



The Genealogy of History and Strategy

Tarih ve Stratejinin Soykütüğü

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex relationship between history and strategy, focusing particularly on the etymological evolution of the concept of strategy. Strategy, as a term, is deeply rooted in historical context, with its meaning shaped and reshaped by the patterns of the past. This work explores how these historical patterns serve not only to illuminate the present but also to project possible futures, making strategy an invaluable tool in understanding both historical trajectories and geopolitical dynamics. Through a genealogical deconstruction of strategic thought, the study reveals the foundational elements—the “bricks” that have built the concept of strategy—offering insight into the forces that have shaped its evolution. By analyzing key historical texts and prominent thinkers, the research demonstrates that strategy is not merely a tool of military or political maneuver, but a reflective, intellectual device that traces the shifts in human thought, power, and governance. In exploring these historical foundations, this study illuminates how strategy’s evolving nature continues to inform our understanding of past conflicts and political structures, while providing crucial frameworks for navigating the complexities of contemporary global challenges. Ultimately, the work highlights the value of a historical and genealogical approach to strategy, showing how it offers essential insights into the present while guiding future projections of power and statecraft.

Keywords

History, Strategy, Geopolitical Thought, Historical Patterns, Strategic Theory, Interdisciplinary Approach, Historical Narratives.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, tarih ile strateji arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi, özellikle strateji kavramının etimolojik evrimini ele alarak incelemektedir. Strateji, bir kavram olarak, derinlemesine tarihsel bağlama gömülmüştür; anlamı geçmişin örüntüleri tarafından şekillendirilmiş ve yeniden biçimlendirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, bu tarihsel örüntülerin sadece bugünü aydınlatmakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda geleceğe dair projeksiyonlar sunduğunu ve stratejinin, geçmişin ve jeopolitik dinamiklerin anlaşılmasında ne denli önemli bir araç olduğunu göstermektedir. Stratejik düşüncenin geneolojik bir çözümlemesi üzerinden yapılan bu inceleme, stratejinin evrimini şekillendiren temel unsurları—yani onu inşa eden “tuğlaları”—ortaya koyarak, bu evrimin içsel güçlerine dair derinlemesine bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Anahtar tarihsel metinler ve önde gelen düşünürlerin analizleriyle bu araştırma, stratejinin sadece askerî ya da politik bir manevra aracı değil, insan düşüncesi, iktidar ve yönetim anlayışındaki değişimlerin yansıması olarak işlev gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Bu tarihsel temelleri inceleyerek, çalışma, stratejinin evrimleşen doğasının geçmişteki çatışmalar ve politik yapılar hakkında nasıl aydınlatıcı bilgiler sunduğunu ve aynı zamanda çağdaş küresel zorlukların üstesinden gelmek için nasıl kritik çerçeveler sağladığını gösteriyor. Nihayetinde bu çalışma, stratejiye tarihsel ve geneolojik bir yaklaşımın değerini vurgulamakta ve bunun, hem günümüzü anlamamızda hem de gelecekteki güç projeksiyonları ve devlet yönetimi için yönlendirici bir perspektif sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Tarih, Strateji, Jeopolitik Düşünce, Tarihsel Örüntüler, Stratejik Teori, Disiplinlerarası Yaklaşım, Tarihsel Anlatılar.

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INTRODUCTION

This work emerges from the complex relationship between history and strategy, a synthesis of intellectual curiosity, existential reflection, and the pursuit of understanding. Rooted in my doctoral research, it seeks to unravel the complexities of how historical narratives intertwine with strategic thought, shaping the very foundation of modern statecraft and geopolitical maneuvering. The dynamic interplay between the past and the present, the concrete and the abstract, offers a profound reflection on the underlying forces driving both historical change and strategic decisions.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a fundamental question: how does history, with its rich tapestry of human actions and consequences, guide the crafting of strategies that transcend time and circumstance? Strategy, in its essence, is more than a mere tactical calculation or a military pursuit; it is a reflection of the human condition, of the constant struggle for meaning, order, and power. As this work delves into the evolution of strategic thought, it becomes clear that history provides the essential framework through which future paths are shaped and envisioned. This study, originally developed in the context of my doctoral thesis, explores the confluence of history and strategy—two forces continuously evolving yet inextricably bound to one another.

