

What constitutes victory in modern war?

Victory as a concept is problematic in general and even more so in the context of modern war and armed conflict. First, definitional issues occur. Different lenses can be used to look at the idea including the tactical, strategic and grand strategic levels of war, or the way in which the status quo is affected. Second, some factors impede a clear understanding of what victory entails. These include challenges around the clear and unambiguous definition of the desired end state or the goals and the way how to measure them once established. War is a complex social phenomenon that could be considered as a so-called wicked problem, complex and ambiguous. So, what constitutes victory in modern war? The result is at best patchy and probably not very satisfying.

*Colonel E.A. de Landmeter**



'Once you hear the details of victory, it is hard to distinguish it from a defeat.'
Jean Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics*, 1964.

History shows numerous examples of battlefield victors eventually losing the war, or the defeated coming out as winners. More recent armed conflicts such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have illustrated that strategic success cannot be achieved by military force alone and that victory requires not only the defeat of the opponents' military capabilities but also the successful resolution of the deeper problems at the root of the conflict. Additionally, the character of war since the end of the Cold War has changed, because of changing technologies and the re-emergence of a wide variety of non-state actors often contesting the authority of the state, driven by identity politics.¹ Moreover, perceptions of winning and losing may often diverge widely from the realities on the ground.² As early as 1969 O'Connor concluded that victory in terms of the defeat and surrender of the enemy is the exception rather than the rule in the modern world.³ So, how then should we value victory in these changing contexts? Or, in other words, what constitutes victory in modern war?

For many, the end of the Second World War resembles the epitome of a clear 'grand strategic victory' that restructured world order and shaped our image of victory.⁴ However, during the Cold War the realisation emerged that the concept of victory had no longer any practical significance

in the context of nuclear weapons: 'no victory would be worth the price.'⁵ It was after this period and the rise of armed conflict with limited aims that the interest in victory recurred. Therefore, for this article, the term *modern war* represents the wars and armed conflicts that occurred since the end of the Cold War.

This article will first seek to explain the general ideas around the concept of victory by addressing some of the interpretations of victory and its components as well as the relation between victory and defeat. This part will show that the concept of victory in general is contested. Subsequently, some factors that impede a clear understanding and use of the concept will be examined. First, we will look at the difficulties of defining victory as a desired end state and the assessment of progress towards success. Second, the issue of victory's inherent subjectivity is explained. Perceptions of the various actors in conflict on different levels will vary according to their beliefs and manipulation and this diversity in perceptions may change over time. Then, the article will address the complex and ambiguous nature and character of war and armed conflict that may create challenges for the utility of

* Colonel Eric de Landmeter attended the 2017 course at the UK Royal College of Defence Studies. During this time he read for a Masters International Security and Strategy at King's College London. This article is based on one of a series of three award-winning essays he wrote for this study. The author is currently Defence Attaché in Moscow.

1 Mary Kaldor, 'In Defence of New Wars,' in: *Stability*, 2 (1) 4 (2013) 2.

2 Dominic Johnson, Dominic Tierney, *Failing to win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2006) 1.

3 Raymond G. O'Connor, 'Victory in Modern War,' in: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Special Issue on Peace Research in History (1969) 367.

4 Alex Weisiger, 'Victory without peace: Conquest, insurgency, and war termination,' in: *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol.31, No.4, (2014) 357.

5 William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011) 127.

< President George W. Bush speaks to sailors on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln during his address to the Nation on May 1, 2003

PHOTO US NAVY, L. HUNSAKER



PHOTO MCD. A. SCHOOR

The US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to interpretations that look beyond war to examine 'whether outcomes in these events are consistent with victory'

victory. Based on this argument it could be concluded that victory is not just problematic but possibly not meaningful at all in relation to contemporary wars and conflicts. However, that would overlook the positive aspects of victory as motive for action and agent of progress. These aspects will be addressed before coming to some conclusion.

