

Grand Strategy Is Total: French Gen. André Beaufre on War in the Nuclear Age - War on the Rocks

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23–29 minutes

Gen. André Beaufre (1902 – 1975), the father of contemporary French strategic thought and required reading at French military schools, epitomizes better than anyone two traits that make modern French military theory unusually rich. The first is failure. Beaufre had a hand in 20th-century France's greatest military catastrophes, the trauma of which spurred his generation to think — hard — about modern conflict. The second is an intellectual tradition that goes back more than two centuries and has been dominated by highly analytical and literate generals “sick with rationality,” to cite [Gen. Lucien Poirier](#) (1918 – 2013), another of France's great warrior-philosophers from Beaufre's generation. Beaufre's thinking is Cartesian: He began by challenging the most fundamental premises and then, step by step, logically built out complex intellectual structures with the rigor of a geometrician. Bernard Brodie, the eminent RAND political scientist who in the 1950s and 1960s was one of the architects of American nuclear strategy and no intellectual lightweight, went so far as to complain [in a review of Beaufre's books](#) of the French general's insistence on riding an “intellectual high horse.” Brodie clearly knew French but apparently not *the* French, and the self-described “pragmatist” of the American school understandably was at once deeply impressed and put off by Beaufre's foreign method. For less particular Americans, Beaufre is a marvel of lucidity. He is also a key for accessing a rich

and distinctly different way of thinking about war with direct applications for today, whether one is pondering Afghanistan or how to deal with China.

There is a single thread that runs through Beaufre's half-dozen books about strategy, which he wrote in the years between his retirement from the French army in 1961 and his death. That thread is a desire to understand the nature of war in the modern nuclear era, and to use that insight to resurrect strategy and elaborate a strategic method appropriate for great powers today. Beaufre of course was not alone. On this side of the Atlantic, men like Brodie and Herman Kahn did brilliant work on the subjects of nuclear strategy and deterrence. Beaufre was fluent in English and well versed in the Americans' thinking. On the French side, Beaufre shared the space with Raymond Aron and three other generals (Charles Ailleret, Pierre Marie Gallois, and Poirier) who, together with Beaufre, are considered the architects of French nuclear strategy and referred to as "[the Four Generals of the Apocalypse](#)."

'25 Years of Almost Uninterrupted Failures'

Compared to the Americans, at least, strategy was not a parlor game for Beaufre. He was a member of the generation of French officers that was at war without reprieve from 1940 to 1962: Beaufre served on the headquarters staff during the fall of France in 1940, a defeat whose effect on the officers who lived it cannot be overstated; commanded field units with the Free French in Tunisia, Italy, France, and Germany from 1943 to 1945; worked on the staff of Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny in Indochina; led a division in Algeria; and was the overall commander of French forces in the Suez War in 1956. These disasters (not counting the 1943 – 1945 campaigns, wherein the French forces rallied to the Allied cause fought brilliantly and victoriously) saw France stripped of its empire and its great-power status. They compelled Beaufre to strive to understand what had gone wrong. "After 25 years of almost uninterrupted failures," [he wrote](#), "we have the duty to search down to the bones to discover the deep reasons for such a contrary fate."

After all, he wrote, “The vanquished deserves its fate because its defeat always results from faults in its thinking that it must have committed either before or during the conflict.” In other words, before getting to nuclear weapons, Beaufre needed to understand war and strategy, and then build a strategic vision around that understanding that made sense in the nuclear era.

The most important of Beaufre’s strategic works is the first, his masterpiece, *Introduction to Strategy*, which he published in French in 1963 and in English in 1965. (Citations here are of the [current French edition](#); translations are my own, though Beaufre corrected the English editions of his works, which therefore can be considered authoritative.) If you read one book of French post-1945 military theory, it should be Beaufre’s *Introduction*. The slim volume offers with extraordinary concision and order a rich vision of modernity and what might be described as a universal field theory for strategy and conflict in the modern world. Beaufre called his idea “total strategy,” and he strove in the *Introduction* and the subsequent works — which are all basically elaborations of the ideas presented in the *Introduction* — to explain what it was and how to do it.