This exploration is not simply academic—it is a philosophical pursuit that attempts to decipher the motives, the metaphysical underpinnings, and the realpolitik of those who have shaped the world's geopolitical landscape. In the following pages, the reader will find an account not just of events and theories, but of the intellectual forces that have influenced strategic thinking through the ages. The quest for knowledge, for power, and for the meaning behind both, remains at the core of human endeavor, and it is through this lens that the intersection of history and strategy is examined.

History and Strategy: An Interwoven Relationship

History is the study of change and continuity across time. It transcends the boundaries of humanities disciplines such as philosophy, political science, psychology, literature, economics, and sociology, while also encompassing formal academic fields like chemistry, biology, and mathematics. In its broadest sense, history functions as a bridge that facilitates our understanding of other disciplines, providing a deeper connection to the knowledge they offer.

Strategy, a comprehensive term that represents all the paths followed in pursuit of a goal, often finds its guiding compass in history. While history seeks to make the past visible in an objective manner, it is inherently tied to causal relationships within its methodological framework. This allows history not only to illuminate the past but also

to provide meaning to present-day phenomena. Strategy, in turn, utilizes the teleological templates history provides to craft projections for the future.

In a 1955 interview, the renowned British historian Arnold Toynbee expressed a perspective that resonates with the functionalist view of history as a discipline: “History that remains unused is nothing. After all, intellectual life, like practical life, is an action. If you do not use it, it may as well be dead” (Toynbee, 2022). Toynbee, who was both an influential academic and a prominent political figure of his time, acknowledged that his approach to history was deeply influenced by international relations and cultural anthropology. These fields, rooted in practical application and holistic frameworks, shaped his understanding of history as a tool for addressing real-world issues (O’Brien, 2002, p. 44).

The Emergence and Evolution of Historical Thought

The utilitarian approach to history, which can be traced back to earlier periods, leads us to the pioneering work of Ibn Khaldun, regarded as one of the founding figures of modern historiography. In fact, Toynbee wrote his seminal work *A Study of History* (Toynbee, 1934-1961) under the influence of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, considering him his intellectual predecessor (Irwin, 1997, pp. 467-468). Ibn Khaldun’s interpretation of history as cyclical, involving stages of establishment, growth, and decline, not only aids in understanding the past but also provides patterns that can forecast the future. While some may view his perspective as pessimistic, it offers a more accurate understanding of historical ruptures than the Eurocentric view of continuous progress.

The philosophy of history, which encompasses these debates, follows a parallel trajectory with developments in the philosophy of science. While the natural sciences present data and retreat, history employs organizational frameworks that transcend mere data. Particularly, the approach known as historicism (Rodrigues, 2019, pp. 98-99) involves the reorganization of the past, implying that “history” is not merely a study of past events but a concept constructed through interpretation.

As a formal discipline, history emerged in the 19th century alongside the rise of modernity and the crisis of representation. The discovery of time as a fundamental factor of change led to divisions in the ways history was experienced and produced, resulting in new contours for the discipline. The historicist approach in modern historiography, which organizes the past through alternative projections of the future, also refers to linear history and the construction of social time (Uebel, 2017, pp. 9-11).



Foucault's Critique and the Concept of Strategy

Foucault, who examines modernity from a critical perspective, argues that ancient history sought to uncover the roots of phenomena like land, language, and other elements that constitute the “present,” aiming to preserve the conditions of the present for future generations. However, according to Foucault, the purpose of history under the guidance of genealogy is not to uncover the roots of our identity and things, but rather to dedicate itself to their dissolution. The dream of an immutable first origin, Foucault asserts, can only exist within a discourse rooted in the ideal of a metaphysical spirit, not in reality (Foucault, 1996, pp. 143-162). Indeed, during the process of professionalizing history, it has continually sought to neutralize individual perspectives while reflecting the desires of subjects to intervene in public and everyday life. Moreover, the process of history becoming a discipline paradoxically fostered a demand for a form of history concerned with intervention in public debates, impressions, and the production of existence (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 100).

