The Nature and Use of Power and Its Influence Upon State Goals and Strategies

by Dr. Hans J. Morgenthau

(A lecture delivered at the Naval War College)

I am supposed to speak about the role of power in our political and military strategy. One might think that it should not be necessary to elaborate upon this topic since the role of power in our political and military strategy ought to be evident. However, this is not so for two reasons: one historic, and one having to do with the great revolutions through which our political and military strategy has been passing in recent times.

Historically, we have had a strange illusion about the role that power plays in foreign policy and military strategy. Until quite some time after the end of the Second World War it was still widely held in this country that a nation—even a great nation—had a choice between what is called power politics and a foreign policy which is free from the taint of power. I remember very vividly that when I used to talk and write about the balance of power, power politics, etc., before, during, and after the Second World War, people looked at me as a kind of perverse fellow who talked about things which really ought to be abolished, and which we had hopes of abolishing, but which certainly did not need to be understood. I remember very vividly that at a lecture I gave before the Foreign Policy Association in Milwaukee in 1943, I mentioned the likelihood that the present struggle for power might continue after the Second World War, and that the Soviet Union might then perhaps be the enemy, and that we might then have to oppose our present ally for the sake of the same balance of power for which we were fighting. The President of the Association, who became a good friend of mine, told me many years afterward that people came up to him after the lecture and expressed their concern about my being a Fascist agent! It was difficult for us, for historic reasons, to accept the proposition that an organic and inevitable relationship exists between the power of a nation and the standing of that nation among the nations.

Take, for instance, the attitude which many took for a long time towards the United Nations, derived from the idea that the United Nations was an alternative to traditional foreign policy. Many thought that the nation had a choice between the traditional foreign and military policies, on the one hand, and a United Nations policy, on the other. This idea was very long in being discarded. Thus we are justified on historic grounds, in view of a prejudice deeply rooted in the American folklore of politics against the recognition and the use of power, in discussing the topic assigned to me.

There is, of course, a much more profound and serious reason for discussing this topic, because it bears upon great theoretical and practical issues which have faced great nations since the beginning of history and which face us in particularly urgent and unprecedented ways under present world conditions.

Reproduced with permission of the NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW, February 1964 and the author Hans J. Morgenthau.

Let me say first of all that traditionally a nation has at its disposal two different types of power—military and nonmilitary. While the nature of military power is obvious and does not need to be elaborated, the nature of nonmilitary power is in need of further explanation. For nonmilitary power encompasses the whole spectrum of activities which are conducive to changing the will of another individual or collectivity of individuals. All power, military or nonmilitary, serves one purpose—to change the will of another nation. What we want to do when we embark upon foreign policy, and what we want to do when we use the threat or the actuality of physical violence, is to change the will of the opponent. He wants to do something, or he is doing something which runs counter to our interests, and so we try, through the peaceful means of diplomacy or through the violent means of war, if need be, to change his mind.

It follows from this simple and obvious relationship between the means and the ends of foreign policy that military power receives its purpose and its function from the political objective of the nation on behalf of which it is employed. And again this is a simple, and so it seems, an obvious principle. But while it is simple and obvious in theory, it has by no means proven so in practice. For one can say that many nations, ours included, have made grievous mistakes in neglecting this relationship between military force and political objectives.

Let me give you as an example the military strategy of the Second World War as pursued by the United States, on the one hand, and as recommended by Churchill and actually pursued by Stalin, on the other. We fought the Second World War for one single objective: to defeat the enemy as quickly, as thoroughly, and as cheaply in terms of human life as possible. This was a strictly military approach to the problem. There was no political context within which this military strategy could operate. When Churchill suggested at the beginning of 1945 that the allied armies go as far east as possible in Europe, that they should stay where they stood until the Soviet Union had complied with its part of the Yalta agreement, a very interesting exchange of wires occurred between Generals Marshall, Eisenhower, and Bradley, which to my mind clearly demonstrates the political vacuum within which our military strategy operated. Rejecting Churchill's proposals, the American generals, in the best tradition of the subordination of the military to the political authorities, declared that it was none of their business to take into consideration the political consequences of their military strategy. They had to win the war, and it was for others to worry about the political consequences. But there was nobody on our side who worried about the political consequences, and so we fought and won the war strictly on military grounds, with the disastrous political consequences of which we are aware today. Stalin, on the other hand, went as far west as he could and stayed there; and the division of Germany and of Europe, the fact that Berlin is an island in a Red sea, are the results of a politically oriented military strategy conducted by the Soviet government.