Victory is contested

Although many books have been written on the question *how* to win wars, not many offer a theoretical construct that addresses *what* victory

is. When it is addressed, it is usually 'in passing, as an assumption, or as an excursion from their primary topic.'⁶ This lack of theory is even more surprising considering the fundamental argument in the scholarship that 'how one defines victory is crucial to whether the state achieves it.'⁷

Derived from Latin (*victoria*, from *vinco victus*, 'to conquer'),⁸ the word victory is mostly associated with fighting, battle, and competition. One of the most common synonyms for victory is winning, meaning to prevail, to triumph whilst another common synonym is success.⁹ Although apparently similar, these words convey slightly different meanings and these linguistic variations contribute to the lack of precise understanding of the meaning of victory¹⁰ that could reflect on the design and subsequent outcome of policy.

Defeating an opponent militarily is not identical to achieving the object of war, the reason for

6 J. Boone Bartholomees, 'Theory of Victory,' in: *Parameters*, Summer 2008, 25.

7 William C. Martel, 'Victory in scholarship on strategy and war,' in: *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24:3 (2011) 518.

8 Martel, *Victory in War*, 21.

9 *Ibid.*, 23.

10 *Ibid.*, 22.

which the war was fought. However, most of the time it was ‘men of the military profession’ that developed the thinking about war thus leading to a ‘natural tendency to lose sight of the basic national object, and identify it with the military aim.’¹¹ As a result, policy has often been guided by military aims, losing sight of what was intended by policy.¹² In understanding victory, a clear distinction between the political aim (the end) and the military aim (one of the means to achieve the end) is essential. Victory can be looked at as an outcome (result), a descriptive statement of the post-war situation, or as an aspiration (ambition or goal) being the driver to accomplish specific objectives through use of force.¹³

Regardless of whether victory is addressed as an outcome or as an aspiration, both must be examined on several levels: the tactical, strategic and grand strategic level.¹⁴ ‘Tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war.’¹⁵ This presupposes a hierarchy where the accumulative winning of battles automatically leads to winning the war. Liddell Hart describes the ‘higher’ grand strategic level as a sense of ‘policy in execution’ in which all the resources of the nation, or coalition, are coordinated and directed towards the attainment of the political object of the war.¹⁶ Strategy is about winning the war, grand strategy rather ‘looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace – for its security and prosperity.’¹⁷ Martel expands grand strategic victory’s width to ‘transformative, paradigm changing effects on the international system.’¹⁸ In the continuum of levels, the strategic victory in this sense remains limited to situations when states defeat other states and, in the process, achieve a reasonable number of its objectives with the effects limited to that state or region.¹⁹

In particular, the US-led wars in Iraq (1991, 2003-2011) and Afghanistan (since 2001) have led to interpretations that look beyond war to examine ‘whether outcomes in these events are consistent with victory.’²⁰ One such inter-

pretation is offered by Mandel²¹ who makes a distinction between military victory and strategic victory linking these to ‘two highly interconnected yet distinct time phases.’²² The first phase constitutes of ‘war winning’: the military outcomes on the battlefield leading to successful military conclusion and favourable conditions for the second phase, which he calls ‘peace winning’, the battle to win the peace when the state tries to ‘reap the payoffs of war’ by managing the transition afterwards through reconstruction and reconciliation.²³ Following this two-phase distinction Mandel describes strategic victory in terms of interrelated informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic objectives or elements.²⁴ Strategic victory, thus, ‘entails accomplishing the short-term and long-term national, regional, and global goals for which the war was fought.’²⁵

Since war is a battle of wills between opponents²⁶ it is interactive in its nature; the ‘collision of two living forces’ as Clausewitz writes succinctly.²⁷ This interaction links the notion of victory inextricably to defeat: one’s victory is the other one’s defeat. Consequently, the results of any war are independent for each side and may vary by participant. One side winning does not automatically mean that the other side lost hugely. ‘It

11 B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd ed. (New York, Penguin Group, 1991) 338.

12 Ibid.

13 Martel, *Victory in War*, 18.

14 Ibid.

15 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976) 128.

16 Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 322.

17 Ibid., 321-322.

18 Martel, *Victory in War*, 25.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 4.

21 Robert Mandel, *The Meaning of Military Victory* (Boulder, Col.; Lynne Rienner, 2006) 16.

22 Robert Mandel, ‘Defining Post War Victory,’ in: J. Angstorm and I. Duyvesteyn (eds.), *Understanding Victory and Defeat in Contemporary War* (London, Routledge, 2007) 18.

