

**UNITED STATES ARMY**

# **Strategic Land Power in the 21st Century A Conceptual Framework, by Colonel Brian M. Michelson**

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A Conceptual Framework,

Strategic Land Power in the 21st Century: Michelson

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by

Colonel Brian M. Michelson



A U.S. Army M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank, Company C, 1st Battalion, 67th Armor Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division stares off a camel during a bilateral exercise in the US Central Command area of responsibility, Feb. 19, 2014. The week-long military-to-military exercise fostered partnership and interoperability. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Marcus Fichtl, 2nd ABCT PAO, 4th Inf. Div.)

**This paper presents a strategic framework in which to consider and evaluate strategic land power in terms of what it is, what its component parts are, and how it will likely be applied in the 21st century.**

## Introduction

As events unfold in the Ukraine, the United States plans to further draw down its land forces and place a relatively larger degree of dependence on air, special operations, and naval forces to meet our security requirements. This decision will have significant long terms strategic consequences, and it would be prudent to consider how we as a nation view Strategic Land Power (SLP) and its role in our security strategy. This paper offers a strategic framework that articulates why SLP is important, defines it in a broad strategic context, and offers a brief discussion on decision making regarding adequate SLP.

## Background

*“War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.” – Carl Von Clausewitz<sup>i</sup>*

If we accept that war, and perhaps more correctly, the application of SLP in any of its forms, is an inherently political activity waged to achieve a specified political endstate, then the heart of SLP rests in our ability to influence people and their political institutions. Influencing populations and political institutions from a distance (air, sea, economic, or cyber, for example) has a certain conceptual attraction due to the idea that this approach will limit friendly casualties and prevent entangling engagements.

However, the characteristic of SLP that makes it unique from other elements of national strategic power is its capacity to achieve long term political ends through direct and personal interaction with populations, their political leaders and the societal institutions of their nation.

The range of SLP options are indeed broad and can range from ground combat and post conflict stabilization, to advise and assist missions supporting a friendly nation fighting an insurgency, or to theater security cooperation in a relatively stable area. The importance of this range of activities ties directly into what a nation believes it can, or should, achieve in a conflict in which it applies SLP against either a direct adversary, or in support of a friendly/allied nation.

A nation's ability to achieve what it deems as favorable terms of conflict termination (victory) in a given situation rests on a sliding scale with two key components: a nation's concept of victory, or desired endstate, and the level of resources it is willing to commit to achieve this endstate. Resourcing decisions will either enable or constrain the types of post-conflict endstate a nation can reasonably expect to achieve. Yet nations will generally base their assessment of required conflict termination capabilities on their concept of how they actually expect to end future conflicts. If a nation limits its desired endstate, or "victory conditions," to objectives that do not include domination of an enemy land force, control of enemy territory and resources, the securing of a population, or even the possibility of changing the political structure of an enemy nation, then its requirements for SLP would be relatively low.

The primary risk of this approach lies in the limited strategic options available to leaders who will face conflicts that can develop far faster than it is possible to generate SLP. The impact of this delayed ability to generate SLP is compounded by the fact that opportunities for decisive intervention may evaporate quickly. Much has been speculated regarding what might have happened had France and Great Britain applied adequate SLP in the interwar years as the Germans brazenly violated the Treaty of Versailles. In short, if a nation wants to even consider the possibility of an intervention that includes the potential for regime change, then it requires at least a moderate amount of standing SLP and cannot expect to be able to quickly generate this capability during an emerging crisis.

## **Strategic Land Power Defined**

*“Military action is a method used to attain a political goal.” – Mao Zedong<sup>i</sup>*

SLP can be best defined as a nation’s ability, as a product of both its physical capacity and political will, to accomplish three essential strategic tasks (the SLP Triad) in pursuit of its political objectives. These tasks are not of equal importance in every situation, but will generally focus on territory, populations, and political structures.

The first element of the SLP Triad is the ability to control territory, and thus a nation’s resources. Success in this task often comes following decisive combat operations but can also be the result of force deployments intended to defend friendly governments from internal or external threats. While territorial control is relatively easy to assess, the second element of the triad, securing populations, is less so.

