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On Victory and the Search for a Status Quo Ante Bellum

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In a recent publication, the authors—a former senior military commander and a defense policy civilian—argued that America's national security professionals are far too quick to dismiss escalation as a tool of statecraft—a position that undercuts America's ability to deter its adversaries.¹

Another consequence of a hesitancy to consider escalation by America's national security practitioners—particularly military officers—is a loss of focus on the goal they ostensibly should be most focused upon: victory. In the authors' experience, very often during a conflict (real or simulated) American national security professionals do not think in terms of achieving a victory that can lead to a newer, potentially better status quo. Instead, the current generation of national security professionals focuses on reestablishing the *status quo ante bellum*, or the situation as it existed before the war.

Status Quo Powers and the Dangers of Mirror Imaging

As established in the authors' earlier article, "Escalation: A Tool to be Considered, Not Dismissed," the United States is a status quo power that seeks to defend the existing global



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status quo from Europe to the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, American national security professionals are inclined to want to reestablish the status quo ante bellum as the desired end state of a conflict with a revisionist power. This inclination, however, often creates a number of problems.

Adversaries seek to overturn the status quo which American national security professionals want to preserve. To think otherwise is to mistake adversary goals for our own goals—to mirror image. In fact, U.S. adversaries are almost always revisionist powers for the very reason that the status quo we seek to preserve is intolerable for them. That is why revisionist powers—be they Russia with Ukraine, Iran with its proxies, or possibly China with Taiwan—initiate conflicts in the first place. They ultimately seek a new status quo that better aligns with their broader strategic objectives.

Indeed, seeking an end to conflict only to re-establish the “status quo” is another way of returning to the conditions in which deterrence already failed. Therefore, entreaties by American national security professionals which seek to convince a revisionist power to return to the status quo ante bellum will likely be opposed because revisionist powers: 1) find the status quo intolerable; and, therefore, 2) are willing to accept risk, employ force, and accept cost to achieve victory.

Moreover, once a conflict begins, revisionist powers will continue to employ force so long as they: 1) are able to sustain force; 2) see a pathway to victory; and, 3) do not pay costs that outweigh the benefits of the objective they seek once they create a new status quo. Attempts by national security professionals to convince themselves that a pathway exists to conflict termination that ends with a status quo ante bellum that is appealing to a *revisionist power* is one that is almost assuredly doomed to failure, or worse. If the revisionist power sees the status quo as intolerable, it has no reason to accept conflict termination short of a new status quo post bellum so long as the revisionist power has some hope that conflict protraction will serve its interest. That adversary will neither seek nor accept conflict termination so long as it can sustain the conflict or until it can achieve its revisionist goals.

U.S. national security professionals are mistaken when they expect that their opponents value a return to the status quo ante bellum as much as they themselves do. This form of mirror imaging does not take into account the actual desires and objectives of their opponents. Such mirror imaging makes it virtually impossible to craft a conflict termination strategy that will be enduring or even acceptable to the adversary.

Better Pathways to Conflict Termination and Decisive Victory

If not seeking to convince the revisionist power to return to the status quo ante bellum, what then should American national security professionals do when formulating conflict termination pathways? Put simply, they should seek pathways to achieve a better, new status quo that can be implemented after a decisive military victory.

Indeed, overly focusing on a return to status quo ante bellum, while desirable from an American point of view in many ways, also presents real dangers for the United States. To



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begin with, by focusing on non-escalatory pathways that are characterized by restraint for the restoration of status quo, national security professionals may end up not deterring the opponent and prolonging a conflict, and therefore increasing the numbers of civilian and military casualties in a conflict.

Even if a U.S.-led coalition “wins” a conflict with a revisionist aggressor, a failure to achieve a meaningful “victory” (however defined within a particular context, but one that very often is a decisive victory on the part of a U.S. or U.S.-led coalition that can dictate a new post-conflict status quo that benefits the existing system and U.S. interests), but instead reinstates the previous status quo ante bellum, leaves in place the reasons that the conflict began in the first place. That is, the revisionist state that initiated the conflict because it found the status quo intolerable, unless defeated decisively, will simply seek to change the status quo when conditions are (for them) more favorable.