23 Robert Mandel, ‘Reassessing Victory in Warfare,’ in: *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol 33 Number 4, (2007) 467.

24 Mandel, *The Meaning of Military Victory*, 16.

25 Ibid.

26 Clausewitz, *On War*, I-2, 90.

27 Ibid., I-1, §4, 77.

may not even mean that the other side lost at all.²⁸ Boone argues that victory occurs on multiple sliding scales. Victory and defeat, although opposites, are not binary.²⁹ He illustrates this by introducing a scale of success (defeat, lose, not win, tie, not lose, win, victory), a scale of decisiveness being the extent to which the conflict has been resolved and a scale of achievement. These scales are closely related yet independent variables that can be used in analysing and understanding conflict.

'In international relations war is the ultimate arbiter in disputes and decisive military victory is the surest way to achieve one's political aims.'³⁰ Wars have power of decision, although not always what was intended; one can win or lose, admittedly on a scale of accomplishment or what Gray calls 'decisiveness'. In his approach a decisive victory strictly refers to 'favourable military achievement which forwards achievement of the war's 'political object.'³¹ As the idea of decisive victory does not necessarily equate with the enemy's military obliteration, he adds the terms strategic success and strategic advantage as a measure of success sufficiently enough for the attainment of the political objective.³² Gray concludes that it matters who wins and who loses; 'in other words, which decisions will a particular war's outcome facilitate or inhibit.'³³ This decisive or transformative aspect of war is supported by Luttwak who argues that violence may have to continue until the belligerents are exhausted or one achieves a decisive victory.³⁴

Notwithstanding the potential decisive aspect of victory, it can be argued that no results are final. Already Clausewitz asserted that 'the defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.'³⁵ Allegedly defeated enemies and populations may choose not to accept their 'defeat' and the peace on victor's terms; thus, victory does not end violence but can mark a transition to insurgency or guerrilla war.³⁶

The 'definitional morass'³⁷ of interpretations and the different lenses through which one can look at victory are problematic for meaningful understanding and application in modern conflict. However, most scholars and analysts seem to agree that military victories alone do not determine the outcome of modern wars. Rather they 'provide political opportunities for the victors – and even those opportunities are likely to be limited by circumstances beyond their control.'³⁸

Defining and measuring success

The lack of a clear understanding of the concept of victory potentially impacts the ability of policy makers to use force effectively for political ends and could complicate societal debate whether to use force at all.³⁹ Therefore, the following section will look in more detail at the factors that impede a clear understanding and application of the concept of victory.

Other than for unconditional surrender such as those of Germany and Japan in World War 2, force can and has been used for other purposes such as peace operations, pre-emption, state-building, counterinsurgencies and counter-terrorism.⁴⁰ But the thinking around victory has not kept pace adequately with the 'new' usage of force.⁴¹ The definition of the objective and the purpose of the war or armed conflict is a political matter. Victory should therefore be considered within the context of the political aim: war and victory are about 'statecraft rather than hostilities.'⁴² Victory consists 'not solely of overcoming the enemy forces; it must include

28 Boone Bartholomees, 'Theory of Victory', 26.

29 Ibid., 27.

30 Weisiger, 'Victory without peace: Conquest, insurgency, and war termination', 357.

31 Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2002) 11.

