


Book Review: Perspectives on Strategy

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Anyone wishing to have a truly firm grounding in questions of war and strategy cannot do without **Colin S. Gray**, and *Perspectives on Strategy* is no exception, writes **Julia Muravska**. Gray's latest book aims to examine in depth five aspects of strategy – intellect, morality, culture, geography, and technology – and poses important questions around technology, geography, and ethics.



Perspectives on Strategy. Colin S. Gray. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

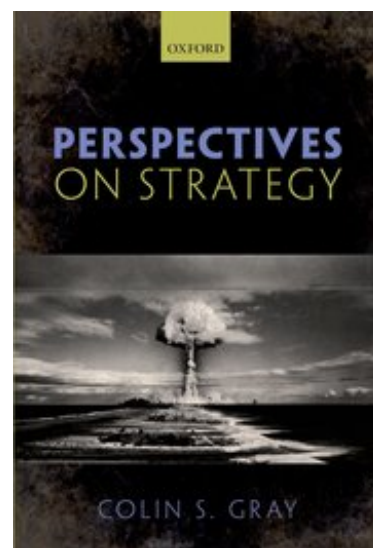
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It is perhaps a familiar pattern in which tribulations of the present prompt an unearthing of history's lessons, forgotten or ignored, it is argued, to general peril. The bruised record of Western military interventions during the 21st century as well as the "international community's" response to the current Arab Awakening, often judged clueless, confused, or calamitous, are no exception. These events have prompted a rediscovery of Sun Tzu's genius, Machiavelli's pragmatism, and now the strategic acumen of T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence of Arabia, as the British soldier, scholar and adventurer of WWI fame was widely known, spoke about the "whole house of war," and this concept of inclusivity, complexity, and unity is the anchor for Colin S. Gray's examination of the "whole house of strategy" in the renowned scholar's latest work, *Perspectives on Strategy* (p. 191).

Gray's purpose, however, is "strictly educational" and never policy-prescriptive, and the perspectives in question are conceptual, ethical, cultural, geographical and technological (p. 198). Through these five distinct yet interacting and co-influential "windows," the scholar undertakes to advance a holistic understanding of "strategic phenomena" (p. 198; 6). At this point, definitions beg to be introduced, as the term strategy, by Gray's own admission, is notorious for being misapplied, overused, and poorly understood. Thus, *Perspectives* is in theory about (neutral) strategy as "direction and use made of means by chosen ways in order to achieve desired ends;" grand strategy as "the direction and use made of any and all among the total assets of a security community for the purposes of policy as decided by politics;" and military strategy as "the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy and decided by politics," although in practice the work really concerns the last of these (p. 2).

If all this sounds rather dense, then it is an accurate reflection of *Perspectives on Strategy*, which is quite a feat, given that it is a slim volume. Yet it demands sustained acute concentration of the reader in order to unlock its intellectual treasure chest. And the gems contained therein are certainly worth the effort, and no less than may be expected from a scholar of Gray's formidable stature, "untroubled" as he self-admittedly is by "Victorian grammatical prejudice," but also, it appears, by stylistic clarity and syntactic elegance. The reader must be prepared to devote time and energy to comprehend the incisive, rigorous, and intellectually stimulating substance of this work, which may really be summarised as mature reflections of a brilliant mind on its beloved subject. Specifically, we would need to swallow constant reminders of our failure to see the truth of Gray's argument ("obviously true;" "common sense affirms that...") and to grapple with sentences peppered with interjections that are a tad too many and adverb-adjective sequences a bit too lengthy ("scarcely less essential"), not to mention paragraphs constructed on an edifice of logic that is implicit rather than explicitly stated.

If such hurdles are successfully scaled, the reward is (much enhanced) understanding of *why* and *how* military strategy and—by flexing the mental muscle a bit more—war are not *only*, but are *also* about ethics, culture, geography and technology. Again, an enviable feat, and, again, Colin Gray's venerable input into the "scholarly controversy" surrounding each perspective (p. 7). Thus, the chapter on culture takes aim at the "cultural turn" currently en vogue in strategic and war studies, and not least at one of its founding fathers, the late Sir John Keegan. It is Gray's contention that, contrary to the arguments of scholars in the "cultural" tradition, "although strategy is cultural, it is so only to a variable degree because there is far more to strategy than culture (on any plausible definition" (p. 83). In addition, claims that strategy and war are inherently and/or fundamentally cultural are



demonstrated to be methodologically problematic (“where does culture end and its influence begin and how does one know?”), conceptually unsound (“if culture is everywhere, it might as well be nowhere, because it cannot be distinguished from its contexts”) and empirically flawed (there are a number of sub-cultures even within one “national strategic culture;” “history shows that belligerents can win despite being culturally ignorant;” and “historical reality is usually one of some cultural learning on the part of all rivals).

Far be it from Gray’s scholarly spirit to discredit arguments without engaging with their more sophisticated versions, reifying them, or advancing his own. For instance, he acknowledges that “culture is important to the understanding of strategies because it directs attention to the customs, beliefs, and behaviours that persist” (p. 83). The “values and customary practices” of a society, in turn, “carry over to its strategic thought and behavior,” meaning that if we are to understand strategy we must pay attention to its cultural aspects (p. 107). Indeed, Gray goes further by specifying a number of precise ways in which culture “matters,” such as being at heart of what has, over time, come to be regarded by nations as strategically advantageous.

Perspectives employs a similar tactic with regard to technology, a similarly sexy topic in this field. Firstly, it patiently explains that “technology is everywhere, all the time, but it does not directly move history onwards,” while its influence is elusive, variable, and shared with a number of competitors, with physical constraints and values being just two (p. 174). Next, Gray demonstrates how available technology is able to “drive tactics, shape operations, and enable strategy” (p. 170).

These are complex arguments, and obviously flow from a distinguished career of scholarship and extensive knowledge. And for this reason, the reader cannot help but crave a more frequent and detailed use of empirical illustrations, particularly of the contemporary variety. This would have been especially useful, as a number of Gray’s perspectives speak to controversies (re)sparked by wars of the late 20th and early 21st century, although extensive footnoting and the caveat that this work is conceived as a complement to Gray’s comprehensive *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* partly assuages this dearth.

In sum, anyone wishing to have a truly firm grounding in questions of war and strategy cannot do without Colin S. Gray, and *Perspectives on Strategy* is no exception. Reading it is no walk in the park, but, then again, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu were not exactly known for clear writing and quickly-grasped concepts, either.

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