Beaufre’s first step was to define strategy. He offered what amounts to a rephrasing of [Marshal Ferdinand Foch](#). Beaufre was a deeper thinker than Foch and absolutely a better writer, and yet he did not stray far from the master with respect to the essentials. One can imagine the venerable marshal reading Beaufre and exclaiming, “Yes, yes, that’s what I was trying to say!” Thus, citing Foch, Beaufre defined strategy as the “art of the dialectic of wills that employ force to resolve their conflict.” In this dialectic, the “decision” each side seeks to impose is psychological, not material. It amounts to convincing the adversary that engaging in or pursuing a struggle is useless. Beaufre continued:

[This duel of wills produces the opposition of two symmetrical games, with each seeking to strike the decisive point of the other through a preparation intended to frighten, paralyze, and surprise

— all actions with a psychological goal, we note in passing. One can therefore discern in any strategy two distinct and essential elements: 1) the choice of a decisive point that one wants to strike (a function of the adversary's vulnerabilities); 2) the choice of preparatory maneuver that would permit reaching the decisive point. But as each of the two adversaries is doing the same thing, the opposition of the two preparatory maneuvers will bring success to whichever of the two adversaries stops the adversary's maneuver and conducts his own to its objective. It is what Foch called the classic strategy of "conserving liberty of action." The struggle of wills boils down therefore to a struggle for liberty of action, with each seeking to conserve it while denying it to the adversary.

Beaufre constructed his vision of strategy around the "principle" of liberty of action. In any conflict, one must think through how to preserve one's liberty of action while denying it to one's adversary. That requires "economy of force," meaning knowing how to "apportion one's means rationally between protecting against the adverse preparatory maneuver, one's own preparatory maneuver, and the decisive action." And it involves concentration of force, so as to be able to strike at the right place, in the right way, at the right time. But that, naturally, requires liberty of action. Strategy, he wrote, is the art of "reaching the decisive point thanks to the liberty of action obtained through a correct economy of force."

'The Only Good Strategy Is Total'

What distinguishes Beaufre from Foch is his broadening of Foch's concepts in light of his own reading of Carl von Clausewitz, his own bitter experience, and the development of nuclear weapons, which made direct confrontation between major powers — and even the very idea of seeking a "decision" through battle — suicidal. Strategy could no longer be military, it had to be "total." "The only good strategy," he insisted in *Strategy of Action*, "is total." One element of this was a reappreciation of [Clausewitz's insight](#) that war was "politics by other means." Beaufre went to great lengths to

emphasize that military action always must be subordinate to politics and seen as but one part of a larger cluster of actions that a country could and should undertake to achieve desired political ends. This was, he argued in his memoir of the Suez War, one of the key lessons from that debacle, in which France, Britain, and Israel conspired to topple Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and seize the Suez Canal without preparing the ground diplomatically and politically, thereby dooming the campaign regardless of anything that might be achieved in battle. Beaufre certainly would not endorse the American penchant for delegating strategy to the military (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), and repeatedly expecting military action to yield the desired political outcome. Total strategy meant subordinating military strategy “to a comprehensive strategic conception, which itself is dictated by the political concept and elaborated and executed by politicians.” In *Strategy for Tomorrow* he explained further:

Military war generally is no longer decisive in the literal sense of the word. Political decision, always necessary, can only be obtained through a combination of limited military action with appropriate actions taken in the psychological, economic, and diplomatic domains. The strategy of war, previously governed by military strategy, which for a while gave preeminence to military leaders, now depends on a total strategy led by the heads of the government, with military strategy only playing a subordinate role.