Strategy as an Interdisciplinary Field

One of the disciplines nourished by history's departure from passivity is strategy. “Strategic studies, in essence, is an interdisciplinary field that examines how military force and other coercive instruments can be used to achieve political objectives during the dynamic interaction of at least two competing wills” (Duyvesteyn & Worrall, 2017, pp. 347-357). While enriched by fields such as political science, international relations, sociology, psychology, and anthropology, its relationship with the discipline of history is much older. According to Freedman (2017), ‘strategy’ has never been a static or fully agreed-upon concept; its meaning is reinterpreted as political and technological contexts change. Strategy, as a historical study, has been clearly distinguishable from military history since ancient times, with works by figures such as Sun Tzu, Kautilya, and Vegetius providing early examples (Koliopoulos, 2019, p. 2). To analyze the relationship between history and strategy within a Foucauldian framework, a semantic analysis can be a useful guide, allowing us to avoid falling into the traps of analogy and anachronism.

Although periods prior to the invention of writing are often referred to as “prehistory,” when excluding natural history, the construction of “history” in its holistic sense begins when humans position themselves in both the subject-object relationship. As beings distinguished by their socialization and communication skills, humans play a central role in this cultural accumulation process, which can also be considered a tautological structure.

A multitude of situations can be defined that prompted early humans to engage in oral communication and produce recurring messages. However, when viewed through

the lens of a historian, two main types of repeated messages emerge. The first is communication that conveys “news,” while the second represents the “interpretation” of current circumstances. The second class of messages is an expression of subjective experience, dealing not with the news of existing objects but with their etiological interpretations. The abstraction of testimony regarding specific situations at a given time through this form of thought represents a step in the development of historical consciousness (Vansina, 1985, pp. 1-8).

Writing, born out of the need to record these messages, did not emerge suddenly. Traces of the evolution of visual communication, which began with humans interpreting gestures and facial expressions, can be observed in the paintings left on the walls of caves tens of thousands of years ago. Some of the oldest known examples of these paintings, such as those found in South Africa, are dated to around 73,000 BCE. For instance, when examining the rain ceremony drawings found in southern Rhodesia, we encounter not only natural phenomena painted on rocks but also a narrative created by early humans’ imagination (Gelb, 1963, pp. 24-25).

The images, which had counterparts in spoken language, transformed into symbols, and the symbols, in turn, evolved into syllables representing sounds. The first writing system, which emerged much later in history, can be traced back to around 3100 BCE in Sumer. The development of irrigation systems and the surplus production in agriculture led to more complex commercial and political organizations, which are considered the main factors driving the creation of writing (Gelb, 1963, pp. 60-62).

Mythology, History, and Writing: A Symbolic Transition

In ancient times, mythology and history were intricately intertwined. Myths served as symbolic tools for early humans to make sense of life and understand the cosmos. Over time, myths gave way to sacred texts and, ultimately, to reason. This transition is associated with the concepts of mythos, epic, and logos. In the civilizational shift that brought about writing, logos was attributed to philosophers, mythos to liars, and epic to poets who were considered more emotional (Akgül, 2014, p. 4).

The Iliad (Homer, 1856) and *The Odyssey* (Homer, 1880), both attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer and written in the 8th century BCE, are considered the first major works of Western literature. Although these works present a historical narrative of the ten-year Trojan War and its aftermath, in terms of genre and style, they are closer to the epic than to historical writing.