32 Ibid., 13.

33 Ibid., 9.

34 Edward N. Luttwak, 'Give War a Chance', in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (1999) 36.

35 Clausewitz, *On War*, I-I, §9, 80.

36 Weisiger, 'Victory without peace,' 356.

37 Robert Mandel, 'Reassessing Victory in Warfare', 461.

38 Ibid., 467.

39 Martel, 'Victory in scholarship on strategy and war,' 514.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 516.

42 O'Connor, 'Victory in Modern War,' 367.

the attainment of the objective for which the conflict was waged.⁴³

Many scholars and policy makers consider victory to be the achievement of a predetermined end state.⁴⁴ 'If policy-makers are unclear about what victory means, they are less likely to achieve it.'⁴⁵ The notion of a desired end state implies that victory occurs if the outcome of the war corresponds with previously articulated aims: 'a relation between war aims and war outcomes.'⁴⁶ This approach may be problematic. Although most wars will start with some sort of predetermined end state in mind, ambiguously as this end state may be, the dynamics of the war may necessitate modification of the ends. The initial idea of victory may need to be abandoned if the defined end state remains too static or needs a fundamental shift.⁴⁷ As Mandel states, 'victory is not always a product of premeditated strategic choice: war termination often lacks order and coherence, with the possibility of different parties ending their participation at different times; and wars rarely follow a course anticipated by the participants, as states rarely finish wars for the same reasons they start them.'⁴⁸

Definition of the end state may further be complicated in situations where more 'policy makers' are involved in the decision making. Apart from very authoritarian states, the decision to go to war mostly involves many stakeholders at various levels of the political, diplomatic and military leadership. This may further be exacerbated by the direct or indirect influence of societal groups and interests. Sometimes it is not clear which vital interest is at stake. Although the final decision making rests with few, the strategy deliberately needs to remain ambiguous as to cater for different opinions. In the case of the Falkland War it was about territory and restoration of the status quo. The same could be said for the first Gulf War and the liberation of occupied Kuwait in 1991. However, after the initially successful actions against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 the reasons for the armed conflict and thus the definition of victory proved more difficult.



PHOTO: U.S. AIR FORCE

A B-24 Liberator releases its bombs over Mühldorf, Germany, 1945: other than for unconditional surrender force can be used for other purposes such as peace operations, pre-emption, state-building, counterinsurgencies and counterterrorism

Nowadays it is almost inconceivable to wage war without considering the post-war period. Ideally, the object of policy extends into the period after hostilities, and victory is closely linked to concepts of conflict termination and conflict resolution that seek to find lasting solutions. 'The object of war is a better state of peace – even if only from your own point of view.'⁴⁹ The views of what constitutes a better peace will most likely differ widely between belligerents, but the principle is applicable both to aggressive nations who seek expansion and to peaceful nations who want to preserve the status-quo.⁵⁰

Maybe it is because of the difficulty of defining the object of the war and the strategic flexibility required that the term 'victory' is not often used in the last two decades. Victory possibly implies a higher level of success and commitment than

43 Ibid.

44 Mandel, 'Reassessing Victory in Warfare,' 462.

45 Martel, 'Victory in scholarship on strategy and war,' 517-518.

46 Mandel, 'Reassessing Victory in Warfare,' 462.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 338.

50 Ibid.



Dropping leaflets in support of operations from a KC-130 Super Hercules over southern Afghanistan, 2013: complex and prolonged counterinsurgencies make measuring victory not less problematic

PHOTO US MARINE CORPS, D. MUNNERLYN

policy makers want to express; it could also suggest that policy makers think they may lose flexibility. Victory does not admit to flexibility.⁵¹ O'Connor's 1969 'working definition', 'victory will mean the cessation of armed conflict under conditions satisfactory to at least one of the combatants in terms of stated objectives,'⁵² though elegant, may no longer be satisfactory in today's armed conflicts.

Measuring victory in terms of successfully achieving the aims could also be problematic. Mandel observes a significant decline in the amount of wars in which a clear cut strategic victory appears.⁵³ But, even when this observation is discarded the difficulty of determining when victory is achieved is apparent. No obvious criteria exist for gauging the accomplishment of ends in particular in a period of complex and prolonged counterinsurgencies.⁵⁴ Some experts suggest measuring victory on the basis of body counts, material loss, territory, capture of capital cities, winning hearts and minds, and the accomplishment of predetermined objectives.⁵⁵ However, any of these metrics could deliver different answers to the question who won in a specific war. In the fight against terrorism

51 Martel, *Victory in War*, 18.

52 O'Connor, 'Victory in Modern War', 367.

53 Mandel, *The Meaning of Military Victory*, 12.

54 E.B. Kapstein, 'Measuring Progress in Modern Wars,' in: *Survival*, Vol.54, No.1, (2012) 137.

55 O'Driscoll, Cian, 'At all costs and in spite of all terror? The victory of just war,' in: *Review of International Studies*, 41(4) (2015) 8.