Like any good student of Foch, Beaufre placed great emphasis on the importance of will, of acting upon it, and of sapping that of the adversary. It follows that everything that has a psychological effect should be brought to bear, while military action, which usually is a material action taken upon material things, matters only in so far as it affects psychology. And it is imperative that military action complement all the other actions taken in parallel, or taken beforehand to prepare the military action. One can see here connections between Beaufre’s ideas and French counter-insurgency doctrine, a subject Beaufre addressed in his strategic

works and [made the topic of a separate book](#).

Why Does France Have Nukes? Beaufre Explains.

Beaufre wrote positively about nuclear weapons because they brought an end to direct confrontations between great powers, and he thought deeply about what they did and did not mean for great-power competition. In the *Introduction* and subsequent books like [Deterrence and Strategy](#), Beaufre laid out the thinking behind French and American theories of deterrence, including American concepts such as graduated response, and tactical nuclear weapons. Beaufre approved of tactical weapons — which the French sometimes referred to as “pre-strategic” — because their use created an escalatory step below full-blown nuclear war, thereby signaling that France was serious about using nuclear weapons and giving the adversary the option to stop before the French reached for their strategic, thermonuclear arms. This argument was part of French military policy and doctrine during the Cold War and helped explain and motivate France’s deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the 1970s. His approach also can be seen in the French military’s [Cold War and current view](#) that the real function of conventional forces in a conflict against a major power is simply to make the adversary amass a much larger force to defeat it, and thereby reveal its intentions. Whereupon it would be nuked. This explains, among other things, why the French army post-1945 has never been built to survive a prolonged major conflict: That is not its strategic function.

Beaufre also was a staunch advocate of the [Atlantic relationship and NATO](#), although he explained and justified France’s sometimes standoffish relationship with that institution. He also made the case not just for why France needed its own nuclear capabilities (basically because President John F. Kennedy’s “graduated response” doctrine made clear that the United States would not necessarily choose to defend Europe when it came down to it), but also why France’s nuclear arsenal benefited the United States and indeed the rest of the world (or at least Europe) as well. One

interesting detail is Beaufre's assertion, apparently based on contemporary French think tank studies, that a nuclear-armed country need only be able to destroy 10 – 15 percent of an adversary's resources (i.e., its cities) to benefit from the "equalizing" effect of nuclear weapons. In this light, the size of France's nuclear arsenal, which stands at about 300 warheads, makes sense. He also argued that for a small country's nuclear capabilities to have the desired deterrence effect, it had to show itself to be at least a little irrational and cultivate a measure of uncertainty about how it might respond to a given action.

Nuclear weapons may have precluded a Third World War, but they did not, however, bring peace. On the contrary, Beaufre observed in the *Introduction*, "Major war and true peace will have died together," giving way to a permanent state he described as "Peace-War," which amounted to what prevailed during the Cold War and arguably continues to this day. While there would be no more "direct" war, or war in the "major key," as he sometimes put it, there would always be war in the "minor key." Beaufre meant "permanent" and "always" literally: We are, now and forever, only at complete peace with our allies and perhaps those who are third parties to our conflict with our adversaries. This means we had better have a strategy for waging an indirect strategy against our adversaries, which by the way invariably means doing whatever one can to pull third parties away from the adversaries and thereby limit their liberty of action.

War in the minor key was above all "indirect," a term that Beaufre explicitly borrowed from the British military theorist B.H. Liddell Hart (1895 – 1970), a longtime friend and correspondent. It was, quite simply, what one did when one's liberty of action was too constrained by the risk of escalation or one's own relative material weakness to attempt a more direct strategy. An "indirect strategy" therefore amounted to "the art of exploiting optimally the narrow margin of liberty of action" that still exists to achieve decisive success despite "the sometimes-extreme limits on the military

means that can be employed.” Moreover, “the narrower the margin for liberty of action, the more important it is to exploit it, because that alone makes it possible to attack the status quo that nuclear deterrence is supposed to preserve.” Great powers have to adopt indirect strategies to fight one another, weaker powers have to adopt them to fight greater ones. It could, moreover, involve nearly anything that might have some effect on the adversary’s psychology, though probably not military action, which might be of use as a complement to other actions but almost never will be sufficient on its own. “Military action no longer plays more than an auxiliary role in the framework of a maneuver of total strategy in the minor key,” Beaufre wrote, “where decision will result from economic, diplomatic, or political actions appropriately combined.”

