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Historical Scholarship and Strategic Studies: A Relationship Study

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Abstract

Purpose: The idea of placing two disciplines side by side in order to establish some level of scholarly links and interconnectedness has gained due attention in recent times. Emerging challenges and the urgent need to salvage the dwindling fortunes that is usually associated with some academic disciplines make it expedient for an academic innovation that is sustainable. Until the mid-19th century, disciplines were studied in their own rights without a conscious effort to overlap. In the discipline of history, the institutional changes occasioned by the University curriculum review in Cambridge University during the same era marked a turning point in the development of historical scholarship. Hence, sub-disciplines began to be evolved from the parent discipline of history. Consequently, sub-disciplines like Economic History, Social History, and so on began to emerge. The multiplicity of these sub-disciplines has further placed on the historian the responsibility to not only justify the reason(s) for the offshoot, but to demonstrate the relationship between history as a discipline and the sub-discipline. This study argues that Strategic Studies is a recent discipline when considered with other disciplines that pegged alongside History as an academic field. It is against this backdrop, that this study looks at the discipline of history bearing in mind at what point it became expedient for a diversification in the domain of history. The study also attempts a brief historical development of the sub discipline of strategic studies. This study further argues that, there is a nexus between history and strategic studies which is mutually reinforcing.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative approach in analyzing the scholarly relationship between the two realms with the domain of history as the epicenter.

Findings: historical approach to strategic/security studies has always been and still remains a very powerful analytical tool provided it is handed with the necessary care.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends that strategic studies is a recent discipline that should be considered as a disciplines that pegged alongside History as an academic field.

Keywords: *History, Strategy, Strategic Studies, Historiography, Scholarship*

INTRODUCTION

The expression “History” is derived from the Greek word *historia*, which means knowledge gained as a result of inquiry (Crookall, 1972). History has also been defined as the study of past events. This popular but incomplete definition of history is obviously influenced by the German School of Historiography. This school deemphasizes immediate history and argues that the study of the present should be left to the social scientists. There is however, no reason for the disposition as the United Nations International Scientific Committee believes and rightly too, that for history to be meaningful it should also cover the present day (Mordi, 1987) hence, history is also defined as the study of the past and present events. In this case, the discipline of history addresses not only the past but also the present. “The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past” (E.H. Carr, 1984). As Professor Ade Ajayi puts it “the historian cannot understand the present as an entity in itself but as a continuous part of the past” (Mordi, 1987). But a more embracing and acceptable definition of history is that which sees the discipline as “the study of the past and present which enables us or arms us to face the future” (Aworawo, 2019). In this regard, history is thought of addressing the present and past events and as well as the future events. Put differently, history identifies the future in the present and past events.

Another usage of the expression “History” is in the sense of an academic discipline that is a type of intellectual pursuit. This is a sense in which it is understood when an undergraduate declares, “I am reading history at the University of Lagos, Akoka”. It is also in this sense that it is understood when we are told that David Aworawo is an Associate Professor of History.

On the other side of the spectrum, the word strategy equally has its etymological roots in the Greek word “strategos” which simply means “Generalship”. In this usage, it means a well-structured and articulated plan aimed at winning a war. It could also be described as a broad war plan or framework for conducting military engagements (Evans et al., 1998). However, in recent times, the word strategy has been used in a way that is more broadly conceived to denote any well-structured and articulated plan to fulfil a set of objectives which may be military, political, economic, business, and so on; which is why today scholars can talk of political strategy, military strategy, business strategy, and the likes. In the same vein, strategy is the means by which objectives are pursued and obtained over time. It is in the light of this, that the word strategy has been used in contemporary times to describe any well-structured and articulated plan. It is then suggestive that the term strategic studies in the original understanding of strategy mean generalship. Thus, strategic studies can be defined as the study of the military system, how to make the system work, how to gain advantage in military situations, and how to mobilize national resources to fulfil military goals. The Penguin dictionary of International Relations defines strategic studies as a “research field dealing with procedures through which actors utilize their military assets to achieve given political objectives” (Obasi, 1989). This definition emphasizes the necessity to build a sophisticated military capacity for the attainment of political objectives. It emphasizes the political objectives without due recognition for the economic objectives in military operations. Economic objectives are paramount to all military operations around the world. On his part Professor Obasi Igwe sees strategic studies as “the application of certain conceptual and

methodological principles to the evaluation of the military-security and other related capabilities, intensions and conduct of peoples and states.”(Obasi, 1989) Obasi Igwe’s conception of strategic studies is more embracing and apt for this study, hence at the heart of his postulation lays the corroborative impacts of other facets of society in the conduct of military operations which means strategy is collaborative.

