

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE STRATEGIES OF ALEXANDER III OF MACEDON, LOUIS XIV OF FRANCE, FREDERICK II OF PRUSSIA, AND NAPOLEON I OF FRANCE

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STRATEGIC AIMS AND MOTIVATION

a) Alexander the Great

For Alexander the Great invading the Persian Empire was not even a decision, indeed the campaign had already been planned and initiated by his father Philip II (Brunt, 1965: 205). The original goal was to 'liberate' the Greek cities in Asia Minor from the Persians, which was hardly a new idea, as can be seen from the actions of Athens and the Delian League, and later Sparta following its collapse (Mossé, 2004: 55). It is possible however, that Alexander did intend to seize the entire Persian Empire right from the offset, as he frequently repeated the mantra "from the Gods I accept Asia, won by the spear" following his hurling of a spear into the ground upon landing at the site of Troy (Hammond, 1996: 68). If he did not intend to conquer all of Asia at the beginning of his campaign, he certainly did once he had assumed control of the Persian Empire. Alexander was under the impression that 'India' was the last province of Asia, and that the conquest of the Ganges basin would lead them to what was essentially the end of the world (ibid.: 207). The rest of the Macedonians however, eventually reached their limit following.

the Battle of the Hydaspes in modern-day Pakistan. Many had been on campaign with Alexander for eight years, and now wanted to return home.

It is clear that Alexander's strategic goal eventually became conquering the world, or at least the parts of the world worth conquering. If we consider his view of the world to be something akin to that of Herodotus' Ecumene, he had already made significant progress. At the time he fell ill, he had established plans for an invasion of Arabia (Hammond, 1996: 245), and we are also told that he had left behind designs for the conquest of the entire coast of the Mediterranean (Brunt, 1965: 212). Not only did he intend to conquer the inhabited world, he would then seek to rule it through large scale population exchanges in order to create an homogenous world which would be easier ruled (Strauss, 2003: 129).

Alexander did not need to come up with the idea of invading the Persian Empire, he practically inherited it. He did however, push the idea to its absolute limits by conquering the entire polity and proclaiming himself Darius III's successor, and then progressing beyond the Empire's borders. It is apparent that Alexander's religious beliefs and personal pursuit for glory

compelled him to set such lofty aims. As Hammond writes (1996: 68):

“Alexander was living fully in the world of his gods and ancestors, as they had been portrayed by his favourite poet, Homer, whose Iliad was his constant companion, and as they still lived in his imagination and belief.”

His belief in his own mission as being divinely inspired only intensified as his successes increased. Citing Alexander’s taking of the rock of Aornus, a highly defensible fortress that no longer held much strategic value as an example, Brunt writes that “More than once we are told that the more impracticable a project appeared, the more he was determined to undertake it” (Brunt, 1965: 209). Therefore it is possible to conclude that Alexander’s strategy was formulated with the purpose of establishing his own legendary status comparable to that of Heracles or Achilles.

b) Louis XIV

Louis XIV lived for a period of 77 years and in that time, France was at war during 51 of them (Lynn II, 2011: 36). It is therefore difficult to address all the strategic aspects of his reign, however there are two overarching aims throughout the period. Upon the death of his chief minister, Mazarin, Louis took sole control of France. Within a year he had launched an invasion of the Spanish Netherlands which Lynn argues was Louis trying to “make his mark, to establish his glory” (ibid.: 37). Lynn further argues that Louis was obsessed with *gloire* which can obviously be translated as ‘glory’ but could be better translated as ‘reputation’ (ibid.:

43). Nevertheless, it is clear that the accrualment of glory was still an important objective for Louis in his quest to become ‘the Greatest King in Christendom’ (Lynn, 1999: 32).

Louis’ drive for personal glory differs in certain aspects to that of Alexander’s. While Louis’ famous “L’état, c’est moi” (“The State? I am the State”) quote may be apocryphal, it has endured because it perfectly represents his political personality (Lynn, 2011: 34). With Alexander we see that his ambitions and aims far outgrew that of the position of king of the Macedons, but for Louis this was not the case. As Lynn states “it is nearly impossible to separate the monarch from the man. From birth he was groomed to rule France” (1999: 27). This idea extended to furthering the interests of the House of Bourbon as a whole, with Rowlands arguing that the expansion of the French army under Louis XIV was ultimately to pursue dynasticism (2002: 336).