Indirect Strategy

Beaufre, perhaps because of his own personal experience, focused on two ways in which military force could be used to support an indirect strategy. One was what he referred to as an “artichoke maneuver” or *grignotage* (nibbling), which is what he saw Hitler doing in the late 1930s when he remilitarized the Rhineland and annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia (or, more recently, what Russia did in Crimea and Ukraine). The basic idea is to conduct carefully calculated “below the threshold” acts of aggression, preferably in a region or against an interest that is not vital to one’s adversaries. Hitler, as Beaufre saw it, understood that the real obstacle was not Czech or Austrian resistance, but rather the opposition of Britain and France. Hitler therefore correctly focused on the diplomatic and political aspects of what he wanted to achieve, carefully preparing the ground before taking any overt military action, which, when it did come, was so quick as to present the international community a *fait accompli* before it had time to react. When the dust settled, both Britain and France, thanks to his diplomatic and political efforts, were willing to accept what Hitler had done and comfort themselves that this time would be the last. According to Beaufre, they fundamentally did not recognize Hitler’s

“maneuver” for what it was, which was an indirect strategy within the context of Peace-War.

Beaufre contrasted Hitler’s masterful execution of indirect strategy with Britain and France’s handling of the Suez Crisis, which he saw firsthand as the commander of French forces. According to Beaufre, British and French civilian leaders neglected the diplomatic and political aspects of the crisis, with the result that they, among other things, failed to secure American acquiescence. Without appropriate diplomatic and political actions, it was unlikely that any purely military action would bring about the political outcome the two countries desired. As it happened, the military strategy that emerged in the months leading up to the invasion, because of the hesitations of French and above all British civilian leaders (according to Beaufre), did not meet the requirements Beaufre thought had to be met for the operation to succeed: If the military action were to have any chance of success, especially absent the appropriate diplomatic and political maneuvers, Beaufre reasoned, it would have to be aggressive and, above all, fast. Beaufre probably would have applauded the First Persian Gulf War: a long and careful diplomatic and political preparation followed by an aggressive military operation intended to achieve a clear political objective.

Beaufre also derived from his experiences the belief that in the nuclear age major powers — both to deter or respond to adversaries’ attempts at the artichoke maneuver or to conduct it themselves — had to have robust conventional capabilities that featured rapid power projection and high mobility. He was haunted in particular by what he saw from his vantage point on the general staff in Paris in the late 1930s and 1940. The French army at the time was large and well equipped, but it had only one speed: total war enabled by full national mobilization. When confronted by Hitler’s aggressions in the Rhineland and Czechoslovakia, France had to choose between all or nothing. What it desperately needed was the ability to project, rapidly, a limited force that could engage

in a limited war. It might have countered or maybe even deterred the Germans by giving French policymakers an intermediate option between all or nothing, i.e., a measure of liberty of action. Indeed, French doctrine commonly describes “maneuver” in terms of something one does to create possibilities. One must therefore have the means to maneuver, to do something. This idea is fundamental to French military policy today.

The other approach is what Beaufre called “maneuver by lassitude,” which typically is pursued through guerrilla warfare, either by a weaker adversary or a great power through a proxy. Because military means cannot bring a decision, one strives to tire the adversary out and make it want to quit. To do this, one distinguishes between the “interior maneuver,” where the conflict is taking place, and the “exterior maneuver.” The real action is the exterior maneuver: One tries to influence public opinion internationally and in the counter-insurgent’s home country, encourage or discourage foreign intervention, and use diplomacy and whatever economic tools are at one’s disposal. One promotes a political line, uses propaganda, lies, and meddles overtly or covertly. “The central idea of exterior maneuver,” Beaufre explained, “is to assure oneself the maximum liberty of action while paralyzing that of the adversary through a thousand ropes of deterrence, the way the Lilliputians were able to chain down Gulliver.” The desired effect is psychological, although one goes about achieving it by deploying every tool at one’s disposal. Whatever works.