Beyond the various search for appealing definitions of strategic studies, there is another usage of the phrase strategic studies in the sense of an academic discipline. In this context, strategic studies connote a systematic and serious academic discipline. (Obasi, 1989). This is the case in which students venture into the pursuit of strategic studies as an area of study or specialization as we understand when one declares, Obasi Igwe is a Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In recent times, particularly in Nigeria, there has been a rejig in the various curricular of Universities across the country, the outcome of which sees strategic studies or similar appellations affixed to history. The question that comes to mind is, why the choice of marrying strategic studies with history? Why not other disciplines in the humanities or social sciences? Or, even in the physical sciences. Could it be tenable to ascribe such evolution as an offspring from the parent discipline? The study hopes to demonstrate that there is a relationship between history and strategic studies.

It is difficult to trace exactly in precise dating the time of origin of scholarship endeavour conducted under the aegis of strategic studies. However, before the twentieth century Europe, the names of Napoleon Bonaparte of France, and the Swiss military theorist and first writer to incorporate Napoleonic warfare into what became a major treatise on strategy, Baylis and Henri Jomini were most outstanding in military-strategic thought. In matters of statecraft and diplomacy, Otto von Bismarck, former German Chancellor, brought enormous influence to bear upon the direction of events. Perhaps, the greatest of them all at that time in European Strategic thinking was Carl Von Clausewitz, whose “On War”, continues to be a classic until today. It is worthy to note that, this period coincided with the heydays of colonialism and cultural and economic devastations that accompanied the destruction of local political institutions. In Africa, figures such as the great Shaka Zulu, evolved strategic concepts that went far beyond the necessities of popular insurgency to that of nation-building and statecraft, and the corresponding military-strategic needs of the policy. This is not to say that strategic studies as an organized and systematic academic discipline had existed as such in those ancient days. During this period, military-strategic thought most often than not was undertaken only as a component of general socio-political theorizing or documentation. (Obasi 1989) When anything was said or written that was almost exclusively military-strategic, it was; therefore, easy to see why it was mostly by men who had either fought serious wars for example, Julius Caesar had had a vested interest in particular directions of statecraft like Machiavelli. Be that as it may, until the 1940s, or even before the 1960s, most key thinkers of Strategic Studies on both sides of the Atlantic, whatever their theoretical bias, would have considered themselves “historians,” or at least greatly influenced by historical study. This was certainly the case with the usually quoted canon of the major so-called “realist” and other thinkers of the post-1945 era; Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Nicholas Spykman, from the United States; and Herbert Butterfield, E. H. Carr, Arnold Toynbee, and Martin Wight in Britain. In a necessarily restricted overview of what are in effect two huge fields of human

knowledge and learning, some corners have to be cut. Strategic Studies is now beginning to open itself up more to non-“Anglo-Saxon” traditions of international history and thinking, but this is a process that has much further to run, in a very selective fashion, whether there is an unbridgeable gap between history scholarship and development strategic studies; what links can be said to exist between history and strategic studies and what do not; what areas of common concern have been addressed by historians that could be used more fruitfully by scholars of strategic studies; a number of key categorical areas of common concern, such as war, peace, the state, empires, and international organization; and a few (but by no means all) studies of areas, especially cultural, where history and strategic studies texts can fruitfully be read in tandem.

Complaints about the absence of coherent research and teaching links between the study of history and that of development strategic studies are commonplace. Historians have long denounced Strategic Studies as indulging in a historical generalization, while Strategic Studies scholars denounce historians for relying on obscure micro research, or what the French call the (“scraping the barrel” is one possible translation). Anecdotal evidence about the two groups of scholars deriding each other’s methods and concerns abounds. Some Strategic Studies scholars have pointed out that for (some of) their colleagues, history is seen as a foreign land, they even claim that they do not know “what it is we mean when we talk about history” (Smith, 1995)

Strategic studies as a systematic and serious academic discipline, is therefore, mostly a twentieth century, most especially post World War II phenomenon. And when it did so, the circumstances in which it arose, including the country, the United States of America, which claims substantially spurred or was associated with it. (A.B.U. 1980)