This concentration, on the part of the United States, upon the military aspects of military strategy without concern for the political consequences, is unfortunately not an isolated incident in the history of American thinking and practice. The First World War provides another example of the same kind of approach to the relationship between military strategy and political objectives. Here again we had one aim: to win the war, to get rid of Imperial Germany, to bring the boys home, and then to forget about the whole thing and return to isolation.

In other words, we have traditionally regarded war as a kind of interruption of the normalcy of peace, which has no organic relation with the peace that preceded it or with the peace that will follow it. In truth, of course, peace and war are organically connected, as foreign policy and military strategy are; they are not two separate self-sufficient technical departments. They are one whole, both serving the same objectives, each by means appropriate to itself. Yet this distinction between peace and war, foreign policy and military strategy, as though one were good and the other bad, one being something you may indulge in innocently and the other being something you must shun aside and only take seriously in an emergency—this whole dichotomy is again deeply ingrained in our traditional thinking about foreign policy and military strategy.

Only in recent years, under the impact of drastic and unmistakable experiences, have we come, at least in a certain measure, to recognize the intimate and organic relationship between peace and war, foreign policy and military strategy.

However, one ought not to be too optimistic about our ability to learn from experience, for there are more recent examples of the persistence of this compartmentalization of thinking and practice. Take, for instance, the comments which one hears from time to time about our policies in South Vietnam. Here again there is a tendency to separate military operations from the political context. People will say, 'Let's not worry about the political context, let's go on with the war.' But obviously you can go on with a war, with a chance of success, only if you have a political context which is promising in terms of your military objectives.

One could even mention, if one wanted to push the matter further, our overall alliance policy, as it has developed since the end of the Second World War, as an example of this tendency of looking at foreign policy as one subject and at military policy as another. Certainly many of our alliances have not been the result of a well-thought-out foreign policy, to which military considerations were subordinated, but they have been established and maintained in good measure as an end in itself. There was a time when we approached the problem of alliances as a stamp collector collects stamps, assuming that we are the better off the more allies we have. So we have had a tendency to collect allies regardless of our interests, regardless of the power considerations involved, regardless even of military advantage, and even oblivious of military liabilities some of those alliances entailed for us.

Let me now turn from this general consideration of the necessary subordination of military strategy to political policy to the great revolution which has occurred in this relationship and which is the result of the availability of nuclear weapons. Throughout history, from the very beginning to the end of the Second World War, there has always existed a rational relationship between violence as the means and the ends of foreign policy. That is to say, a statesman in the prenuclear age could, and actually did, calculate whether he could achieve his objectives by peaceful means, or whether he had to resort to the threat or the actuality of violence. A statesman in that period was very much like a labor leader who must calculate whether he can achieve what he seeks by the peaceful means of collective bargaining, or whether he has to resort to industrial warfare in the form of a strike. Or, to use another comparison, a statesman who would choose war acted very much like a gambler who is willing to risk a tolerable fraction of his resources. If he wins the risks taken are justified by the gains made; if he loses he generally hasn't lost everything. Even a Hitler with unlimited objectives still remained within that rational tradition of the relationship between violence as a means and the ends of foreign policy. Even though Hitler lost his war for total stakes as completely as a war can be lost, Germany did not disappear from the map and is again today, only 18 years after the end of the Second World War, one of the great powers on the face of the earth.

