

# DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

## Podcast Transcript

### Andrew Carr “Strategy as Problem-Solving”

This article proposes a new definition of strategy as problem-solving that challenges the focus on goals and assumptions of order within many post-Cold War approaches to strategy. It argues that the military needs strategy to diagnose the complex problems of the twenty-first century before they can be solved. Inspired by practitioners such as Andrew Marshall and George F. Kennan, this new definition clarifies what strategists do and offers a logic for distinguishing the use of the term strategy. Practitioners will also find problem-solving tools and pedagogies they can adopt today.

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**Key words: complexity, Andrew Marshall, George F. Kennan, problem-solving, strategy**

#### Episode Transcript

##### Stephanie Crider (Host)

You're listening to Decisive Point. The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.

Joining me today from Australia is Andrew Carr. He's a senior lecturer in the Strategic and Defense Study Center at the Australian National University and author of "[Strategy as Problem-Solving](#)," which you can read in the spring 2024 issue of *Parameters*.

Welcome to Decisive Point, Andrew.

##### Andrew Carr

Thank you for having me.

##### Host

You put forward a new definition of strategy as problem-solving. Tell me about it.

##### Carr

My definition of strategy is pretty simple. We live in a world that is always confronting us with problems, and strategy is how we solve a specific type of problem—those that we find in complex systems. Now, humans solve problems every day, often through tried and tested means, such as following a recipe or a doctrine, and we generally get consistent results. But when you have a problem such as how to compete with China or how to deter an insurgent group from attacking commercial shipping, there is no reliable solution, nor is the cause and nature of these complex problems obvious. Each major strategic challenge has its own dynamics, which we need to diagnose first before we can begin discussing the solutions.

So, in the definition that I'm proposing here, the contribution of strategists is to diagnose such problems. A good diagnosis helps to both identify what's involved and to interrogate how it's emerged and how it operates. And then it allows the equally important other parts of government to operate so leaders can take that diagnosis and then use

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it to allocate resources and to make decisions while officials can take actions and provide feedback on, you know, does this analysis actually reflect what’s going on in the world and how we should be engaging with it?

So, there’s a conversation between the different parts of organizations within this approach, this strategy. So, strategy, therefore, is not about producing big documents that just tell everybody else what to do. And it’s not about envisioning the kind of world we want to build in 20 years’ time or just being efficient in our resource allocation. It’s really about trying to face head-on the big problems of our current world and asking, you know, “Why are these so difficult and how do we make some meaningful progress here?”

### Host

How does strategy as problem-solving approach post-Cold War theories of strategy?

### Carr

This is a really important part of understanding the role of strategy in providing for our security, because I see strategy as a human adaptation to our particular circumstances. Each era has different ways of approaching strategy—both in terms of the content they’re thinking about, but I think also in terms of the structure and the form.

Now, in the post-Cold War era, a lot of Western strategic thoughts—ends, ways, means (the [Lykke model](#), or grand strategy)—seemed to rest on two underlying assumptions. First, we assumed that the world was somewhat orderly, perhaps even predictable. So, we put a lot of resources into a task, and therefore, we should be able to, kind of, get the results that we’re seeking. Questions about resourcing, about modelling, about the level of national commitment and will were often some of the big debates that we had. The other assumption was that we needed to set big, ambitious goals and then find ways to efficiently allocate our resources towards those goals. The goals were what motivated and (drove) and coordinated our behavior was the argument. So, this generated lots of documents that told us about the world we’re seeking and how we’re integrating various parts of government to achieve those goals.

Now, if the world genuinely is orderly and somewhat predictable, then these approaches make good sense. They’re good assumptions if you’re trying to plan and organize in a stable environment. And they also make sense if our problems are comparable. You know, if we think China today is just a new version of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, then we probably can jump straight to discussing solutions and assigning resources—but I don’t think that’s the case. Today’s strategic problems have their own dynamics, and the world seems far less orderly and predictable than it did in the 1990s. So, we need different ways of approaching strategy if we’re to find our way today.

### Host

Let’s talk about that a little bit more. What role does the environment of a problem play in strategy as problem-solving?

### Carr

Thank you for asking this because I think this is really essential to the argument I’m making. The way humans try to solve problems depends on the types of challenges that they’re facing. What else is going on around them? You know, in laboratory conditions, problem-solving can become this kind of pure process of logic planned out in advance. But, you know, in a chaotic disaster situation, problem-solving is much more about just action first and thinking later.