In the late 1940s, the scholar Bernard Brodie published his famous article titled “Strategy and Science” where he presented a persuasive argument for a more rigorous study of strategy and also to create strategic studies as a distinct sub-discipline/field of International relations which will be studied scientifically and from a more robust point of view, than what military leaders have attempted to do up till that time. Since then other scholars have developed Brodie’s idea to a higher level of refinement and today, strategic studies exists as a sub-field of international relations which focuses on the study of military system, strategies of war and the political issues that define them. Today, strategic studies is fully reflected in the syllabuses of many of the Universities and academics in Africa that offer strategic studies as a field of study either on its own or as a component of studies in the various political, social, and military sciences. In Nigeria for instance, in the late 1970s or early 1980s “New Degree Programme”, Bachelor of Science International Studies of the Department of Political Science, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, offered a course IS 204: Introduction to African Strategic Studies.(Obasi, 1989) Thus, set the stage for the origin of strategic studies in Nigeria. With this development came further innovations that paved the way for the adoption of the field with a historical dimension, hence one finds the discipline of history fused with strategic studies as a department in the Humanities or Arts faculty of various Universities across the country. A typical example of the institutionalization of the study of war that took place during the second half of the century was the work of field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German General Staff from 1891 until 1905. Schlieffen became fascinated by the double envelopment effected by Hannibal’s Carthaginians against the numerically superior

Romans at the battle of Cannae (216 BCE). As a result, he tried to demonstrate that enveloping attacks had been the recipe for victory throughout history. It has been correctly pointed out that Schlieffen's analysis often did violence to the facts, thus demonstrating once again the difficulty of finding a single and compelling metanarrative in military history and strategic/security analysis. (Aworawo 2017). This study argues that there is an interlocking relationship between historical scholarship and strategic studies.

The Employ of Theories in Scholarship by Both Disciplines

An understanding of historical patterns certainly helps to explain numerous themes in the humanities and social sciences. (Makhen, 2002) These patterns are largely explained with their subjections to the relevant theories. Both history and strategic studies deploy theories in their analyses of war phenomenon at a particular point in time. The historian undertaking studies on a war phenomenon cannot but make use of the Clausewitzian theory for instance in his analysis of the strategy adopted in such a military operation. Despite the challenges in attaining precision and making accurate prediction, theory-building is a relevant activity in historical writing.

Scholars from both disciplines attempt to present generalizations from regularities and patterns established in evolution with the development of inexorable laws. A historical approach is required in the study of intelligence and strategic surprises. (Howard, 1983) Treatises on war which have a historical dimension have drawn on theories to enhance their scholarship. Their interest in classical theory remains lively. Among others, Gerard Challand produced a valuable anthology ranging from ancient Egypt to the end of the 20th century C.E; the relevant books of Azar Gat, and Michael Handel have become standard reference works on the subject; and Beatrice Heuser has profitably delved into the works of long forgotten 16th to early 19th century theorists. Inasmuch as historical prediction is not accurate in each and every case because of the enigmas of the human condition but it has been largely correct most of the time. Strategic studies rely on such predictions which could only be made by the historian due to his depth understanding of scenarios in the past, to plan and execute military operations. In another development, one of the most useful services that academics can perform is to explain the principles of thought that guide their study. As a 'strategic theorist' this is rather challenging. The term 'strategy' must be one of the most commonly used terms in public discourse. It is employed to refer to anything from state policy to personal choices. Yet, few appreciate what this term really is, and what it implies as a system of inquiry. There are also many writers of what could be termed a positivist strategic studies tradition who use historical insights to great effect in the development of ideas such as "offensive realism," such as in Mearsheimer. (Yarger, 2006)

The phenomenon of strategic theory as a method of analysis has slowly, over the course of 40 years, permeated the domain of international relations and political studies via the work of scholars like Thomas Schelling and Colin Gray who have theorized on classic strategy and has been increasingly used and acknowledged as a tool to assist in the comprehension of decision making. One of the best statements of the utility of strategic theory has been given by Harry Yarger, he submits that, 'Strategic theory opens the mind to all the possibilities and forces at play, prompting us to consider the costs and risks of our decisions and weigh the consequences of those of our adversaries, allies, and others'. What, then, precisely is strategic theory, and how does it help us

to open the mind? In any study of human conduct strategic ‘theory’ cannot aspire to any hard scientific understanding that survives experimental testing under exactly replicable conditions. However, it does constitute a theory in the broader sense that it advances a set of propositions that if true can be held to explain certain facts or phenomena. In this regard, strategic theory reveals itself less as a set of hard and fast rules, but more as a series of purposive assumptions that guide analysis.