By the end of the Franco-Dutch war in which France had acquired significant territory, Louis’ overall strategy shifted towards defence. Lynn states that “After the Dutch War, for all his desire for *gloire*, Louis harboured in his heart more fear of invasion than lust for conquest” (Lynn II, 2011: 52). Louis’ main goal became creating a France that need not rely on any ally, but could be entirely secured through its own large military forces and technologically advanced fortifications (ibid.: 35). Louis never sought the position of ‘universal monarch’, unlike Alexander, nor even an undisputed hegemonic position over Europe; rather, his main strategic aim was securing France’s place as the strongest great power.

c) Frederick the Great

Unlike Alexander and Louis XIV, Frederick the Great did not inherit a great power when he came to the throne of Prussia in 1740. Like Alexander, however, his father left behind an army that was better trained than its contemporaries. An opportunity would soon appear over the issue of Maria Theresa's succession to the Habsburg holdings, and Frederick began the War of the Austrian Succession with his invasion of Silesia. In later years Frederick described his decision to invade as "the consequence of his possession of a well-trained army, a full treasury, and a desire to establish a reputation" (Showalter, 1996: 39). From this it could be argued that Frederick's strategy was directed by his quest for personal glory in a similar manner to Alexander and Louis, however this conclusion would be tenuous. When reflecting on foreign policy nine years before he even ascended to the throne, Frederick had argued that "Prussia must expand its territory according to a systematic, long-term plan" (ibid.: 30). It appears more appropriate to conclude that Frederick's decision to pursue a policy of expansionism was perhaps influenced by a desire for glory, but not solely driven by it.

For Frederick, the overarching goal was to elevate Prussia to the position of a Great Power. He argued that only a large, strong state could secure the welfare of its subjects and enhance the happiness of mankind (ibid.: 32), therefore Prussia must become large and strong to achieve these goals. As Showalter states "From his earliest days on the throne Frederick sought not to overthrow the balance of Europe, but to adjust that balance in Prussia's favour" (ibid: 335). Therefore Frederick's strategic aims were divergent to that of

Alexander and Louis, owing to the position of Prussia in the international system.

d) Napoleon

Of the four men, Napoleon is the only one who did not inherit a throne. Instead he created the First French Empire through the virtue of his outstanding battlefield achievements. However, as Esdaile demonstrates in his article *De-Constructing the French Wars: Napoleon as Anti-Strategist* identifying a Napoleonic strategy that extends beyond a few campaigns is a difficult task (Esdaile, 2008: 516). This is partly down to the fact that Napoleon believed that as he had won the throne of the French Empire through military means, he must maintain it that way. On the 26th of June 1813 he said to the Austrian Chancellor Count Metternich:

"Your sovereigns born to the throne may be beaten twenty times and still go back to their palaces; that cannot I – the child of fortune: my reign will not outlast the day when I have ceased to be strong, and therefore to be feared" (ibid: 543).

In this way he is obviously unlike the other three, in that they, born to their thrones, did not feel the need to continually re-legitimise their rule through battlefield victories.

One could then perhaps expect that after many campaigns an end goal might be established, but a clear objective remains elusive. It is possible to recognise, however, that one of, if not the main aim of Napoleon was to overcome the British. As Esdaile states (ibid: 519-520):

“she [Britain] was at the heart of all the enmity which France had faced, the very motor, indeed, of the anti-French war effort. [...] In short, even when other powers entered the war, the defeat of Britain remained everything”.

But the defeat of Britain appears to have largely been an end without proposed means. Napoleon was more interested in pursuing immediate wars based on his ego and personal quest for glory. The prime example for this would be the Russian campaign, as Napoleon felt slighted by the Tsar’s dissolution of their alliance (despite it occurring as a result of Napoleon’s diplomatic inflexibility). As Esdaile states “Alexander had challenged him and had therefore to be put in his place” (ibid.: 549), showing that Napoleon was making strategic decisions based on his own ego.

