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Andi Widjajanto
Department of International Relations, University of Indonesia, andi.widjajanto09@ui.ac.id

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MODIFIERS FOR MILITARY STRATEGY

Andi Widjajanto
Universitas Indonesia
E-mail: andi.widjajanto09@ui.ac.id

Abstrak
Tulisan ini menjelaskan variasi yang muncul dalam strategi militer dengan menganalisa empat faktor yang berperan sebagai determinan dalam perumusan strategi militer, yaitu struktur sistem internasional, budaya institusi militer, inovasi teknologi, dan penggunaan kekuatan militer. Analisa pertama tentang variasi dari strategi militer yang terkait dengan sistem internasional dilakukan dengan menggunakan teori perimbangan ofensif dan defensif. Teori ini menunjukkan bahwa variabel-variabel sistemik seperti perimbangan kekuatan dan perlombaan senjata, berpengaruh terhadap pilihan strategi militer suatu negara. Analisa kedua tentang budaya militer menunjukkan bahwa setiap negara memiliki kepercayaan strategis tentang perang yang terbentuk karena beberapa faktor seperti pengalaman perang, pertimbangan geostrategis, evolusi organisasi militer, dan proyeksi kepentingan nasional. Budaya militer ini cenderung tidak bersifat statik sehingga berpengaruh terhadap munculnya variasi strategi militer suatu negara. Analisa ketiga tentang teknologi militer menunjukkan bahwa proses internalisasi teknologi militer terkini dalam organisasi militer akan mempengaruhi pilihan strategi militer suatu negara. Kegagalan proses internalisasi ini cenderung akan melahirkan kapasitas militer untuk memenangkan perang. Analisa keempat tentang penggunaan kekuatan militer dalam pertempuran menunjukkan adanya dua faktor determinan utama yang mempengaruhi variasi strategi militer yaitu aplikasi gelar penindakan dan rasio kekuatan. Interaksi dua faktor ini mengharuskan komandan unit militer untuk terus menerus melakukan modifikasi strategi tempur untuk mengantisipasi taktik manuver lawan.

Kata Kunci:
Strategi militer, sistem internasional, budaya militer, institusi militer, teknologi militer, realisme

This essay is about the variations of military strategy. I seek answers to questions such as these: Why do variations of military strategy persist? If the political objective of survival is so important and can determine military strategy, why do not all states adopt a more defensive-oriented strategy? How do states choose which types of military strategy? What causes states to support a defensive-oriented strategy or a more offensive one?

It is my contention that variations of states military strategy can be explained by examining the states’ strategic-operational responses to four modifiers: structural, cultural, technological, and force modifiers. My arguments are primarily deductive based on the existing literature especially on the concept of offense-defense theory. By critically reviewing the secondary literature on offense-defense theory, I will show how variants of offense-
defense theory can be used as a theoretical guidance to find modifiers that alter military strategy.

**Structural Modifiers**

The first modifiers for military strategy can be traced into the structural level of the international system. Since the offense-defense terminology is used as the main concept, it is natural to turn into the offense-defense theory of the realist school to seek several structural explanations that can depict the alteration of military strategy. In this essay, the term offense-defense theory is used as a variation of neorealist theory which puts forward a key element known as “defensive realism”. This branch of neorealist theory accepts Waltz’s proposition on the deterministic role of distribution of power in international system and shares a common agreement that offensive doctrine provokes international conflict and war.²

The offense-defense theory has many variants. It has been widely used as causal models across a wide range of security issues such as military doctrine,³ alliance formation,⁴ arms race,⁵ and causes of war.⁶ By examining variants of the theory, modifiers for military strategy of survival at the structural level can be identified.

The modification of military strategy of survival at the structural level, for example, can be seen by combining Posen’s explanation on the causal relations between balance of power and heterogeneity in military doctrine⁷ with Walt’s argument of the dominant of balancing behaviour of states in dealing with threats. Confirming neorealist argument on the ultimate of goal of state to seek security under anarchy, states’ military strategy of survival will only favour a defensive doctrine when powers to be aligned with them are available. In other words, even for a reason of survival, states will be more attracted to offensive doctrines if balance of power in international system prevents them to find reliable military allies. Posen puts his argument boldly “an offensive doctrine is thus a method of power balancing”.⁸

The same method to find structural modifiers can be repeated by combining the utilization of offense-defense theory in explaining arms race and causes of war. The proponents of offense-defense theory tend to agree with Jervis’s argument that war will be more likely when an expansionist/revisionist state initiate arms race by accumulating a more offensive weapons system. This will heighten security dilemma between states.⁹ Based on this argument, Glaser offers two models that can be used by defenders to deal with their adversaries. The deterrence model can be applied to deal with expansionist states; the spiral model can be utilised to cope with other status quo states.¹⁰ However, it is interesting to see that Glaser’s models recommend defender to be prepared to make a strategic shift to a more
offensive mode. He argues that in a situation where cooperative policies are not desirable; in order to survive the entrapment of security dilemma defender should opt for a more competitive approach of reactive offense.  