Analytical Approach in their Discourses

Both disciplines rely on hind-sights from each other to enhance their analysis of events. It is truism that history is a mediating discipline which provides the ingredient for analysis and the basis for the validation of facts in many subject areas. History in most cases is studied for strategic or security purposes. However, when history is studied for such purposes it must fulfil three requirements for it to be of use. First, it must be done in depth, so that the scholar understands “what really happened”; secondly, it must cover a great time span, so that the scholar realizes what changes and what remains immutable overtime; thirdly, it must amongst other things take into account the broader political, economic, and social context. (Clausewitz, 1989). It is only with the employ of historical approach in his analysis that student(s) of strategic studies could understand for instance that the trend of historical approach that began with Machiavelli; or even with Vegetius, recalled its culmination with the work of the Swiss baron Antoine Henri de Jomini. In his *Precis de l’ art de la guere* (The Art of War) first published in 1838, Jomini’s work demonstrates that command of a vast expanse of historical examples does not guarantee an accurate grasp of the broader sociopolitical context and consequently may result in failure to link military conditions of the period (Gat, 2001); Jomini simply viewed it as an error induced by inadequate thinking and prejudice. (Whaley, 1969)

Furthermore, another trend of development that presents a nexus between historical scholarship and strategic studies is the introduction and adoption of qualitative research by both fields. Following the pioneering works of Lewis Richardson and Quincy Wright, the use of quantitative historical data entered the field of strategic studies. The most immediate results were a valuable work on military deception, (Singer, 1980) and the correlates of war project. (Machiavelli, 2008) Also, the use of quantitative data featured prominently in Bueno de Mesquita’s expected utility theory and to this day enjoys a substantial scholarly acclaim. The use of ancient history in strategic/security analysis is now considered more or less normal. Apart from its widespread use in illustrative examples, there is a growing literature dealing with ancient historical case studies. These are predominantly drawn from Greek and Roman history, albeit a more inclusive approach to non-Western cases has also been attempted. (Olsen et al, 2001) Furthermore, the historical approach has fitted well with attempts at comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of war (Weltman, 1995) and strategy in general. (Freedman, 2013) In the same vein, the historical approach has been used to good effect in studies on war. For instance, it is in analyzing war phenomenon that one would understand that these are perceptions of threat or of military advantage, power considerations, and more mundane concerns such as territorial disputes.(Evera, 1999)

The study of grand strategy from historical perspective has also proved very popular. It is not unusual to encounter works with a broad historical sweep, organized either as separate case studies or around a grand theme, such as the interplay between victory and defeat. As regards the subjects of specific case studies, it is no accident that powerful historical actors command the greatest attention. To start with, western scholars have begun to tap the huge reservoir of Chinese strategic experience. (Johnston, 1998) Strategic studies by far the most popular subject of historically minded discipline that treated grand strategy is the United States, has gained scholarly attention being overwhelmingly focused on American grand strategy during the cold war era. It should be noted that much of this literature is critical, perhaps overly so, given that the actual decision makers had to operate in a novel and highly uncertain environment, especially during the early cold war years. The Cuban missiles crisis retains its appeal, whereas the Vietnam War occupies a special place within the strategic/security analyses of the Cold War. (Walton, 2002) Of repute is the fact that, historical approach is being employed in order to explore the future of the United States of America's grand and military strategy; this discussion is often framed in terms of preserving America's advantages. (Herman et al, 2002)

At this juncture, it is fitting to beam our searchlight on some pioneer scholars of repute in strategy and security that have devoted much attention to the usage of historical approach in their scholarly endeavour.

Strategist Employing Historical Stance

The historical approach was the cornerstone of Machiavelli's work. The Florentine statesman drew upon a wealth of examples from ancient Roman and contemporary Italian and European history in order to come up with generalizations in political and military matters. (Gat, 2001) However, although his historical approach served his analysis extremely well in matters of politics and grand strategy, it seems that his admiration of the Roman Republic and his desire to promote the civic and republican spirit among his fellow citizens led him astray with regard to tactical matters. In order to justify his advocacy of a tactical formation that could fit into the Roman context, he felt compelled to claim historical continuity at the tactical level of war.

The military writers of the 17th and 18th centuries used the historical approach as a matter of course, with ancient history being quite popular among them. (Clausewitz, 1989) Clausewitz, a man noted for his critical attitude, commends the attempt of one of those writers, the French Marquis de Feuquieres, to "teach the art of war entirely by historical examples" and expresses gratitude for the results of Feuquieres' historical research. There is a quintessential role that history plays in the studies of/on how wars should be prosecuted. Historical scholarships make us to understand that every age and every political unit has its own kind of war, conditioned by historical circumstances. It is with hindsight of the transformations of war that have taken place in the past and an acquaintance with current dynamics or innovations that would arm a particular society for a war situation. For instance, Clausewitz laments that the Austrians and Prussians of 1805, 1806 and 1809, blissfully unaware of the profound transformations of the war that had taken place at the onset of the 19th century prepared for typical 18th century wars of maneuver and were too surprised to face "the God of war himself". (Aworawo, 2017) It is worthy to note that, the historical approach represented a powerful strand of thought in the early literature of the subject. Historical scholarship

