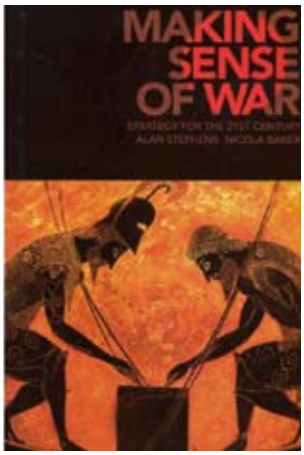
Book Review

Making Sense of War: Strategy for the 21st Century



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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

Books that try to cover the strategic level of warfare are few and far between, in large part because of the intrinsic difficulty in adequately covering a field which is immense in its outlook, and so a new title in this area always generates interest. And that interest is increased when the book originates outside the normal US/UK 'suspects' associated with strategic studies, as this particular volume does, having been produced by 2 Australian academics from the University of New South Wales, Australia Defence Force Academy.

Consisting of 11 chapters, with the majority of these having produced by the authors on an individual basis (only the introduction and final chapter were co-written), it covers what strategy is, how it has been thought of in the past, and how it is approached now, before moving to reflect on some more general considerations regarding the nature of war itself, and in particular those factors that affect the use of force by the military in the 21st century.

From an air power perspective there are a few surprising statements – particularly when they come from the official historian of the RAAF. For instance is it perhaps unexpected to find out that armies have apparently won control of the air, which is alleged to happened in France in 1944 when allied troops captured Luftwaffe airfields. Whilst it is true that the V1 and V2 threat was only lifted when the allied armies overran the areas from which these were launched, real control of the air had already been won before D-Day; in fact the invasion could never have taken place if control of the air had not already been established – what is certainly a fact is that the allied armies could not advance fast enough to provide enough airfields for their own aircraft, and did not take any Luftwaffe airfields until at

least a month after the landings. And coming forwards in time, whilst the importance of Operations Northern and Southern Watch in terms of the coercive use of air power is correctly identified, the details are incorrect – there were in fact 2 no-fly (and later no-movement) zones – one above the 36th parallel (policed from air bases in Turkey) and one below the 32nd parallel (policed mostly from air bases in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, with a small amount of carrier-borne support). Perhaps a more general criticism is that whilst the strategic level of war is well covered – not surprisingly given the title – and the links (and differences) between the tactical and strategic levels of war are well drawn out, there is effectively no mention of the operational level of war at all. Bearing in mind that this is the point at which strategic and grand strategic aims are turned into campaign plans, and where the tactical level of war is directed, this is a serious limitation. There is also little mention of the way in which strategic level theory, doctrine and strategy interact, and in particular the impact that doctrine can have on the way in which military power s able to be applied – the recent conflict between Israel and Hisbollah in the Lebanon is certainly a good example of this.

Nevertheless, the way in which historical examples are interspersed throughout helps the reader to more readily understand the theoretical concepts which are discussed, and it does cover a tremendous range of strategic thought in a relatively few number of pages. The latter half of the book, which considers more of the context within which warfare is situated, is generally good at introducing a range of topics within this area – ranging from changes in the type of war being fought over last 60 years, through concepts of legitimacy and legality, differences between 'hard' and 'soft' power, and the particularly troubled area of peace-making. What is perhaps unexpected is that the chapter dealing with the controlling of war focusses almost exclusively on the US experience, in terms of considering the balance of power between military and civilian leadership in a number of conflicts from Korea through to Iraq in 2003. Whilst America is clearly a very important nation in terms of considering this particular topic, it would have been useful to see this considered from the perspective of some other international players, and in particular non-Western nations.

The final chapter certainly provides a very useful resume of both recent and current trends in strategic thinking around the world, although mostly from a western perspective, but it does perhaps lean a little towards the current trend to assume an 'end of strategy' – at least in terms of an end to conventional warfare. Whilst this is an area of some contention, it is worth remembering that 'small wars' have a long history, so the current emphasis on counter-insurgency is not particularly new – although it is clear that the environment within which operations are carried out has changed – but as various resources (land, water and energy immediately spring to mind) come under severe strain over the next few decades, it is perhaps unwise to assume that conventional warfare is dead just yet.

In summary, whilst this book does suffer from some shortcomings – such

as the lack of discussion over the linkage between the strategic and operational levels of war, and over-reliance on American experience – it does cover a huge range of material in a very readable fashion. With a wealth of historical references (and ignoring a few minor anomalies) it is certainly ideal as either an introduction to the subject of 'strategy', a provider of material for thought or discussion, or even just a useful reference book to strategic thought and practise down the ages. For the price it certainly represents good value.