Cultural Modifiers

The second modifier for military strategy of survival is deeply rooted in a state’s military culture. The culturalism in security studies provide a tool of analysis that challenges realist explanations in revealing states’s strategic choices in the realm of national security.

Lewis, for example, tries to describe the American culture of war by examining geography, history, cultural heritage, and long-held national political objectives. He argues that the American culture of war consists of following principles:

“War is serious business and ought not to be entered into lightly. Major wars are a national endeavour involving the resources of the nation. Wars ought to be conducted in a professional, expeditious, and unrelenting manner to bring them to quick and successful conclusion. War ought to be strategically and doctrinally offensive, and short. The aim of war ought to be the destruction of the enemy’s main Army followed by the occupation of the country; and finally, the transformation of the defeated nation politically, economically, socially, and ultimately culturally”.

Based on Lewis’s description, the American way of war is combination between total war, attrition warfare, short war, offensive strategy, and war of occupation. This cultural element of war become modifier of military strategy when they represent themselves as major obstacles for military commanders to implement a more adaptive strategy to respond to a specific conflict. Osgood, for example, tried to introduce the concept of limited war as a respond to the policy of containment which called for a defensive strategy and willingness to fight a short limited war. This concept of limited war was slow to be incorporated to military establishment due to its contradictory position against the American culture of war.

Another interesting example that can be used to explain the role of military culture as modifier of military strategy is by looking at China’s security motivations. There are several interpretations on China’s strategic culture. Johnston, for example, claims that China’s strategic culture has always been offensive based on the Realpolitik calculation, and not a Confucian strategic culture. Johnston’s argument put strategic culture as a deterministic factor that cannot be used as modifier for any strategic choices.

However, Huiyun’s article on Mao’s strategic belief gives a very different interpretation. Huiyun’s technique in using defensive and offensive realism to coding Mao’s philosophical belief leads to a finding that strategic beliefs are not static. Huiyun discovers
that “Mao was a defensive realist in peacetime and became an offensive realist in wartime”. This un-static strategic belief is a modifier that can be used to explain why China had various strategic responses. In Korea, China relied on the strategy of pre-emption of perceived attack. In Vietnam against the United States and along the Sino-Soviet border against the Soviet Union, China preferred to implement deterrence. Coercion was opted out as the main strategy to deal with India and Vietnam. And finally, against Taiwan, the strategy of coercive diplomacy was the preferred choice. All of those cases indicate that when strategic beliefs are not static, cultural modifier is presented influencing selections of military strategies.

Technological Modifiers

The third modifier for military strategy of survival can be found by examining the process of internalization of new technological innovation into a military organization. This process is conducted by creating a strategic planning to control phases of technological innovation that might lead to the invention of a new weapon system.

This process will serve as a modifier to military strategy if it leads to the increase level of force lethality, force protection, and force mobility. These three concepts of force are introduced by Adams to understand the utilization of offensive, defensive, and deterrent operations in terms of what was technologically possible at the operational level. By analysing the impact of military technology on force lethality, protection, and mobility, Adams comes out with an assessment of the overall offense-defense-deterrence balance from 1800 to the present. She argues that the period 1800-1849 and 1934-1945 prevailing technology favoured offensive operations. From 1850-1933 the existing military technology supported the employment of defensive operations. Finally, with the absolute nature of nuclear weapons, deterrent operations have dominated the military operation mode since 1945 to the present.

Adams’s finding indicates that the development of military technology can alter a state’s military strategy. Logically, in nuclear age, no states will develop an offensive doctrine to fight a war against the United States. The existing military technology will dictate rational military leaders to abandon any war plans design to cripple the United States using a direct offensive attack.

This logic also applies to the United States. In a nuclear age, the United States must alter its way of war of attrition warfare and restraint itself to a limited offensive strategy. A
case in point is the United States’s strategy in Vietnam. To fight a modern limited war of Vietnam War, the United States had “to place an artificial restraint on the conduct of war to preclude it from escalating into more total war, nuclear war”. This example shows how the development of military technology modifies a state’s military strategy.

The role of military technology as modifier of military strategy has a slightly different logic in the Third World. The introduction of a new military technology in the Third World is more likely to be followed by a problem of disintegrative defense strategy. This is due to the lack of technical expertise in the Third World to implement Knox and Murray’s Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA). Their concept of RMA relies on the ability to impose a unification of national strategic concept that should in principle determine the structuring, composition, and employment concept of armed forces. For them, a state should try to launch RMA not only to adapt the latest advances in military technology but also to increase the consistency of its national defence conception in all levels of strategy. The Third World militaries simply fail to achieve this strategic integration.

To make the matter worse, Cohen, for example, argues that internalisation of new military technology in the Third World mostly occurred due to process of arms transfer, resulted in arms race that weaken stability of a region. However, since most of the Third World Military failed to transform the quantitative arms transfer into qualitative land, air, naval capabilities, the form of limited offensive lead to series of stalemate of attrition warfare. Cases in point are Indo-Pakistani War 1971 and Iran-Iraq War. In both wars, all countries decided to initiate a war of movement based on the strategy of maneuver since they did not have sufficient firepower to sustain a decisive war of attrition. However, the lack of the ability in mastering military logistic hindered significant military advances, and this led to series of military stalemate. Wars in the Third World become protracted wars.