Securing populations, both physically and psychologically, is a challenging task even without the societal upheaval present during and after a conflict. While physically securing a population is challenging, securing it psychologically is even more so and requires no less planning than any other deliberate military action. Success in the first two elements leads to the real prize: the ability to influence political structures.

The third, and arguably the most important leg of the SLP Triad, is the ability to eliminate, establish and/or defend political structures. A nation's impact on another nation's political structures, whether positive, negative, local or national, is by far the most difficult, important, and enduring aspect of SLP.

SLP is inherently a measure of a nation's Joint and Interagency capabilities and is not based merely on the capabilities of a ground oriented force such as an army or marine corps. Such a definition would be entirely too narrow. Rather, it includes all of a nation's capabilities that contribute to the accomplishment of the SLP Triad key tasks. For example, strategic lift (air and sea-based assets) and a nation's ability to mobilize and project non-military elements of national power in a 'Whole of Government' approach actually contribute to a nation's SLP and can be counted as a part of it.

Roughly analogous to naval theorist Julian Corbett's contention that command of the sea is relative and contested, SLP is similar in its application, but with some important differences. Similarities include the inability to maintain a permanent presence in all places at all times, the presence of strategic terrain and the ability to concentrate at decisive times and places. The differences, however, are almost as striking. First and foremost, the elements of SLP interact with non-combatants to a far greater degree than the other elements of strategic power.

Additionally, depending on the phase of the conflict, the non-lethal elements of SLP may have a far larger role than even the lethal elements. Lastly, in situations during which SLP is applied in support of a friendly nation in response to an internal threat, or in the case of post conflict stability and transition operations, SLP is generally far more widely distributed and its presence is more persistent than many of the other elements of national power. Given its importance, assessing the relative strength of a nation's SLP is guided by several core factors.

## **Key Elements of Strategic Land Power**

In evaluating a nation's relative power in SLP, several key elements will dominate the discussion. While not all elements are equally important in all situations in which SLP is applied, an overall assessment includes the following:

***Lethality*** – The ability to defeat and dominate opposing land forces and those elements contributing to the enemy's ability to generate and project combat power. This is the most traditional way of looking at SLP and remains a large and critical component part. However important lethality is, it is not the only, or in some phases, even the most important part of SLP.

***Engagement Ability*** – SLP is very human in its approach, and the ability of a nation to engage across cultures with partners, allies, and nations it seeks to build relationships with is a key measure of SLP. While Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Military Information Support Operations units are especially well suited to this type of work due to their language and cultural training, increasingly conventional forces are building capabilities to do this well.

***Civil Power Projection*** – The ability to mobilize, focus and project the full spectrum of non-military national capabilities in support of the application of SLP. While not limited to the traditional elements of Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic power, projecting the non-military national capabilities of a nation has historically been exceptionally difficult. The U.S. involvement in Iraq demonstrates how even the world’s only superpower displayed a significant weakness in this area.<sup>iii</sup>

***Legitimacy and Political Support*** – The ability of a nation to communicate strategically and win in the “Court of World Opinion” weighs heavily on any evaluation of the relative strength of a nation’s SLP. This perception of legitimacy, the degree of international political support for an action, the number and capabilities of allies, and the opinions of neutral and opposing nations will either serve as an additive force, or a reductionist one. Legitimacy issues are complicated further in cases where a nation applies SLP in support of another nation due to the impact on the supported nation’s internal legitimacy caused by its request for, and acceptance of, external support. Additionally, a nation’s capacity to generate and maintain domestic political support, especially when the costs of a conflict rise over time, factor into the nation’s ability to sustain the application of SLP over time.

***Military Governance Capacity*** – While current Army doctrine discusses populace and resources control, stability operations, and a number of other related topics, we have been proverbially “nibbling at the edges” of what is at the heart of SLP. Arguably the most important element of SLP is its ability to secure populations, both physically and psychologically, and to defend, establish, and/or eliminate national political structures.