insurgency metrics proved very hard to establish. In such circumstances, useful metrics may be based on the idea of 'feeling safe' and the question how many people are able to live their life in safety free from fear of violence.⁵⁶ The appropriateness of metrics is at stake when the aims of the war are not clearly defined or understood. So, metrics need to be designed in accordance with a successful strategy. If not, they 'will be little more than a laundry list that offers scant insight into which variables ought to be centre of attention.'⁵⁷

Victory is subjective

The notion of victory is inherently subjective. 'At the most basic level [it's] an assessment, not a fact or condition.'⁵⁸ As war is the interaction between opposing wills and by its nature a social activity, the perception of the actors involved is often more important than the seemingly straightforward outcomes of the conflict. The perceptions of who won and who lost often diverge widely from the realities on the ground. Great battles can be won by the military but nevertheless observers may see the outcome as a defeat and major concessions in negotiations can reversely be perceived as victories.⁵⁹ This differences in interpretation are related to viewing perspective and time span,⁶⁰ or in other words 'the *diversity* in perceptions of victory and defeat; and the *changes* in these perceptions over time.'⁶¹

Viewing perspective depends on the question *whose* view matters in defining the outcomes of the conflict. Is it always the victor who is right or merely the defeated?

One can take the opinion of the political or military leadership in the respective contesting states as authoritative or rather the interpretation by domestic populations. The viewpoint will also vary with the level of action: what seems a very positive outcome on the tactical level battlefield may not be judged as victorious at the higher strategic or political level. Although the US war in Vietnam could be seen as a tactical military success, it was considered a loss at the strategic level and with hugely differing view-

points politically and domestically. The traditional levels of warfare offer a useful framework for analysis but the phenomenon of *strategic compression* – ostensibly small events on the ground that have immediate and unexpected repercussions at strategic level – potentially complicates and influences perceptions. Around the clock media coverage, transparency and social media plausibly affect perceptions. As modern armed conflict has become a battle of narratives as much as a violent struggle, perceptions of the war will evidently shape the perceived victory.

The question of time span revolves around how much time should be taken after the end of the armed conflict before a meaningful assessment of possible gains or losses can be made. An example where time may have redefined the result is the assessment of the outcome of World War I as a decisive Allied victory. Nowadays historians dispute this label in the light of the second World War that occurred as a result.⁶² Another example arguably, is the 1991 Gulf War that was considered a clear military and strategic victory: Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi occupation by the US-led coalition. However, the Saddam Hussain regime continued and sourced regional instability ultimately leading to the invasion of 2003.⁶³ In hindsight, the US may have pursued the wrong objective in 1991 as it did not include regime change.⁶⁴ The issue of time is probably of less importance for policy-makers; in the context of victory however, it remains important to consider whether 'the problem' that underpins the armed conflict is sufficiently resolved at a certain point in time or

56 Fick, Nathaniel, 'Defining Victory: Assessing Military Efforts and Measuring Outcomes in Afghanistan,' in: *American Interests in South Asia: Building a Grand Strategy in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India*, edited by Nicholas Burns and Jonathan Price (Aspen Institute, 2011) 57.

57 Kapstein, 'Measuring Progress in Modern Wars,' 137.

58 Boone Bartholomees, 'Theory of Victory,' 26.

59 Johnson, Tierney, 'Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics,' 1.

60 Mandel, 'Defining Post War Victory,' 16.

61 Johnson, Tierney, 'Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics,' 38.

62 Mandel, 'Defining Post War Victory,' 16.

63 Gray, 'Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory,' 11.

64 Mandel, 'Reassessing Victory in Warfare,' 467.

just contained and waiting to re-emerge.⁶⁵ The 1982 Falkland War is generally considered a triumph for Great Britain; Argentina was defeated, and as a result the political system in the country collapsed. Interestingly, both time span and changing viewpoint led to a post-war narrative in Argentina that gradually viewed the war not as a defeat – despite the apparent humiliation and huge loss of life – but rather as a victory of democracy and a new start following the demise of the junta.⁶⁶