**Force Modifiers**

The fourth modifier of military strategy of survival lies closely with the use of force in a battlefield. This point of view is based on Stephen Biddle’s framework that tries to rebuild offense-defense theory by using force employment and force size as independent variables to explain the offense-defense balance.

The first force modifier is force employment. For Biddle, a defender’s strategy should be continuously modified based on troops’ dispositions in battlefield. He, for example, argues that a defender can only choose a defensive strategy if its force is deployed in a deep, reserve-oriented dispositions. The success of the German defense to contain...
series of Allied offensives on the Western Front in the summer and fall of 1918 is considered as a case in point of the superiority of deep, reserve-oriented defense against even a numerical superior attacker. But, if a defender has to face a reality that its force can only be deployed in a shallow and forward oriented dispositions, the defender better shifts its defensive strategy into a more offensive operation. The success of German offense in exploiting British defences on the Somme in March 1918 is seen as an example of how shallow and concentrated forward defense could be broken by a series of offensive assault.

A more contemporary example that shows how force employment can be considered as a modifier of military strategy is given by Mersheimer. In analysing NATO’s defensive strategy, Mersheimer assessed that ‘NATO has adopted “the American style of warfare” which reflected in its attrition-oriented strategy of forward defense’. Based on his analysis on balance of power between NATO and Warsaw Pact, Mersheimer proposed NATO to adopt a maneuver-oriented offensive strategy to deal with Pact’s much stronger mechanised forces. For him, a maneuver-oriented strategy is a better alternative for the outnumbered defender to avoid defeat. This example again indicates that a defender sometimes has to be able to shift its defensive strategy into a more offensive one.

The second force modifier is force size. For this modifier, I will expand Biddle’s idea of force size by combining it with Arreguin-Toft’s asymmetric warfare theory. This resulted in the finding of strategic interaction as one of modifier of military strategy of survival.

In relations with offensive and defensive strategy, strategic interaction framework suggests that strong actors will always favour offensive strategy. This verdict resonates Mersheimer’s neorealist variant of offensive realism that argues that all great powers are revisionist and “primed for offense”. To serve this objective, all strong actors will develop a strong military capability that will be able to launch a direct attack using either attrition or maneuver strategies.

The United States’s strategy in both Korean and Vietnam Wars can be used as an example on how a strong actor relies on attrition warfare. This strategy was used to impose decisive victory on much weaker opponents by utilizing material superiority as well as the use of massive firepower. In both Korean and Vietnam cases, the strategy of attrition was used based on “a gradual and piecemeal process of destroying the enemy’s military capability through a variety of methods: in-depth withdrawals, limited objective attacks, air strikes, artillery fire, and search-and-destroy missions”.

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For the maneuver strategy, the German Blitzkrieg of 1939-1942 is the best example to be used in explaining how strong-revisionist actor primed for offense.\textsuperscript{41} Differ with the strategy of attrition that tries to seek and destroy enemies’ centre of gravity, the maneuver strategy relies on “the avoidance of the enemy’s strength, to be followed by the application of some selective strength against a known dimension of enemy weakness”.\textsuperscript{42}

To deal with those kinds of attackers, Arreguin-Toft argues since in a dyadic direct confrontation much weaker defenders are likely to be defeated, the second best option for defenders is launching guerrilla warfare strategy that aims “to destroy not the capacity but the will of the attacker”.\textsuperscript{43} The force size will become important modifier in guerrilla warfare due to the importance of the flexibility of force employment. Mao Tse-tung, for example, argues that “a guerrilla commander must understand that the flexible employment of his forces is the most important means of changing the situation as between the enemy and ourselves and of gaining the initiative”.\textsuperscript{44} For Mao, a commander must be able to decide the timing to employ either strategic defensive or strategic offensive in guerrilla warfare.\textsuperscript{45} In this context, force modifier is build not only by the size of troops and strategic interaction between warring parties, but also based on the operational development of battlefield.

**Conclusion**

This essay tries to explain how four types of modifiers can be used to understand states’ preferences in specific military strategy in any given security situations. The existence of structural, cultural, technological, and force modifiers tell us that states’ military strategy is not a static concept determined by a single independent variable.

The existence of modifiers of military strategy tells us that states’ military of survival should not be limited to a defensive strategy. States’s military strategy should be adaptive to respond to various dynamics from grand strategy level to tactical level. A state’s ability to perform strategic adaptiveness in anticipating the unpredictability character of war should be developed to safeguard its survival.

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Endnote

1 The term modifiers is based on Snyder’s concept of structural modifiers. See Glenn D. Snyder, “Process Variables in Neorealist Theory,” Security Studies 5, no.3 (1996): 169. However, in this paper, the term modifiers will be used loosely to describe the existence of several factors that can be used to explain the alteration of states’ military strategy.

2 The agreement on the provoking nature of offensive doctrine is based on the Jervis’s four worlds argument. See Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” World Politics 30, no.2 (1978): 167-214.

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variables: force employment and force size.

in this paper military technology is treated as a separate modifier, I will only focus on the other two

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