The availability of nuclear power has changed this rational relationship. Imagine for a moment that a nuclear war would have to be fought over the Western presence in Berlin or over the Russian presence in Cuba, two (in this respect) similar situations, both lending themselves to the same kind of speculation. Certainly the objects of the war, West Berlin and Cuba, would be wiped from the face of the earth, and in all probability a belligerent in such a nuclear war would suffer intolerable and possibly definitive damage. This is the radical change, and I should say the only revolutionary change, which has occurred in the structure of international relations since the beginning of history. Considering the destructiveness of the means in relation to the ends, nuclear violence is no longer a rational means to the ends of foreign policy. This is not to say that nuclear war has become impossible. Unfortunately in foreign policy, as in human affairs in general, what is irrational has not of necessity also become impossible. It is quite possible that if the present trend continues, sooner or later a nuclear war might have to be fought. But we ought to be aware of the fact that such a war would have a function quite different from the

function which conventional wars have performed: the latter were, in contrast to nuclear war, rational means to the ends of foreign policy.

The governments which are in the position to wage a nuclear war, the United States and the Soviet Union, are fully aware of this fact, and their awareness of this fact has led to a radical change in their use of power for their respective national purposes. We are here in the presence of a great paradox in that governments which in terms of their material power are infinitely more powerful today than any government has ever been are much less able to use such power, or any effective power as a matter of fact, on behalf of their interests than were their much less powerful predecessors. Take again the examples of Berlin and Cuba.

In November 1958, Mr. Khrushchev presented the United States with what amounted to an ultimatum. He said, 'Get out of Berlin within six months, or else.' He repeated this procedure by telling us in the Spring of 1961, 'At the end of the year you will be out of Berlin, or else.' But there was no 'else'; we are still in Berlin in about the same position in which we were five years ago and Khrushchev did not follow up his threats with any kind of effective action. This kind of inconsistency, of loss of face, would have been inconceivable in the prenuclear age. No statesman could have survived it; he would have lost his reputation, if not his office. But in the nuclear age a statesman on whose decisions the fate of his own nation, if not of the civilized world, depends is fully aware of the enormous and intolerable risks which a threat of violence, nuclear or conventional, entails for all concerned. And so while statesmen still talk and threaten in prenuclear terms, when the chips are down or when they are afraid the chips might come close to being down, they pull back and do not dare to use violence of any kind.

Take our policy toward Cuba as it was revealed in the crisis of October 1962. We went a considerable distance on that road which might have led to nuclear war, but we stopped before we had reached what we had declared to be our objective—the elimination of the Russian military presence in Cuba-because we were afraid, rightly or wrongly, lest by going farther we would come too close to nuclear war. I have gone on record as believing that it was the wrong decision to stop at this point. But I am fully aware of the enormous responsibilities which the President had in this matter, of the great uncertainties that faced him, and of the very grave consequences which, one way or other, would flow from his decision. In any event, rightly or wrongly, the President stopped at a certain point and refrained from using the power at our disposal because he believed that to use that power to the full would create the intolerable risk of nuclear war.

I must be satisfied with giving you these few examples. One could write a history of post-World War II diplomacy in terms of the limiting influence which the availability of nuclear power has had upon the foreign and military policy of nuclear nations. As a matter of fact, nuclear powers are much more restrained in their use of violence—any kind of violence, conventional or nuclear—than are nonnuclear powers. Great Britain and France dared to go to war in 1956 over Suez. The Soviet Union and the United States stopped them. Again I have been very critical of our diplomacy in this affair. But it is important to recognize in the context of this discussion that that diplomacy derived again from the recognition that the use of any violence, even of the conventional kind, carries within itself the risk of escalating into the use of nuclear violence. For another example, take our strategy in the Korean War. That strategy was, of course, primarily dominated by that same fear of going too far in the use of conventional violence and thereby conjuring up the spectre of nuclear war.

Here, then, is the paradox: the nuclear powers are infinitely more powerful than any nation has ever been, but they are much less able, because of the disproportionate relationship between the magnitude of their power and the objectives of foreign policy, to use their power for the purposes of their foreign policies.