The first figure to approach history in a rational and systematic manner was the ancient Greek historian Herodotus. In his work *The Histories* (Herodotus, 2003), written in the 5th century BCE, which focuses on the Greco-Persian Wars, he not only coined the



term but also laid the foundation for the discipline itself. In fact, in the 1st century BCE, the Roman statesman Cicero, in his book *On the Laws*, attributed to Herodotus the title “father of history.” However, criticisms of Herodotus have been just as ancient as his work. The Athenian historian and general Thucydides, considered a contemporary, never mentioned Herodotus by name but criticized his narrative approach, emphasizing that the most important task of the historian is to record experience (Thucydides, 1972). Thucydides rejected Herodotus’ method, accusing him of including interpretations of events he did not personally witness (Evans, 1968, pp. 11-12).

This critique highlights that philosophical and methodological debates on the discipline of history are as old as the discipline itself. The term “history” in English has its roots in the Greek word *istoria* (ἵστωρ-έω or ἱστορία), meaning “to inquire about something” or “to investigate.” It also carries meanings of “narrative” and “story” (Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 842). In Herodotus’ work, the term “myth” is repeatedly used in a similar sense as “story,” though it does not imply judgments of truth or falsehood. The legendary and superstitious connotations attached to these words are the natural consequence of modern languages’ tendency to alter derived terms (Herodotus, 1975, p. xiii). However, applying these terms retrospectively can lead to anachronistic conclusions.

Works by ancient authors like Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides are considered the nucleus of modern historiography. A common feature of these works is their focus on the wars fought in their respective regions. They concentrated on the winners and losers of these wars and analyzed the causes that led to the existing outcomes. In this context, we can assert that history and strategy were closely intertwined in the ancient world. Indeed, the term “strategy,” expressed by similar phonetic words in many languages, also derives from Greek, much like the word “history.” In Greek, *strategos* (στράτηγος) means “a military commander or leader, general,” while *strategema* (στράτηγῆμα) refers to “an element of generalship, the actions of a general” (Liddell, 1996, p. 1652).

Independent of its Western roots, the concept of strategy was also developed in the East, with one of the earliest and most famous works being Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, dating back to the 4th century BCE (Sun Tzu, 2008). Composed of thirteen chapters and three hundred eighty-four theories of war, this work distinguishes itself from others by focusing on the theoretical framework of warfare. While it diverges from the discipline of history, its strategic propositions are built upon examples drawn from Chinese history and the philosophical tradition of Taoism.

The Stratagems (Frontinus, 1925), written by the Roman author Frontinus in the 1st century CE, is one of the earliest examples of strategy as a distinct discipline in the

West. Frontinus divided his work into four books, covering preparation for battle, the actual battle and its aftermath, siege warfare, and other related topics (Turner, 2007, pp. 427-428). Throughout ancient and medieval European intellectual circles, the term “strategy” was largely confined to its military meaning. The most significant shift in this regard came with the publication of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 1994), published in 1532. While Machiavelli did not directly reference the term strategy, his view of military success as a tool for absolute monarchy and his assertion that political power originates from force rather than divine authority secularized political thinking and contributed to the scientific study of applicable politics. The impact of this work on political science and strategic studies continued to grow well into the 21st century.

Roman historians used the term “strategia” when referring to areas under the control of a military commander or a member of a war council. The term maintained its narrow geographic meaning until the 18th century, when it was first used in a form close to its modern meaning by the French military theorist Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert, in 1799 as “La Strategique” (Horwath, 2006, p. 1). Shortly thereafter, in the post-Napoleonic period, the term was defined in its current sense in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1825. According to Robert O’Neil, prior to this period, the term “strategy” as we read it in connection with the wars of the ancient Greeks and Romans referred to more than just great tactics (Malik, 1999a, p. 14).

Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow (1757-1807), a Prussian officer and scholar, focuses on the distinction between the concept of “strategy” (strategics) and the French term “la stratégie.” In his 1799 work *The Spirit of the Modern System of War* (Bülow, 1806), he traced the origins of the term strategy and argued that it should not be reduced to merely “the art of the general.” Instead, he emphasized that strategy encompasses the entire art of warfare, including both strategy and tactics. However, Bülow’s theories, which incorporated geometric and mathematical principles known as “Stratarithmetrie,” were criticized by Napoléon (1769-1821) and Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), the Prussian general who fought against the French in the First World War. Napoléon, who had mobilized war through totalizing strategies, and Clausewitz, with his famous assertion that “war is simply politics by other means” (Clausewitz, 2015, p. 19), derided Bülow’s approach (Yalçinkaya, 2019, p. 2). Clausewitz’s work *On War* became a second major shift in the definition of strategy, expanding it beyond its military roots to its modern understanding.

Before the 19th century, a series of authors, extending the Enlightenment period in Europe, sought to uncover the scientific principles underlying the execution of war. This was rooted in the belief that military strategy, like other arts, should be based on specific and fixed principles (Malik, 1999b, pp. 17-18). Given that most of the wars in the past four centuries took place in Europe or between Europeans and the native



populations of other regions, it is unsurprising that the majority of references to and debates about war were conducted by European authors. Kalevi Holsti's (1991) study of wars between 1648 and 1989 concluded that over 90% of all wars during this period were initiated by Europeans (Yalçinkaya, 2019, pp. 1-2).

In the 21st century, new strategic layers, such as air, space, and electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), have been added to the classic military domains of land and sea in geopolitics. These new layers, which parallel the development of technology and changes in the international landscape, have never been erased from history but have instead been integrated into the ongoing strategic discourse (Gray, 2008, pp. 313-314). Each geopolitical layer in the study of history and strategy is discussed within its respective school of thought. Thus, figures like Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, alongside Swiss theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779-1869) and British strategist Basil Henry Liddell Hart (1895-1970), are considered prominent figures in the land school of strategy. U.S. strategists Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) and Julian Corbett (1854-1922) represent the naval school, while pioneers in the air and space strategy include Italians Guilo Douhet (1869-1930), Americans William Mitchell (1879-1936), British Sir Hugh Trenchard (1873-1956), and Russian Alexander de Seversky (1894-1974) (Malik, 1999b, pp. 16-38).

Space strategy, especially after the Cold War, has gained increasing importance. The space race between the United States and the Soviet Union led to significant developments in satellite technology and military presence in space. Today, many countries are working to develop their space strategies. Electromagnetic spectrum strategy, which includes topics such as electronic warfare and cybersecurity, has been developed to ensure the protection of military communication and targeting systems. These strategies are of great importance for states to effectively manage their cybersecurity and military operations (Gray, 2008, pp. 313-317).

The new areas of strategy mentioned above fall under the broader concept of "military strategy." In the modern use of the term "strategy" in the 21st century, it appears not only as a separate discipline but also in various forms across multiple disciplines. Academically, it is used to develop theoretical frameworks and applied methodologies, particularly in fields such as political science, military studies, business, economics, and sociology. In this work, formal strategy, whose primary actors are states, is divided into numerous sub-disciplines.

At the top of a state's strategic planning hierarchy is the concept of "Grand Strategy," which is primarily shaped by national policymakers and leaders. It concerns how national resources should be aligned across various sectors to achieve desired objectives in an uncertain world. While informing military strategy, it also transcends it

(Kennedy, 1991, pp. 4-5). Grand Strategy encompasses not only military strategy but also the full spectrum of national power tools used to achieve a nation's national interests, such as economic, diplomatic, informational, and internal security strategies (Liddell Hart, 1991, Chapter 1). These strategic areas cannot be sharply separated from one another. The success of Grand Strategy depends on the coordination of all elements as a cohesive whole. It involves prioritizing limited resources and must always be flexible enough to adapt to the global environment.

The sub-disciplines of military strategy, such as doctrine, concepts, operational strategy, tactics, operational concepts, and operations, form a hierarchical structure that guides the application of force from the broadest to the most specific levels. At the broadest level, doctrine provides the fundamental military principles and philosophies that shape the use of force in various situations (Headquarters, 2017, pp. 1-3). Doctrine tends to be permanent and evolves gradually in response to significant changes in warfare (Murray et al., 2012, p. 142). Concepts, placed beneath doctrine, represent innovative or forward-thinking military ideas that explore new ways of using military force. Unlike doctrine, concepts may not be universally adopted but can encourage the development of future strategies (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. II-1).

