

Analysis

The long shadow

Victory, defeat, and grand strategy

Paul van Hooft

Victory and defeat in the Second World War have cast a long shadow, specifically in the US, UK, France, and Germany. How did and do they shape transatlantic grand strategies? This article is a concise summary of an extensive dissertation, which found that experiences with victory and defeat lead to three separate, but complementary effects on the use of force and diplomacy. These effects and the experiences of the Second World War persisted through the Cold War and even today.

How does war shape strategy? War is often assumed to have a strong effect on post-war beliefs and behavior. This makes intuitive sense, and is reflected in various ways in existing scholarly research on collective memory, on the use of analogies during decision-making, and on war-weariness.¹ These point out that wars are invoked as lessons to highlight and dissect normative questions, to understand new crises and challenges, and they are used to attack political opponents. We are reminded that displaying weakness to authoritarian opponents is as morally wrong and ineffective as when Britain and France appeased Hitler in Munich, and the Nazi-regime is the symbol of authoritarianism and militarism run amuck that should 'never again' be allowed to take place. Images of the trenches of the First World War connote the senselessness of war and how wrong-headed policymakers sacrifice soldiers for poorly thought-out plans, as do invocations of Vietnamese jungles. Similarly, to the anti-war movements, the 2003 invasion of Iraq underlines that we should distrust policymakers. Past wars therefore become powerful tools to diagnose the uncertainty of the present. Their impact is much greater than merely the use of analogies during crises: experiences with war define the core beliefs on strategy within the nation-state. Understanding exactly how and why they do so is difficult, however, as lessons contradict each other and policymakers could pick and choose between them.

I argue that victory and defeat in war shape the post-war grand strategies of states, and specifically their willingness to use of force and diplomacy. The book does so through the central case of the Second World War and the experiences and the post-war strategic behavior of its belligerents, and focuses on four cases in particular: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. I argue that victory and defeat have three effects on postwar security policy that last multiple decades: they make the use of force and diplomacy more or less likely; they strengthen or weaken policymakers; and the nature of the experiences with war shapes specific elements of national grand strategy concerning the force posture and alliances. These effects are separate, but complementary, and reinforce one another. Most importantly, the high-level beliefs on grand strategy preselect later policies.²

War, loss, and experience

The Second World War offers an exemplary case to explore these ideas. The war involved all major states in Europe, America, and Asia. Yet, wartime experiences varied strongly between states. Some states not only lost massive numbers of citizens, but also experienced the humiliation and shame of military defeat, surrender, occupation, collaboration, or even the responsibility for genocide. Other states, in contrast, neither experienced invasion nor occupation, and their casualties, however terrible, were mostly military in nature. For other states, most of them, the experiences were more mixed and ambiguous. They fought and came out on the winning side, but at significant costs, often suffering huge numbers of civilian and military casualties, occupation, and the moral ambiguity of collaboration. The US, the UK, France, and Germany are similar in most other ways, but strongly vary on these experiences and they also widely differ when it comes to matters of using military force and sovereignty in international diplomacy.³

The book tests the argument that victory and defeat shape post-war behavior through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. This includes regression analysis using different measures of wartime defeat and loss for all the participating states of the Second World War. However, the greatest part of the research focuses on the US, UK, France, and Germany, through historical analysis, counterfactual thought experiments, content analysis of documents, and a series of fifty interviews with American, British, French, and German policymakers. From this variety of methods, the research produces the following findings.

Victory to force, defeat to diplomacy

The first of the book's findings is that victory and defeat in war shape the likelihood of states using force and diplomacy. Victory shows that good can be accomplished through the use of force. In contrast, death and destruction are sobering, both for policymakers and societies.

Consequently, the states that had experienced occupation and surrender, had aggressed, fought on the losing side, and had suffered high numbers of casualties, were significantly less likely to use force or threaten the use of force, and more likely to be a member of international organizations or use diplomatic representation than states that had been victorious and suffered few civilian and military casualties. In contrast, the states that had been more victorious in war become more willing to again use force after the war, and less likely to use diplomacy.