Another new dimension in the use of power on behalf of the objectives of nations has to do with the emergence of so-called new and uncommitted nations, for whose allegiance the great powers compete. Obviously, such a nation—and you can take any new African nation that

comes to mind—is under typical circumstances not susceptible to military threats or diplomatic inducements and pressures. If you want to prevent such a nation from going over to the communists, it will do you no good to threaten it with military violence, nor will it do you any good to use the traditional methods of diplomatic pressure or diplomatic promises. Both methods are obviously inadequate to bring about the objective, which is to keep the uncommitted nation at least in a detached neutral position and at best to bring it over to the Western side. Thus both sides in the cold war have embarked upon a policy, which is not new in its essence but certainly novel in the extent to which the national resources have been committed to its support, and which is generally called the policy of foreign aid. That is to say, we are trying to achieve our objectives with regard to the new and uncommitted nations through the methods of technical and economic aid and all kinds of psychological methods related to them.

Foreign aid is a very important new element in our armory of foreign policy, and it is also, as you well know, an unpopular element. Its unpopularity, it seems to me, is intimately related to the intellectual and practical confusion which has beset it in the past. This observation is related to what I have said before about the tendency toward the self-sufficiency of separate technical enterprises in our foreign and military policy. For we have tended to look at foreign aid, too, as such a self-sufficient technical enterprise, this time of an economic nature. We have thought that a nation is underdeveloped because it is lacking in capital and technological know-how. So give it capital and technological know-how and you will put it on the road to economic development.

It has, at least I hope, by now become clear to us that economic development is an infinitely more complex phenomenon than is indicated by these relatively simple remedies. In fact, it requires not only strictly economic and technological remedies, but is predicated first of all upon certain preeconomic rational and moral factors. In other words, many underdeveloped nations are underdeveloped not because they are lacking in capital and technological know-how, but they are lacking in capital and technological know-how because they are intellectually and morally underdeveloped. I have put it in a kind of epigrammatic statement, which has been widely quoted, by saying in an article, ‘As there are bums and beggars, so there are bum and beggar nations.’ If you go to the Bowery in New York and give economic aid to one of the men you meet there at the curb, it is very unlikely that you will put any of them on the road to economic development. Indeed, you will put them on the road to increased consumption of alcoholic beverages. For their deficiency which has prevented them from making an economic success of their lives is not the lack of capital; it is rather a moral and intellectual deficiency which has made them what they are. And so it is with certain nations.

Certain nations are in a state of lethargy and find themselves not only in a precapitalistic, but prerational stage of development to such an extent that no amount of money and technological know-how is likely to put them on the road to economic development. Insofar as such development is possible at all, it will come about slowly and painfully through a moral and intellectual transformation from within, but not through outside intervention. Take as one example the phenomenon of saving, which for us is an obvious and almost natural element in economic development—to save either for a future emergency or for the purpose of profitable investment. But this very concept of saving, the idea of what saving is all about, is alien to hundreds of millions of people and to most of those who make up the populations of underdeveloped nations. You may perhaps be acquainted with the story of the Indian porter who refused to carry another suitcase because he had already eaten that day. Where one encounters this kind of moral attitude toward a fundamental economic problem, one is unable to promote economic development, no matter how much money is spent, no matter how much effort is made.

I would also say that one of the great misunderstandings and one of the main sources of disappointment has been the assumption that foreign aid is primarily aimed at economic

development, and that it is a kind of charitable enterprise through which we extend certain public welfare programs from the domestic onto the international scene. This is by no means so. Most of what we call foreign aid has nothing to do with economic development. Much of it is military aid, and much of it is what was called, in less delicate periods of history, bribery; that is to say, you buy a government, either lock, stock, and barrel or for a specific purpose.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, such practices were performed quite openly. After the conclusion of the Treaty of Basel of 1795, by which Prussia withdrew from the war against France, the Prussian Minister Hardenberg received from the French government valuables worth 30,000 francs and complained of the insignificance of the gift. In 1801, the Margrave of Baden spent 500,000 francs in the form of 'diplomatic presents,' of which the French Foreign Minister Talleyrand received 150,000. It was originally intended to give him only 100,000, but the amount was increased after it had become known that he had received from Prussia a snuffbox worth 66,000 francs as well as 100,000 francs in cash.

