

**Strategy: Key Thinkers** by Thomas M. Kane, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, pp. 196, \$24.95

*S. Samuel C. Rajiv\**

Illuminated by the work of strategic classics, Thomas Kane shows that the link between military power and political goals has always been complex and continues to be so. This is because the use of armed force to achieve political objectives (the essence of military strategy) is fraught with serious consequences for nation-states and for the people inhabiting them. Many perceptive minds have tried to unravel these complexities to better understand how and why societies engage in war as well as to guide future strategists to wage them more effectively.

None of the ‘masters of strategic thought’ discussed in this book are, of course, ‘pacifists’. Most of them instead glorified war, as did Carl von Clausewitz. The author notes that the Prussian general warned against the dangers of ‘misplaced compassion’ (p. 100). Instead, in his masterpiece *On War*, Clausewitz urged his readers to take war seriously and to specifically take political issues into account as ‘the fight is over issues which are inherently political’ (p. 81). This insight led him to his famous maxim: ‘war is merely the continuation of policy by other means’ (p. 82).

Clausewitz further noted that the ‘trinity’ of ‘primal emotion, military art and rational planning’ makes up the enterprise of war (p. 79). While the first category relates to the passions and support to go to war emanating from the general population, the second is the prerogative of the armed forces, and the third being the preserve of government

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\* The author is Associate Fellow, IDSA, New Delhi.



authorities. The author notes that despite critics being wary of such distinctions—especially over the issue of rationality being the sole preserve of the government—Clausewitz was pointing that these elements shape different wars differently (p. 89). The ‘grammar’ of war, concerning the ‘practicalities of doing harm’, was therefore unique to each case (p. 84).

For Niccolò Machiavelli, the essence of strategy is the ‘effective use of force’ (p. 60). He affirms that a strategist must maximize his own capabilities in order to have ‘as much control over one’s future circumstances as possible’ (p. 66). This is because variables like intervention by external forces and chance, which he dubs as *fortune*, impact as much as half of a strategist’s freedom of action. He termed as *virtu* the personal qualities that would enable one to overcome *fortune*, which he equates with a woman, to be conquered by force (p. 67). Machiavelli asserted that potential enemies needed to be co-opted or destroyed (p. 68) and that religion could be used to manipulate people (p. 67), who he further advised should be kept in poverty (p. 68). Kane notes that the Florentine’s strategy not only supersedes politics but also faith (p. 67).

The fourth-century Roman writer Flavius Vegetius favoured subduing the enemy through ‘famine, raids and terror’ (p. 54). Kane notes that such advice gelled well with that of the great Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, who, in his masterpiece *The Art of War* written around 500 BC, viewed armed conflict as a ‘practical tool for achieving state’s goals’ (p. 8). Sun Tzu asserted that war was not a ‘quasi-religious ceremony’ but of ‘vital importance’ to a state (p. 11). He delineated five basic factors affecting victory and defeat—politics; weather; terrain; personal qualities of commanders; and doctrine relating to the organising of opposing armies (p. 10). Sun Tzu reiterated the essential importance of: having sufficient knowledge about the enemy—‘know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated’ (p. 11); using resources swiftly, efficiently and decisively (p. 13); ‘effective timing’; and logistics. He also emphasized central control and effective administration, among others.

Kane notes that Sun Tzu surprisingly did not say much about weapons per se. The author notes that ‘perhaps Sun Tzu was sceptical about weapons technology for the same reason that he was sceptical about relying on mere superiority of numbers’ (p. 22). Sun Tzu, however, privileged the vital importance of ‘deception’ to ‘conceal one’s true motives and capabilities’ (p. 25). He urged that war should be approached rationally, given that it is a ‘matter of vital importance to a state’ and an undertaking not to be taken lightly (p. 27).

In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides captured the strategic debates surrounding the war between the Greek city-states of Sparta and Athens. He lays down for his readers the complex realities that lead these states to make the choices they do. These include the role of alliance politics, balance of power dynamics, role of technology and innovation as illustrated by naval warfare engaged by these states to gain an upper hand, as well as efforts to neutralize such power. Thucydides specifically highlights the role of leadership as exemplified by the 'prudent moderation' of Pericles (p. 42), the Athenian leader under whose rule, Thucydides writes, Athens was at its greatest. Athens, however, was defeated because it wasted political advantages, continued war with Sparta and started new wars with Sicily (p. 31).