could be seen as indispensable for the study of the tactical and operational, and occasionally the strategic and grand strategic levels of war. These are all fundamental themes in the field of strategic studies. Strategic studies or security studies literature draw inferences from the use of historical cases to shed light on particular grand strategic choices. In the same, Clausewitz provides a sweeping historical sociology of war from ancient times to his own era, not neglecting to include Eurasian nomads. To him the idea is simple, every age and political unit has its own kind of war, conditioned by historical circumstances. One can see that the historical approach represented a powerful strand of thought in the early literature of the subject. It was sometimes misused, but was deemed indispensable for the study of the tactical and operational (and occasionally the strategic and the grand strategic) strict methodological rules and important qualifications for the use of the historical approach. A brave attempt to harness the historical experience to the study of war made by the French colonial Charles Ardant du Picq whose collected works was published posthumously in 1880. Ardant du Picq dealt with the tactical level of war, drawing heavily from ancient battles and sending detailed questionnaires to his colleagues with a view to preserving and distilling their war experience. (Yarger, 2006) The endeavour to ascertain contemporary tactical conditions and organizational recommendations for the French army was highly commendable. However, deducing tactical lessons from the ancient battles was a potentially disastrous exercise. Ardant du Picq attributed primary value to morale as a means to success in battle; moral superiority could overcome greater destructive power.

The historical approach fared much better at the hands of the American captain (eventually Rear Admiral) Alfred Thayer Mahan. In his two most famous works, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* published in 1897, and *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* published in 2002, he tried to provide an analysis of the workings of sea power as a tool of grand strategy and a passport to world dominance, as well as a theory of naval strategy based on the precepts of Jomini and the conduct of outstanding practitioners such as Nelson. (Yarger, 2006) During the interwar years scholars like J.F.C. Fuller demonstrated that the historical approach could be profitably combined with unconventional and pioneering thinking. Although Fuller became known during the interwar years as a leading theorist of tank warfare, he arguably left an even more lasting legacy with his historically informed analyses which featured prominently after World War II. His *Armament and History* published in 1946 was a trailblazing attempt to fathom the impact of weapons technology on war, from the ancient Greeks to World War II. Among Fuller's bibliographical works, the most remarkable is probably *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* published in 1998. In examining the extraordinary career of Alexander the Great, Fuller showed himself to be equally at home in areas ranging from the philosophical milieu of the ancient Greek world in the 4th century BCE to Alexander's commando operations.

Another historically minded analyst that emerged during the interwar years during the interwar years was Basil Liddell Hart. Liddell Hart's work has been characterized by his belief in so-called indirect approach, which generally denotes the sidestepping of the enemy strong points and the avoidance of attrition warfare. The historical approach was one of the preferred tools. (Yarger, 2006)

Conclusion

In all, it could be deduced that there is a nexus between historical scholarship and studies. Hence, strategic studies itself is a historically minded discipline with scholarly attention being overwhelmingly focused on a plan or a framework for conducting military engagements. History to this effect provides a platform for recapitulation and prognosis for likely outcomes of such engagements. Hence, history plays a mediating role in which it provides the ingredients for the validation of claims and propositions in many disciplines. Even though some scholars are skeptical about the authenticity of the patterns established in some historical events, a good number of claims made in different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences are validated by reference to what happened in the past. Strategic studies just like other disciplines elsewhere in the knowledge community is one field of study that has drawn richly from historical patterns. For instance, the analysis of the military formations or mechanisms of the world after WWII, whether NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), or Warsaw Pact; and their impact on global security has been based on past examples. Conversely, strategic studies have occupied a central place in what historians have studied over several centuries. Albeit attention was dedicated to political history at the early stage of scholarly endeavour in the field of history, strategic studies came to occupy a central place in the themes that historians explore. There is no gainsaying the fact that scholars in history possess the requisite skills and knowledge to thrive well in the domain of strategic studies. Although the study of war and strategy would often go hand in hand with military history, from very early times there have appeared treatises on strategy particularly on “the art of war”, that are clearly distinguished from historical treatises and thus from the very beginning set strategic/security studies on a clearly distinct track. Be that as it may, historical approach to strategic/security studies has always been and still remains a very powerful analytical tool provided it is handed with the necessary care. The current trend of scholars in history with bias in strategic studies buttresses’ the fact that historians and strategist function closely and across professional and disciplinary boundaries. This reality also confirms the closeness between the theory and practice of history and strategic studies.

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