What was done until about 150 years ago openly, without concealment or pretense, we do today more subtly. We send all kinds of missions to certain foreign countries to reform everything from A to Z; but what we are actually doing is to stuff the coffers of the ruling group with dollars in support of our foreign policies. I am not arguing against the practice itself. I only argue against the pretense and against the waste of money which that pretense involves. Certainly we could buy certain governments for a fraction of the price we are paying if we knew what we were doing.

Another type of foreign aid is what you might call prestige aid. It has nothing to do with economic development either. Governments of many underdeveloped nations, especially when they are new ones, must have an airline of their own. They can't manufacture airplanes; they can't service them; they can't fly them. But they must have their national colors and coat of arms painted on the fuselage. A steel mill was until recently a status symbol for the underdeveloped nations. Now it is being replaced by the atomic reactor. More often than not, the airline or the steel mill has nothing to do with economic development. They are symbols of having arrived in the 20th century; they are mere status symbols. Foreign aid supporting such enterprises is political in nature and has nothing to do with economic development. Again I want to say that I am not opposed to such measures per se, but that one has to know what one is doing if one wants to be successful and if one wants to do it as rationally and cheaply as possible.

I should say that, in certain instances at least, the Russians have been much more successful in the subordination of economic aid to political purposes than we have been. I only need to remind you of the famous case of the paving of the streets of Kabul, which we refused to do on sound economic grounds and which the Russians did for political reasons. On the other hand, the Russians have harmed themselves enormously in Africa because of their commitment to Marxism. So we have had our handicaps and the Russians have had theirs. But while we have not the possibility nor the interest to do anything about the handicaps of the Russians, we can do something about ours.

Here again I come back to what I have said before concerning the relationship between military and political policy. The same holds true of all aspects of what you might call the security policies of a nation, and it holds true of economic policy as well. What we do in the economic field, what we do in the field of political warfare, propaganda for instance, must be subordinated to the overall political objectives of the nation. Only when we do this will we be able to establish the vital link between political objectives and the means, peaceful or military, at their disposal. Only then will we be able to establish a balance between our objectives and the means at their disposal.

There have been periods in our history, and I am thinking particularly of the period between the First and Second World Wars, when the objectives we set ourselves for our foreign policies were far below the means which were at our disposal. We emerged from the First World War as potentially the most powerful nation on earth, yet our influence was that of a third-rate power in

the concert of the nations. In order to stop the Japanese expansion into China, we proclaimed the so-called Stimson Doctrine of the nonrecognition of territorialacquisitions by violence. This doctrine did not stop any Japanese soldier in Manchuria or China proper, and that policy has been correctly called a policy of making faces, that is, a completely ineffective policy.

There is another extreme to which a great power can go, and that is to set itself objectives which it cannot achieve with the means at its disposal. Of that extreme, Hitler's Germany is the prime example in recent history. The objectives Hitler set himself went far beyond the means available. There are, then, two great pitfalls, besides the others I mentioned, which a great power must try to avoid: to set itself objectives which fall short of what it can achieve, and to set itself objectives which go beyond what it can achieve. Balance between means and ends, balance between the purposes of a nation and the power which a nation has at its disposal-this balance is the ultimate ideal goal which those responsible for foreign policy and military strategy must try to achieve.

Dr. Morgenthau has served as a consultant, Department of State, 1949-51. He was associated with the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, 1958; with the Foreign Service Educational Foundation, 1959-60; and was visiting professor of government, Department of Government, Harvard University, 1960-61.

He has been author or co-author of numerous books in the field of political science since 1929. Among the latest are: *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1946); *Politics among Nations* (New York, Knopf, 3rd ed., May 1960); and *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York, Knopf, 1951).

© From *Naval War College Review,* Feb 1964, Vol. XVI, No. 6, pp. 18-30, "The Nature And Use Of Power And Its Influence Upon State Goals And Strategies," by Dr. Hans J. Morgenthau. Reproduced by permission.