Current Joint U.S. doctrine defines military government as: “The supreme authority the military exercises by force or agreement over the lands, property and indigenous populations and institutions of domestic, allied or enemy territory therefore substituting sovereign authority under rule of law for the previously established government.”<sup>iv</sup> While no longer in use, a useful pre-World War II doctrinal definition is informative: “Military Government is that form of government which is established and maintained by a belligerent by force of arms over occupied territory of the enemy and the inhabitants thereof.”<sup>v</sup> The need for this requirement is not generally in doubt, however, a nation’s ability to execute this function effectively at an acceptable cost often is. While the merits of the U.S. involvement in Iraq continue to be hotly debated, there is little doubt that the results of the U.S. involvements in the military occupations and political restructurings of Panama, Germany, Japan, the Philippines, and the Confederate States of America were significant geo-politically, albeit not always in a universally positive way. In each case, the U.S. envisioned the political endstate it desired, committed itself to development of SLP, and applied it fully to secure U.S. national interests.

***Strategic Leadership*** – This is always the most dynamic element of combat power and ultimately the most critical element in the application of SLP. Leadership includes not only the actions of key leaders involved in specific settings, but also their ability to shape the institutional cultures and professional ethics that guide an organization while also providing both continuity and resiliency. Just as SLP is relative to a specific situation, so too is the relative leadership capacity of specific senior leaders that direct the application of SLP in a given situation.

While strategic vision, temperament, ability to work with allies and warfighting skill all influence a leader's ability to apply SLP, different temperaments and skill sets are required for even different phases of the same campaign. Some leaders are able to make the transitions between phases well, while others who are well suited to one phase of an operation (e.g., decisive combat operation) may be wholly unsuited to a subsequent phase (e.g., stability operations). Careful consideration of leader selection for each phase of an operation requires mature talent management systems at all levels. The importance of this principle increases geometrically with the level of responsibility and authority.

## A Brief Look Forward

*“The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.”* - Paul Johnson<sup>vi</sup>

The United States and many other nations are in the process of making difficult decisions regarding defense expenditures. They will determine either by analysis or indifference what they require in terms of SLP, how this capability will be applied, and most importantly, to what extent it will be resourced. In many capitals, budgetary factors may have a disproportionately large influence on strategic ends discussions due

to the lack of an immediate existential crisis. As Thucydides aptly noted, “as is the way of a democracy, in the panic of the moment they [are] ready to be as prudent as possible.”<sup>vii</sup> Unfortunately, without such a motivating crisis, policy makers and strategists may be tempted to over-emphasize recent history and arrive at incorrect long-term conclusions regarding their nation’s requirements for SLP. However, by taking a broader contextual view and incorporating recent experience and long term historical trends, senior leaders can create a better and more accurate assessment of the ends, ways, and means a nation must align to achieve its security goals.

In the end, defining SLP is fairly straightforward, but defining what adequate SLP is for any nation, to include the U.S., is not. Perhaps the best rule of thumb would be that defining adequate SLP is a bit like deciding how much insurance to buy. While adequate insurance is a way for families to protect themselves from uncertainty and catastrophic financial loss, too many consider the economics of the moment and buy inadequate policies with the naïve expectation that life is predictable and that they will not actually need to use them. Yet once a catastrophe happens, they realize that the long term costs of the situation are far larger than expected and could have been mitigated for a fraction of the net cost of the claim. In a similar way, adequate SLP is a hedge against both risk and uncertainty in a world littered with accidental wars, both large and small, that were never supposed to have happened.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.

<sup>ii</sup> Tse-Tung Mao, *On Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961), 89.

<sup>iii</sup> Brian M. Michelson and Sean P. Walsh, *Lopsided Wars of Peace: America's Anemic Ability to Project Civilian Power*, December 12, 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/lopsided-wars-of-peace-america%E2%80%99s-anemic-ability-to-project-civilian-power> (accessed September 23, 2012).

<sup>iv</sup> Joint Publication 1-02 as amended through 15 February 2014, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 15 February 2014), 171.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. War Department, *Military Government*, FM 27-5 (Washington, DC: U.S. War Department, 1940), 1.

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Johnson, *The Quotable Paul Johnson: A Topical Compilation of His Wit, Wisdom and Satire*, edited by George J. Marlin, et al (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 138.

<sup>vii</sup> Robert B. Strassler, ed, *The Landmark Thucydides, A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York, Free Press, February 2008), 481.