STRATEGIC METHODS

a) Alexander the Great

The main strategic instrument Alexander used was his tactical superiority, both in the standard of troops available and his own generalship. Strauss states that “If Persia would fight the Macedonians in a set battle, Alexander had good reason to be confident of victory” (Strauss, 2003: 148). His strategy involved avoiding the main Persian strength, its fleet, and instead used his strength, the army, to deny them ports (ibid.: 136). It was not just that Alexander was an effective commander, he managed to win battles with incredibly few losses. While this can be heavily attributed to the Macedonian Phalanx’ mode of fighting (it is difficult to kill an enemy if he is keeping you at bay with a six metre pike), Hammond argues

that Alexander’s love for his men and the camaraderie between them drove him to win with as few losses as possible (Hammond, 1996: 260). The battle of Granicus is an example of this, where Alexander risked his own life using the Companion Cavalry to screen his infantry’s river crossing. Alexander led from the front, and inspired all men to follow him, not only his own Macedonians (ibid.: 261). He knew he could lead an army as far as he did because he could count on his charisma and leadership.

It was not just those directly under his own command that Alexander had an effective strategy for dealing with, he understood the need for the Greek city states as allies. He did not seek to annex or subjugate the Greek League, his approach was that of an ally, albeit one of overwhelming strength (ibid.: 256). He waged an incredibly successful war against Persia and made relatively few demands of the member states, with Hammond arguing that “It is difficult to find fault with the conduct of Alexander as hegemon of the Greek League” (ibid.: 258).

His conduct over the conquered could overall be regarded as conciliatory, although there are incidents such as the burning of Persepolis which run counter to this. Alexander did not share the opinion of his teacher Aristotle that all non-Greeks were barbarians suitable only for subjugation and exploitation (ibid: 79). In many cases Persian satraps were reinstated in their localities, however Alexander did take the measure of dividing civil, military, and financial powers, usually between a mix of local rulers and Macedonian officers (ibid: 79-80). Through this strategy Alexander not only conquered the territories, but increased the likelihood of his retention of them.

b) Louis XIV

In contrast, Louis XIV was not a General, nor even a soldier. He attended battles, however this was carried out as a political move to present himself as a warrior king (Lynn, 1999: 29). Also unlike Alexander, Louis was not in control of a good army, indeed throughout much of the 17th century the French army was particularly poor (Anderson, 1988: 56-57). In order to meet his strategic goals, Louis relied on quantity, not quality, ballooning the size of the army during his reign. At its peak in 1693 the French army numbered 447,000 men, which represented a four-and-a-half to six times increase of the numbers in 1661 (Lynn II, 2011: 56).

One of Louis' main strategic flaws was his failure of diplomacy. While he was in pursuit of an independent France with entirely secure borders, he also sought to achieve this aim unilaterally. As Lynn puts it "Louis's sense of his own glory and of French power tempted him to go it alone in international affairs and war" (ibid.: 49). Louis had made himself a reputation for being expansionist early in his reign with the War of Devolution and the Franco-Dutch War, but then did nothing to remedy his image, so when his grand strategy switched to a defensive focus, it did not translate. Lynn concludes succinctly that Louis "lost the narrative" (ibid.: 54).

c) Frederick the Great

Much like Alexander, Frederick the Great directly inherited an army that was superior to its contemporaries. Unlike Louis he was not interested in grand fortifications as a means of securing the state, and as Showalter affirms "Frederick staked his state's future on his field

army, on soldiers rather than walls" (Showalter, 1996: 36). His development of the oblique order was used to stunning effect at both the battles of Leuthen and Rossbach, acquiring victories with large disparities in casualty numbers which was particularly unusual in the 18th century. Showalter points out that Frederick's writings show that he relied on the use of tactical and operational methods to solve grand-strategic problems (ibid.: 108).

Frederick was well aware of the importance of allies in the European power system and how they affected wars:

"The first thing, as I have said, is to compare all the enemy forces, along with those of their allies, to your own and to the assistance that your allies will give you. Strategy is based on the forces you have, on the strength of the enemy, on the situation of the country where you want to carry the war, and on the political condition of Europe" (Luvaas, 1999: 307-308).