Put another way, the goal of returning to the status quo ante bellum may sow the seeds for another future conflict over the same fundamental issues. Such was the case with the 1801 Peace of Amiens between the British Empire and Napoleon Bonaparte, when the underlying causes of the first half of the Napoleonic Wars were unaddressed—but neither side was defeated—thus setting the stage for the second half of the Napoleonic Wars. Or, it may hold the seeds for a future conflict, because the new post-conflict status quo actually incentivizes a future conflict by creating animosity among the vanquished without substantially increasing the victor’s benefits or expanding the coalition of the victors. For example, consider the post-World War I settlement in Europe, when the German Empire was defeated, but retained revanchist goals and the basic elements of power needed to dominate Europe given the disestablishment and break-ups of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. Decisive victory attained on the field of battle is the necessary condition by which a new status quo can be established that can prevent a follow-on conflict from unfolding.

Decisive victory ultimately deters a future war by changing the conditions that allowed a revisionist power to pursue conflict in the first place. This decisive victory could take a number of forms. It could be a victory in which the victors lead the vanquished to change their behavior by offering them a new role in a different post bellum security environment (as was the case with Germany and Japan after World War II). Decisive victory could also create the conditions for a more stable and therefore enduring peace by seeking accommodation with the vanquished (as was the case at the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, when both sides of the Napoleonic Wars, to include the successor regimes to the Bonapartist coalition, cooperated for almost a century to defuse most foreign policy or security disputes in Europe and beyond). Finally, decisive victory could include an expansion of the coalition of the victors (such as occurred following the Cold War, when NATO expanded to include most of the former members of the Warsaw Pact). In almost all cases, decisive victory takes the form of a new, better status quo post bellum that is based on a new power and political relationship between the victor and the vanquished.

A new, better status quo could take many forms. It could result in a weakened adversary that has fewer instruments of national power and thus is unable to present a significant threat



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to U.S. or allied interests (such was the case after the first Gulf War). It could result in a strengthened alliance system that is better able to contain, deter, and ultimately defeat future aggression (as was the case after World War II). It could result in a better correlation of forces or some other basic change in the allocation of power. However, in almost all cases, a new status quo post bellum requires a decisive prior victory of some kind.

However the conflict ends, the military should focus on achieving decisive victory that leaves adversaries in a weaker position than before, in order to make them pay a price that demonstrates that their initial decision for conflict was a grave mistake and undermines their ability to initiate future conflicts. This new condition also serves as a warning to other actors who may seek to initiate conflict as a means to change the status quo.

Without a decisive victory that fundamentally changes the security environment into an enduring, stable, and therefore peaceful status quo post bellum, security challenges persist because the fundamental challenges that existed before the conflict erupted remain. In addition to the examples listed above, history offers many examples of post-conflict settlements that failed to address the fundamental tensions or security challenges that triggered the conflict in the first place. Whether it is the Arab-Israeli conflict, Kashmiri border disputes between India and China, or between China and Taiwan, cease-fires or peace treaties that fail to address the fundamental point of disagreement between two parties – and which therefore make a status quo intolerable for one or more parties – simply set the stage for a future conflict at a later date.

Conclusion

Our nation's military officers and civilian policymakers need to get back to basics. They must think deeply and critically about risk acceptance – and how avoiding operational risk and showing “restraint” may put the United States at greater strategic risk. In the final analysis, they need to think hard about *victory* and how to set the conditions for a successful conflict termination that improves America's position in a new status quo post bellum and ends an adversary's desire and power to challenge the status quo. This must be done in concert between uniformed military professionals and civilian policymakers. It must be done with a deep understanding of history, why an adversary found the existing status quo intolerable in the first place, the reasons that a conflict began, and a plausible path to a new status quo post bellum that will set the conditions for a new, enduring and stable peace.

If America's national security professionals do not do these things, our nation runs the risk of winning a war, only to refight it years later, due to a failure to focus on a decisive victory that enables an enduring peace.

¹ See Admiral Charles Richard, USN (Ret.) and Robert Peters, “Escalation: A Tool to be Considered, Not Dismissed,” *Information Series*, No. 600, National Institute for Public Policy, October 2, 2024, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/admiral-charles-richard-usn-ret-and-robert-peters-escalation-a-tool-to-be-considered-not-dismissed-no-600-october-2-2024/.



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