In analysing war, what matters is the ultimate perception of the situation, not just the facts.⁶⁷ People's beliefs during and after war are

influenced by as much the events on the ground as they are by psychological and cognitive biases that are the result of pre-existing beliefs, symbolism of events and manipulation by elites and the media.⁶⁸ In their extensive study *Failing to Win* Johnson and Tiernay 'dissect' the psychological, political, and cultural factors that lead to different perceptions of international conflicts as victories or defeats.⁶⁹ They distinguish prior biases (individual beliefs, national culture, organisation, world view), crisis evolution (unfolding events and their framing) and deliberate perception manipulation as the main influencing factors.⁷⁰ In summary, the perceptions of victory not only affect the history books but also 'shape the fate of leaders, democratic processes, support for foreign policies, and the lessons used to guide decisions in the future.'⁷¹

Complex character of war

Although the nature of war and armed conflict has not changed over time, its character has because of ever changing actors, methods, technological evolution and ideologies. Major changes in the goals of war, the rules of war and the target of the war have shaped contemporary wars and conceptions of victory.⁷² War used to be considered as an instrument to restore a disturbed status quo whilst preserving much of the pre-war order intact. Conversely, the goals of modern wars are often aimed at long-term transformational changes in the political, social and civic structures aimed at removing the threat or address the roots of the conflict.⁷³ The rules of war have increasingly restricted the means and methods that could be used in war. According to Blum, a growing concern for individual suffering has shifted the approach to war and its rules from a state-centred approach 'to a more cosmopolitan regime, in which individual human security is paramount.'⁷⁴ Overall, she concludes, 'international law and morality have made war, in aspiration if not in practice, more difficult to wage.'⁷⁵ The third relevant development is related to the nature of the actors in war. Traditionally, wars were state centric with the state as a unified entity. However, the rise of non-state actors, such as



PHOTO US LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

An example where time may have redefined the result is the assessment of the outcome of World War I as a decisive Allied victory

65 Mandel, 'Defining Post War Victory,' 16.

66 Author's observation during official study trip to Argentina with Royal Belgium Defence College in 2000.

67 Boone Bartholomees, 26.

68 Johnson, Tierney, *Failing to Win*, 5.

69 Ibid., 1.

70 Dominic Johnson, Dominic Tiernay, 'Essence of Victory,' in: *Security Studies*, 13:2 (2003) 354-355.

71 Johnson, Tierney, *Failing to Win*, 18.

72 Gabriella Blum, 'The Fog of Victory,' in: *The European Journal of International Law* (2013), Vol. 24 No. 1, 392.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 393.



Training Peshmerga soldiers in Northern Iraq: more actors with a wide variety of interests and their own perceptions of reality complicate the definition of success and victory

PHOTO US ARMY, J. HURST

insurgents, terrorists, transnational criminal networks combined with greater focus on individuals' status and conduct, consequently demands that 'victory needs to be formulated and achieved in a more nuanced way vis-à-vis different groups within the state.'⁷⁶

These developments are in line with the findings of Mary Kaldor whose 'New Wars' thinking has helped change the way policy makers perceive contemporary armed conflict from a 'stereotyped version of war' to a more sophisticated understanding of conflicts where the nature of actors and their objectives appear to have fundamentally changed the character of war.⁷⁷ In these New Wars, 'victory no longer rests on the ability to inflict massive destruction but on the ability to wrestle popular support away from one's opponents.'⁷⁸ Simply put, more actors with a wide variety of interests and their own perceptions of reality, further complicate the definition of success and victory.

New wars can be further described 'as mixtures of war (organised violence for political ends),

crime (organised violence for private ends) and human rights violations (violence against civilians).'⁷⁹ Similar terms, such as hybrid warfare, multivariate warfare, mosaic or complex warfighting are explicitly about being a mixture.⁸⁰ The multiplication and variety of actors, goals, methods and ways of finance which characterise the current armed conflicts leads inevitably to increasing complexity and unpredictability. It is for this reason that the construct of 'wicked problems' originally described by Rittel and Webber⁸¹ in 1973 was dusted off by policy and doctrine writers during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A wicked problem is complex, often intractable, without any unilinear solution, and moreover, it has no

76 Ibid.

77 Kaldor, 'In Defence of New Wars,' 2.

78 Bart Schuurman, 'Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars,' in: *Parameters*, Vol.40, No.1, (Spring 2010) 89.