Victory, defeat, and leadership

The second finding is that victory and defeat shape the legitimacy and influence of the actors involved in national strategy. Victory generally strengthens the civilian and military policymakers, while defeat weakens them. This means that not only are beliefs shaped by experiences with war, but also the ability of policymakers to pursue their beliefs. Not every victory and defeat matters equally, as blame and credit can be assigned to specific domestic actors.

The US and Germany, as the two extreme cases, best illustrate how changes in strategic beliefs and domestic distribution of influence and legitimacy reinforce each other. The US victory in the Second World War strengthened the position of policymakers and came at

relatively low costs and casualties – American policymakers did not need to make a great effort at domestic mobilisation for the war effort. So, while American grand strategy had become ambitious after the war, civilian and military policymakers also had greater autonomy to actually use force though they used references to the past, such as ‘Munich’, to defend forceful policies in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and other cases.⁴ Vietnam undermined the legitimacy of the use of force, but the post-Vietnam victim narrative surrounding the armed forces de facto strengthened the US military’s autonomy, as did the victory in the Gulf War. In contrast, not only had German total defeat in the Second World War already led to a drastic change in the post-war core beliefs of German policymakers and of the public at large, but the defeat also delegitimised the pre-war, traditional dominance of the German military and the executive. In post-war Germany, both the executive and the armed forces are therefore highly constrained and this further limits the ability to consider, let alone threaten with or use, military force.

The UK and France, as the two more ambiguous cases, show the more particular effects of experiences with war. The British victory in the Second World War, in contrast to that of the US, came at great social cost, personified in the popular myth of the ‘people’s war’. This created a populist myth with a central role for strong personal leadership – as seen in the Falklands, Kosovo, and Iraq. The complex experience of France in the war also affected postwar leadership. The humiliating French defeat in 1940 was blamed on pre-war divisions between the political Left and Right that had impeded effective military innovation and integration with French alliance strategy. It was only the founding of the Fifth Republic and the return to power of De Gaulle that largely resolved the political tensions of twentieth century France and established foreign and defense policy as the ‘reserved domain’ of the French President. That executive autonomy has allowed the French state to use force and diplomacy decisively.

Victory, defeat, and grand strategy

The third and final finding is that experiences with war shape not just the willingness to use force and diplomacy in general, but also the core beliefs of policymakers on the best composition of grand strategy in terms of military capabilities and alliances. These beliefs preselect other policies, making certain choices in later contingencies more or less likely. The effects of this are less prominent in the public debate compared to the emotionally charged analogies to Hitler, Vietnam, Iraq or other policy failures, but they are more fundamental to the overall strategic direction of states.

At the core of the ambitious global scope of US grand strategy is the sense of vulnerability American policymakers suffer from. That vulnerability became central to their thinking after the sudden collapse of Europe in 1940 and the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. US leadership came to be seen as essential as Europeans were considered unable to resist authoritarian states on their own, or were prone to be seduced by extremist ideology. American policymakers sought to avoid a return to so-called isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s at all costs.⁵ Instead, they pursued US leadership and accepted entangling alliances, including the establishment of a permanent military presence in Europe and Asia during and after the Cold War. The perceived need for credibility led to increased American involvement in peripheral conflicts such as Vietnam. I argue that without the crucial experience of the 1930s and 1940s, where American policymakers felt the world slipping

dangerously beyond their grasp, very little of the succeeding seven decades of postwar policy would have taken place.

Similarly, the behavior of the European allies of the US in relationship to American power was defined by their experiences with the Second World War. The traditional British tendency to rely on off-shore balancing no longer sufficed after British policymakers failed to maintain a continental balance of power and to prevent the fall of Europe to Germany in 1940. During the Cold War, the UK committed itself to the continent through the NATO alliance. It placed permanently prepositioned forces in Europe, and did not rely on a national nuclear weapon. Yet, British policymakers still considered the UK as exceptional to the continent due to its unconquered status, even though they were dependent on the 'special relationship' with the US.

Likewise, the sudden and catastrophic military defeat in June 1940, and the collapse of France's alliances, transformed French strategic thinking on diplomacy and force. After the war, France therefore sought to avoid dependence on allies for its security – as the experiences in Indochina, Suez, and Algeria confirmed France's negative appraisal of the US and the UK. General De Gaulle in particular perceived the NATO alliance as merely entangling France without actually securing it, as the American nuclear deterrent was not credible. Instead, at great cost, French policymakers pursued an autonomous French deterrent. The resulting grand strategy risked alienating the US, precisely when France needed the US the most.