As for the interior maneuver, the fight itself, what matters is holding on — which requires a strict application of economy of force and organizing and deploying one’s forces to foster sustainability over the long term. Sustainability and not military victory must be the organizing principle driving the military strategy, for military action cannot bring about victory. The objective was to convince (*convaincre*) the enemy, not vanquish (*vaincre*) it, which was not possible. Meanwhile, one must cultivate confidence and hope

among those on one's side, while diminishing the confidence and hope of the adversary's side. This fight is entirely psychological and most likely will require countering whatever sustains the enemy — its ideology, its religion, etc. — with viable alternatives. This was, according to Beaufre, not done either by the French in Indochina or Algeria, or by the Americans in Vietnam. He no doubt would have judged American efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq similarly.

Beaufre Would Not Negotiate with the Taliban

Beaufre made clear that prevailing in a war of lassitude in any case would take a very long time, and one of the worst things one could do was announce a deadline. He was, it follows, unequivocally hostile to the idea of negotiating with the enemy in this kind of conflict, for all it does is communicate to the enemy's side one's fatigue and one's intention to leave, thereby confirming it in the hope that sooner or later it will get everything it wants. An enemy like Vietnamese Communists or (Afghanistan's Taliban) might agree to sit at the negotiating table, but only as another tactic to tire their opponent. Beaufre also would have deplored the continual overreliance on the military both to dictate strategy and to achieve "political decisions," Americans' inattention to politics and lack of appreciation for the psychological and ideological factors driving insurgencies, and, apparently, neglect of any possible "external maneuver." The American approach to "psyops" from Vietnam to Afghanistan is inherently tactical. It needs to be applied to the strategic level, where it must define the campaign strategy rather than being an accessory to it.

Among Beaufre's lessons for contemporary Americans is the need to think of the United States in a state of perpetual Peace-War with its adversaries, which required developing appropriate total strategies to prevail. Beaufre advised a planning process that featured identifying one's own and one's adversaries' motivations and vulnerabilities — not military vulnerabilities but rather psychological ones, soft spots that, if acted upon, could limit adversaries' liberty of action and sap their will. Of course, at the

same time one has to act to prevent the adversary from doing the same, hence the need for self-awareness. All this requires in-depth analyses of the internal politics of one's own nation and one's adversaries, and a keen appreciation of the bounds of everyone's liberty of action. Military action might be necessary, but it almost never would be sufficient, and it would have to be integrated into a comprehensive indirect strategy. The decisive maneuver would be some combination of actions intended to have a desired psychological effect that also impinged on the enemy's liberty of action. Winning this kind of conflict required being armed with ideas, ideologies, political lines, diplomatic muscle, the skills to manipulate international forums like the United Nations, economic sanctions, propaganda, and possibly the means to conduct "insidious" actions that cause harm yet fall below the threshold required for sparking a direct confrontation. One might, for example, conduct cyber attacks, or acts of sabotage to a nuclear facility, while trying to coordinate diplomatic and economic sanctions. There also had to be as part of any total strategy actions that target third parties, countries that one needs to win away from the enemy to strengthen one's own liberty of action and diminish that of the adversary. Finally, however one does this all, one has to act purposefully. Analyze. Plan. There is no room for improvisation, not at the strategic level.

If this all seems aggressive, it is. Beaufre, heir to Foch, did not fall far from the *offensive à outrance* (offensive to excess) school. The idea is simple: If you do not take the offensive, your enemies will, and while you might not have an appropriate total strategy, your enemies will, and do. Vladimir Putin, Beaufre would point out, would have learned strategy from Lenin, who had strong ideas about the relationship between politics and war and his own vision of "total war" ; the Chinese, Beaufre would remind us, have Lenin, of course, but also Mao.

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