79 Kaldor, 'In Defence of New Wars,' 6.

80 Ibid., 5.

81 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,' in: *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973) 155-169.

'stopping' point: it is novel and 'any apparent 'solution' often generate other 'problems', and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, but there are better or worse alternatives. In other words, there is a huge degree of uncertainty involved.'⁸² Developing a strategy for dealing with global terrorism is considered an example of a wicked problem.⁸³

This complexity requires differentiation between subjects including combatants, leaders, supporters, opposition, both in theatre and 'at home', and a mixture of methods, carefully tailored to each group.⁸⁴ It is justified to observe that it is extremely difficult to articulate end states, measure outcomes and, thus, define a coherent

concept of victory accordingly that are also acceptable to a wide range of actors with their interests and perceptions of the situation. Thus, victory as a concept appears to be very problematic and might be devoid of meaning altogether. However, does that mean that the concept of victory has no positive attributes?

Victory as a force for good

'Even fighting in an impossible situation is done in the hope of victory, if only by miracle or if only defined as surviving the contest.'⁸⁵ Despite its contested nature victory has a strong emotional element, which can sometimes serve as a force for good. Extensive research shows that victory and defeat can have psychological and physiological effects on human beings. Victories and winning are mostly admired; losing and defeat are not. 'The thrill of victory...and the agony of defeat,' the late Jim McKay's famous opening words of ABC's World Wide sports show, encapsulate this emotional state.

It is widely accepted that Prime Minister Thatcher's decision to retake the Falklands, which at the start of events was not the obvious choice, secured her domestic authority

PHOTO ANP, S. NACKSTRAND



Earlier victory was described as either an outcome or as an ambition. It is the latter function – something to aspire to – that can act as a driver for action, both individually and for groups. A famous example of this was voiced by Winston Churchill's address in the House of Commons on 13 May 1940 in which victory as aspiration and agent of change is central: 'You ask, what is our aim? I can answer with one word: Victory – victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.'⁸⁶

Since the notion of victory can have a strong emotional appeal, it is often used, if sometimes only in a rhetorical sense or with doubtful intentions, to muster support for political reasons. The symbolic value, in particular, of victories, or defeats for that matter, should not be underestimated. When former US president George W. Bush declared in 2003 that the US had 'prevailed' in the war against Iraq⁸⁷ with the words 'mission accomplished' projected behind him, it was all about symbolism and winning. After all, the domestic political survival of leaders may depend on the perception of being viewed as victors. 'President Kennedy derived great political benefit from the Cuban missile crisis; Khrushchev quite the opposite,'⁸⁸ even though both had to make sacrifices to settle the conflict. It is also widely accepted that Mrs. Thatcher's decision to retake the Falklands, which at the start of events was not the obvious choice, secured her domestic authority.⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the positive effects of victory, the opposite, defeat, can lead to deep emotional reactions of frustration that over time could potentially inform negative motivations such as revenge, particularly if enshrined in national cultural identity. The defeat of the Serbs in 1389 on the Kosovo Polje battlefield against the Ottomans, for example, served as a strong symbol in Serbian nationalistic feelings of vengeance against the Muslim population in the early 1990s. Likewise, the Treaty of Versailles that concluded Germany's defeat in World War 1 contributed to German revanchism. The general predisposition with the notion of victory could be explained as a product of culture,

Since the notion of victory can have a strong emotional appeal, it is often used, if sometimes only in a rhetorical sense or with doubtful intentions, to muster support for political reasons

history, language and politics.⁹⁰ In further explaining some of the cultural and identity elements of victory the concept of strategic culture⁹¹ could prove helpful. The notions of victory, winning, and success are deeply engrained in our human culture and have emotional significance, even without having detailed and clear understanding of their conceptual meaning. As O'Connor concludes, 'human beings do not always react the same way to the same or similar pressures, and circumstances can alter cases in war as in law. But the emotional appeal of victory and the repugnance of defeat are endemic.'⁹²