Germany offers the greatest contrast between its pre- and post-war strategies. In both the First and the Second World War, German policymakers had relied on an extremely offensive force posture to ensure German survival against encirclement by perceived threats to its East and West. Germany's total defeat during the Second World War reversed those beliefs. To avoid renewed isolation, German policymakers embedded Germany as deeply as possible in NATO and the European institutions, and adopted a highly defensive force posture. Germany's experiences with Ostpolitik, European unification, and the French-German bilateral relationship confirmed German faith in multilateral solutions, and blocked any pursuit of an alternative, ambitious strategy. Yet, the German discomfort with military force undermines the centrality that alliances and multilateral diplomacy play in German strategy.

Why it matters in the 21st century

The importance of this analysis is consequently more than a tale about analogical thinking: it points to larger differences in beliefs on both sides of the Atlantic that derive from experiences with wars and that continue to persist after the Cold War into the present. Moreover, the memories of the war continue to define the perceptions of American and European policymakers⁶, as well as their counterparts in Russia.⁷ Both 'always Munich' and 'never again war' are bad models of foreign policy. Over-responding to Iraq in 2003 was as poor an idea as not responding strongly in the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, or to the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2014.

In terms of international threats and challenges, the coming decades are certain to be more different for the West than any era since 1945, whether due to an increasingly unstable Middle East, a resurgent Russia, or a rising China. In fact, Asia has its own historical legacies

in international affairs to contend with, the relationship between Japan and China obviously representing the most dangerous one. While we are not bound to the past, how we understand it strongly defines our approach to the future. Strategy involves an open-minded matching of ends and means; by definition there are no benign biases in strategic thinking. The roads not already taken will be overlooked, and the future might repeat the past for reasons both tragic and avoidable.

Dr. Paul van Hooff is a lecturer on strategy and transatlantic relations at the University of Amsterdam (UVA). He defended his dissertation 'The Future in the Past: Victory, Defeat, and Grand Strategy in the US, UK, France and Germany' on January 27, 2015.

1. For example: May, E.R., 1973. *'Lessons' of the Past. The Use and Misuses of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press; Legro, J., 2005. *Rethinking the world: great power strategies and international order*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
2. Grand strategy is the complex whole of specifically diplomatic and military, but also economic, social, and other instruments of a state use to both shape and respond to its international and domestic environment, to ensure national survival and shape the order.
3. For example: Daalder, I.H., 2001. 'Are the United States and Europe heading for divorce?', *International Affairs*, 77(3), pp. 553-567; Calleo, D., 2002. *Rethinking Europe's Future*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press; The respective American and European approaches towards regime change in Iraq in 2002 and 2003, but also in other post-Cold War conflicts, such as the break-up of Yugoslavia, seemed examples of such apparently deep-rooted differences.
4. Examples: *[Al Qaeda are] 'the heirs to fascism', and 'like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased', only 'defeated'* – President Bush (43). Bush Marks Pearl Harbor Anniversary Norfolk, Va., Dec. 7, 2001; *'Surrender in Vietnam' would not 'bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression'* - President Johnson. Press conference, July 28, 1965.
5. For example: *'The victors of World War I squandered their triumph in this age-old struggle when they turned inward, bringing on a global depression and allowing fascism to rise, and reigniting global war. After World War II, we learned the lessons of the past. In the face of a new totalitarian threat this great nation did not walk away from the challenge of the moment.'* - US 1995 National Security Strategy , p. 2.
6. *'We run the risk of repeating the mistakes made in Munich in '38. We cannot know what will happen next... This time we cannot meet Putin's demands'* - Premier Cameron, *'David Cameron Warns of 'Appeasing Putin as we did Hitler''*, *The Guardian*, Sept. 2, 2014.
7. Examples: *'[Ukrainian action] sadly reminds me the events of the Second World War, when German fascist occupants surrounded our cities'* - President Putin *'Defiant Putin Compares Kiev to Nazis'*, *Reuters*, August 29, 2014.