Thucydides quotes Athenian speakers, who debated the pros and cons of going to war with Athens at the Spartan assembly in 432 BC, and asserted that all states respond to the 'pressure' of 'fear, honour and interest' (p. 37). They further affirmed that all states 'follow the principle that the strong rule and the weak submit' (p. 37). The Athenian speakers were explaining their state's foreign policy vis-à-vis the smaller city-state of Corinth, which was allied with Sparta but had problems with another small state Corcyra, which was allied with Athens.

Another famous quote from Thucydides attributed to the Athenians during their capture of the small island of Melos is: 'the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' (p. 33). Kane, however, cautions that this does not mean that Thucydides was an early supporter of the international relations school of thought called Realism—as is widely accepted, because it is not clear if he agrees with such propositions. The Melians themselves did not recognize this threat and fought the Athenians. Though they lost badly to Athens, the latter themselves eventually lost the Peloponnesian War to Sparta, suggesting that 'realism may be insufficient as a guide to long-term strategy' (p. 34).

In the chapter discussing the work of nuclear strategists, Kane similarly gives sufficient space to consider the work of proponents of strategic culture, like Colin Gray, Jack Snyder and Ken Booth, among others, who bring out the role of cognitive biases (strategists from different countries reasoning in different ways) shaping strategic approaches as against accepting the 'purely rationalistic versions of deterrence theory' (p. 152). Kane eloquently writes that strategy 'acquired the rules of etiquette after the Super Bomb', termed the 'balance of terror' by Albert Wohlstetter (p. 147). The author, however, notes that in strategic etiquette, like in social

etiquette, 'rules vary according to context'. He, therefore, asserts that the Clausewitzian notion of strategy being contextual gets re-affirmed (p. 148). Kane also cites the work of Thomas Schelling, who viewed violent conflict as a 'form of bargaining—balancing threats against demands' (p. 149).

Apart from nuclear strategy, Kane also discusses the works of strategists of irregular warfare. He points out that 'revered' strategic thinkers neglected insurgency. The exception was Clausewitz, who compared guerrillas to 'hot coals at the heart of a building' capable of razing the entire structure (p. 162). Kane goes on to discuss key principles of Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong as well as of counter-insurgent strategists like Robert Thompson and Frank Kitson. For Thompson, constraining the mobility of the insurgents to act will severely limit the impact of their strategies and make 'insurgencies fade away' (p. 170). Kane calls for the development of third generation of insurgency theory to properly account for what Thomas Hammes termed 'Fourth-Generation Warfare' (p. 176).

Other chapters in the book deal with naval and air warfare strategists like Alfred Mahan and Giulio Douhet and strategists of 'heavy metal' (tank warfare) Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller. Kane, however, reiterates the insights of great strategic thinkers like Clausewitz that technology or weapons by themselves are not the panacea, rather success is dependent on how effectively they are used by strategists depending upon the context and the nature of the enemy. He discusses the 1999 NATO air campaign on Kosovo as well as the 1990 and 2003 Gulf Wars to bring to light the complex realities that underpinned such conflicts. A pertinent point Kane makes while discussing Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is that while the Soviets took the lead in developing such concepts, the Americans 'took the lead in fielding technology which made Military Technological Revolution (MTR) possible' (p. 136).

The final chapter seeks to relate the classic works of strategy to contemporary challenges like cyber warfare or anti-satellite weapons. Kane notes that these issues also deal with the need to effectively balance between offensive and defensive options, and 'debates over maritime and aerial warfare may inform our consideration of conflict in newer strategic environments' (p. 183). He, however, closes by affirming that there are no ready recipes for strategists to follow and that practitioners have to do the thinking themselves without 'passively consuming strategic thought' (p. 185). This book is an admirable effort to distil the core concepts and arguments of key strategic thinkers and identify their contemporary relevance.