalemate instead of an

means of the war, as well as the realities of the operational environment. Rules of engagement are a commander’s tool to manage the use of violence in battle. They are communicated to the trigger puller and discussed at all echelons to ensure clarity of purpose and policy. Nothing is more frustrating to the war fighter than restrictive rules of engagement, even if they reflect national security strategy goals or the objectives of the mission. Leaders at every echelon of command appreciate flexibility and authority to make decisions. The more

worst.”¹⁵ Hubris, weak strategy, and self-imposed restrictions are major obstacles to success in limited war. Based on the American experience in Korea and Vietnam, superpowers should not get in the habit of bringing a knife to a gunfight. Where war is required, policy makers must ensure that the armed forces have clear objectives and the rules and resources to achieve them.

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operational success. Vietnam is the quintessential conflict that forces an examination of the moral validity of limited war. The Vietnam experience made many question the ethics of deliberately sending Soldiers into battle with limited resources where the political objective was less than total victory.⁸

The third obstacle for superpowers in limited war is restrictions. The very phrase “limited war” is problematic. If war is, as Clausewitz describes it, “an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds,”⁹ any limitations inhibiting violence seem absurd. It seems illogical for a superpower to limit the scope of its lethality or accept defeat or losses to personnel or equipment in pursuit of an ephemeral end. This reality is why limited wars since the Korean War have been unsuccessful. As discussed above, superpowers put restrictions on the objectives of limited war such that something less than victory is deemed success. The “utmost bounds” of violence are also limited to weapons in an acceptable range of lethality. Perhaps the most remarkable restrictions are the rules of engagement themselves.

Limited war requires nuanced rules of engagement that reflect the policy of the superpower, the ends, ways, and

limited the war, the more restrictive the rules of engagement and the higher the authority required to use force. In limited wars, like Afghanistan, four-star approval may be required for an action that a platoon leader would have authorized in World War II.

In practice, limited war can result in rules of engagement that frustrate the war fighter and benefit the enemy. In Vietnam, the rules of engagement made American forces the equivalent of a boxer fighting with one arm tied behind his back.¹⁰ The rules of engagement at the time prohibited the bombing of the dikes in North Vietnam and restricted targets in Hanoi and Haiphong.¹¹ Savvy enemy forces adapt to our rules of engagement and gain an advantage by using our restrictive rules against us.¹² They operate in crowded areas, inhabit mosques and hospitals, and place women and children in structures so that positive identification cannot be established. In limited war, our self-imposed restrictions create an asymmetric advantage for the enemy.¹³

Clausewitz warned superpowers against limited war by pointing out the fallacy of war without bloodshed.¹⁴ He properly pointed out that “mistakes that come from kindness are the very

Notes

1. Michael Cannon, *The Development of the American Theory of Limited War*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1997).

2. Ibid.

3. David Halberstam, “MacArthur’s Grand Delusion,” *Vanity Fair*, (September, 2007), available at <https://www.vanityfair.com>.

4. Tom Engelhardt, “The Superpower Conundrum,” *The Nation*, (July 2015), available at <https://www.thenation.com>.

5. Ibid.

6. Donald Stoker, “Everything You Think You Know About Limited War Is Wrong,” *War on the Rocks*, (December 2015), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

7. Richard Falk, “What We Should Learn from Vietnam,” *Foreign Policy*, (January 2001), available at <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

8. Ibid.

9. Carl von Clausewitz, “On the Theory of War,” in *On War*, ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

10. “What We Should Learn From Vietnam.”

11. David French, “Our Immoral Rules of Engagement,” *The National Review*, (June 2015), available at <https://www.nationalreview.com>.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. *On War*.

15. Ibid.