When Frederick began the War of the Austrian succession, he not only knew that he was likely to start a Europe-wide war, he was essentially counting on it (Browning, 1995: 39). It was unlikely that Prussia could take and hold Silesia on its own against Austria, but knowing that Austria would be bogged down in other theatres was what gave Frederick the confidence to launch the war. There is a reasonable argument to be made that Frederick was poor at judging the international system given that around a decade after the end of the war, all the Great Powers of Europe except for Britain waged war on Prussia during the Seven Years War. While he underestimated Austrian tenacity in trying to reclaim Silesia, the other major strand of his

strategy, that of tactical superiority, meant Prussia survived. Showalter said of the Seven Years War that “Frederick had compensated for his state’s geo-strategic disadvantages by his own tactical skill and the fighting power of his army” (Showalter, 1996: 310).

d) Napoleon

Defining how Napoleon achieved his strategic aims is just as difficult as trying to discern the aims themselves. One way that we can compare Napoleon is that much like Alexander and Frederick, he sought decisive victories through tactical and operational superiority (Gates, 1997: 4). While he was a master of the field, the distinct lack of strategic oversight meant that this superiority was eventually for naught. Indeed, even his approach to operational warfare was rather reactionary, as one of his aides confirms “he never devised any other than a vague plan, preferring to take counsel of opportunity, a system more conformable to the promptitude of his genius” (ibid.: 4).

The one identifiable grand-strategic undertaking of Napoleon was the Continental Blockade. The idea was that as France’s superior armies could not reach British shores, she would be strangled economically with Napoleon declaring “We will not lay down our arms until we have obliged the English, those eternal enemies of our nation, to renounce both the scheme of disturbing the Continent and tyranny of the seas” (Esdaile, 2008: 521). This required the closing off of essentially the entire European continent to British markets. This was an ill-fated venture from the start, as not only could France not make up for the want of colonial produce, it was also set up as an exploitative measure. Esdaile describes it thus (ibid.: 531):

“the blockade was from the start an integral part of an economic policy designed to harness the rest of Europe to France’s economic needs. In particular French industry was to be protected and the rest of the continent transformed – literally – into a captive market”.

The effect was reasonable damage to the British economy for the first two to three years, followed by a fast recovery once it had adapted to new markets, leading us to conclude that Napoleon’s only tangible piece of grand strategy was a total failure.

CONCLUSION

It is rather obvious to conclude that Napoleon, for all his tactical brilliance, was the worst strategist of the four. The France that he left was smaller than the France that he seized in 1799 (Lynn II, 2011: 59). His unwillingness to use diplomacy and co-operation to bring down Britain, and lack of grand-strategic aims ultimately meant that his victories were wasted. It is then interesting to compare this with Louis XIV, who also notably failed to implement effective diplomacy and was not gifted with the same tactical abilities or quality of army, yet by the end of his reign had enlarged France (ibid.: 58). This is because Louis had a strategic goal, therefore the victories he did win contributed towards something other than the perpetuation of his own reign.

Alexander is difficult to assess, for we can look at his accomplishments based on two separate criteria, and his early death means we will never know the full extent of what he could have achieved – or lost. If we look at Alexander’s strategic aim as being his own immortalisation

as a 'Greek' hero, then he was resoundingly successful. If we assess it based on his establishment of a great Empire, we must say that ultimately, he failed, for the sole reason that he did not beget an heir. Had he heeded the advice of his generals Antipater and Parmenio to produce an heir before the invasion of Persia (Brunt, 1965: 215), his Empire may not have immediately fractured upon his death.

And so finally we come to Frederick, and of the four he could be argued to be the most successful in his strategic aims. Using his reading of the international system he was able to pry the valuable territory of Silesia away from the Austrians. While he may not have been as inspiring as Alexander, or as good a field general as Napoleon, he then held Silesia against almost all the major powers of Europe practically alone for seven years through his ability to turn tactical superiority into strategic gains. While it could be argued that he was lucky that the death of Empress Elizabeth led to Russia's immediate withdrawal from the war, Frederick's aim for the Seven Years War was merely to stay afloat and wait until European diplomacy shifted in his favour, which it ultimately did.

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