Operational Strategy fills the gap between national policy and military action. It translates national security goals into achievable military objectives, considering existing resources and the broader political landscape (Gray, 1990, p. 9). Operational Strategy focuses on how to achieve these objectives at the national or theater level, determining the tactics that serve as a practical map for execution (McMaster, 2008, p. 19). The concept of operations (CONOPS) outlines specific methods for executing a given operation or mission, bringing military strategy into focus. It details the desired strategic outcomes by considering timing, logistics, and the deployment of forces. Finally, operations represent the most focused level, involving the actual execution of military actions in alignment with the approved Operational Concept. This includes the deployment of specific forces and resources to achieve a defined military objective (Headquarters, 2017, pp. 3-10).

The contemporary meanings of these terms were solidified in the mid-20th century following the experiences of World War II (Cohen et al., 2012, p. 21). The need for clear communication and planning during large-scale operations emphasized the importance of standardizing military vocabulary (Murray, 2012, p. 142). The organizational chart depicting the hierarchy of strategy in the 21st century is visualized in Figure 1 below. Understanding these distinctions and their hierarchical order is crucial for comprehending military decision-making and planning processes.



HIERARCHY OF STRATEGY



Figure 1: Hierarchy of Strategy (Akduman, 2024, p. 17).

National Security Strategies (NSS) do not directly correspond to any subcategory within this hierarchy. Although the term has been used orally for a much longer time, it was first institutionalized with the U.S. National Security Act of 1947 (Congress.gov, 2022). Today, National Security Strategies are not only developed by the United States but also by many other countries, transforming the broad goals of Grand Strategy into more focused plans applicable to specific periods of governance (The White House, 2022). They outline near-term priorities, identify key threats and challenges, and indicate how various state institutions will contribute to achieving national security goals (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The National Security Strategy serves as a bridge between the high-level vision of Grand Strategy and the concrete steps taken by the government. It includes elements from all subfields of Grand Strategy in order to achieve national security objectives in the short and medium term.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, as a discipline, strategy emerges from the misty labyrinths of history, an intricate art shaped by social complexity and societal consensus. Like a ghost trailing behind power, it seeps into the minds of those who hold sway over humanity. This, too,

is a shared reflection of the quest for meaning and the effort to comprehend human existence. At the dawn of ancient times, as the sun of humanity's era began to rise, those who took the first steps in the complex dance of war and politics simultaneously laid the foundations of strategy. As time progressed, the meaning and function of strategy have evolved, but its roots remain forever tied to humanity's search within the labyrinth of power and knowledge. In the depths of this labyrinth, the shadow of Foucault reverberates as the concept of strategy changes shape through new understandings and practices of power. This evolution metaphorically passes through the filters of the power and dominion games human communities and states have played throughout history.

Thus, the geopolitical and historical evolution of strategy emerges as a synthesis of humanity's social complexity, societal consensus, and the quest for meaning. This process moves forward, constantly reshaping itself toward the future while pushing the boundaries of human understanding and thought.

In the future of humanity, the evolution of strategy will be woven with the continuous transformation of archetypes of knowledge, technology, and social changes, traveling in unexpected directions. In the infinite twists of cosmic time, the untapped potential of possibilities and thoughts lying beyond the intellectual horizon of humankind will shape and redefine the philosophical dimensions of strategy.

At the ultimate boundaries of thought, human societal structures and technological access will reconstruct the conceptual framework of strategy. This process will advance with two key aims: one to reach the farthest corners of the universe and chase the pursuit of universal meaning, and the other to overcome the social and ecological challenges facing the world. This quest and development process will contribute to humankind's deeper understanding of existence and the universe, opening new horizons in the future evolution of strategy.

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