-
- 82 Keith Grint, 'Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of 'leadership,' in: *Human Relations*, 2005, Volume 58 (11) 1473.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Blum, 'The Fog of Victory,' 407.
- 85 Boone Bartholomees, 'Theory of Victory,' 36.
- 86 <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat> (accessed 28 Mar 2017).
- 87 Martel, *Victory in War*, 4.
- 88 Johnson, Tierney, 'Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics,' 13.
- 89 Hew Strachan, 'Strategy: Change and Continuity,' in: *The Direction of War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013) 263.
- 90 Martel, *Victory in War*, 30.
- 91 Jeffrey Lantis, Darryl Howlett, Strategic Culture, chapter in *Strategy in the Contemporary World: an Introduction to Strategic Studies*, eds. Baylis, Wirtz and Gray (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 92 O'Connor, 'Victory in Modern War,' 380.



As the attempts to define what success looks like in Afghanistan or Iraq show, the formulation of victory now requires more long-term, abstract, and complex, less tangible and immediate terms

Concluding remarks

War is about winning, however that does not mean it is about victory.⁹³ Military force can be used legitimately for limited goals or for short term political advantage without the intent of resolving the underlying issues. 'War is about politics, and consequently victory in the end is a political matter.'⁹⁴ In this article, it is argued that victory as a concept is problematic in general and even more so in the context of modern war and armed conflict. First, defini-

tional issues occur. Different lenses can be used to look at the idea including the tactical, strategic and grand strategic levels of war, or the way in which the status quo is affected. It can be considered as an expected outcome or an aspiration and can be limited to the phase of hostilities or reach beyond into the post-war period, the difference between 'winning the war' or 'winning the peace.' Victory and defeat are opposites but are connected and can be described on sliding scales as a function of the interaction between opponents.

Second, some factors impede a clear understanding of what victory entails. These include challenges around the clear and unambiguous

93 Boone Bartholomees, 'Theory of Victory,' 36.

94 Ibid.



PHOTO MCD, J. DE MEESTER

cies between actors. Overall, it could be concluded that victory as a concept for modern war and armed conflict is not meaningful in general.

War is a complex social phenomenon that could be considered as a so-called wicked problem, complex and ambiguous. Since at the start it is not clear what the political purpose and subsequent aims need to be, the whole idea of victory could possibly distract attention from the nature of the problem. It may lead to simplification of something that cannot be simplified. On the other hand, being so much part of our human existence, victory in aspirational terms arguably has positive motivational effects or assist in rallying political support for a cause. But this should be handled with care.

So, what constitutes victory in modern war? The result is at best patchy and probably not very satisfying, but as Blum concludes: 'With wars becoming about long-term change, requiring a mix of benevolence and aggression that is carefully tailored to individual targets, the political and civilian dimensions of victory have outgrown the military one. As the attempts to define what success looks like in Afghanistan or Iraq show, the formulation of victory now requires more long-term, abstract, and complex, less tangible and immediate terms. War, in other words, can no longer be reduced into a military campaign.'⁹⁵

Military success still needs to assist in shaping the international or regional political environment in support of strategic interests of many actors. A victory in the 'true sense implies that the state of peace and of one's people, is better after the war than before.'⁹⁶ However, such a victory requires considerable patience, because 'while the military contest may have a finite ending, the political, social, and psychological issues may not be resolved even years after the formal end of hostilities.'⁹⁷ ■

definition of the desired end state or the goals and the way how to measure them once established. Victory is inherently subjective; it depends on the viewpoint of the actors involved in the conflict how the result is perceived and assessed. Obviously, the warring sides may differ but even within one 'side' the perceptions can hugely vary between for example state and population. The subjectivity problem is further enhanced by the changing character of war. Wars and armed conflict have become increasingly complex as a result of changing actors, in particular non-state actors, and their wide variety of interests and goals, the methods that are used, as well as changing perceptions around the use of force and the growing interdependen-

95 Blum, 'The Fog of Victory,' 393.

96 Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 357.

97 Mandel, 'Reassessing Victory in Warfare,' 467.