So, in the paper I’ve drawn on the work of some complexity-science thinkers, particularly Dave Snowden, to try and distinguish how different kinds of environments create different kinds of problems and why only a small set of them actually require strategy. So, to run through a very simplified version of it—and you can see more in the paper—in a clear system, you know, think a chef in a kitchen or a mechanic in a workshop, the way the basic chemicals interact, the way our machines operate is relatively predictable, and so problems can be solved in a repeatable and a consistent fashion. In a complicated system, there’s still an underlying order and regularity even if the context is different, and perhaps the

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problem has never been seen before. Now, for instance, when we built a space station—massive challenge, but it was still building material objects within a physical world.

And finally, Snowden says, look, there’s also complex systems. Now in these worlds, these environments will have varying levels of order—it changes overtime, it doesn’t operate in linear and consistent fashions. And there’s a degree of feedback, adaption, and learning going on within the system, which in turn kind of produces its own unique emergent phenomena. Now, you don’t need strategy to deal with clear or complicated systems. You want best practice manuals, and you want to follow the expertise of scientists or leaders who have been in the field for a long time. But complex systems are very different, and strategy actually seems ready-made for helping us to make sense of how to survive within them. There’s a number of scholars from the 1990s onwards who have shown that, you know, Carl von Clausewitz actually preempted some of the modern ideas of complexity science with his descriptions of war. And I think the mindset of many practicing strategists, that sense of humility you sometimes find that focus on adaption, on feedback, on understanding the adversary, also puts us in a really strong place for overcoming the kinds of problems that we face in complex environments.

### Host

How do strategists diagnose problems?

### Carr

If strategy is problem-solving, I don’t want to support the idea that strategists do everything to solve the problem. Indeed, I think that’s actually a problem with a lot of the theories that we have today—that the role of strategists is almost this omnipotent kind of conjoiner of all different areas of national power. So, in the paper, I focus on the role of diagnosis as the distinctive contribution of strategists, because we can’t solve complex problems just by talking about the actions and the resources we’re going to apply towards those ends. First, I think we actually need to diagnose the problem (try to understand the dynamics at work, the way that the system is evolving and adapting) and then we can start to think about resourcing. A classic example of this is actually George F. Keenan’s “[long telegram](#)” from 1946. Indeed, in the telegram he compares treating the Soviet Union to a doctor with an unruly patient. He then draws on, you know, history, economics, politics, philosophy, and culture, and he tries to explain to Washington what the Soviets are actually trying to do but also what kinds of approaches to the Soviets might make sense given some of their inherent weaknesses. So, he says, you know, don’t try to directly defeat them—instead, let’s look for more patient ways of offsetting and amplifying their weaknesses. And that’s obviously kind of the foundation, intellectually, of what then became the policy and strategy of containment.

So, diagnosis varies with each problem, but I think there’s at least two common steps. First, we need to identify what problem is worth solving. Not all problems are equal, and sometimes solving one can unlock a range of opportunities. In the paper, I point to the example of Stalin shifting his focus in 1944 from winning the Second World War to the problem of preparing for competition after the war and show how this then gave long-term advantage to the Soviets. So often we must respond to problems that are presented to us, but good strategists are also working to try and discover problems that are just emerging and perhaps even to work out ways to create problems for our adversaries. The second step after that identification part is to interrogate the problem, and here I link back to the work and the insights of complexity science to discuss how we can make better sense of such confusing environments and the kind of mindsets that we need to find our way in complex systems.

### Host

What are the advantages of strategy as problem-solving?

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### Carr

So, there's many good definitions of strategy out there, and I see this paper as a contribution to those discussions, certainly not the last word. But I think there's at least three clear benefits for trying to think of strategy as problem-solving. First, it gives us a sense of clarity about what strategy is—much of the current debate gets tied up on the content. You know, perhaps everything to do with nuclear weapons should be called “strategic” because of their importance. Or perhaps we've lost the meaning of strategy if we allow people in business or in politics to describe their work as strategic.

I think strategy as problem-solving allows us to get away from such debates because it defines strategy not in terms of content, but as a way of approaching the world. When you have complex problems, strategy is a way of purposefully trying to diagnose and solve them. So, it's not a synonym for “important,” but it can be applied across many different domains, and I think that is a useful way of distinguishing what is the work of strategists.

Second, because we have studied problem-solving through scientific work, through academic studies, the work of consultants and business, there's actually a lot of tools already available for practitioners today to adopt and use in their own work to help improve what they're trying to do. There are problem-solving tools, group dynamic tools, data tools. And increasingly, we're seeing artificial intelligence being used as a problem-solving resource. Some of these will be already well-known to those practicing as strategists or in the armed forces, but there's a lot that can be drawn on and thought about, and perhaps evolved and adapted to our needs here in the security community.

And third and finally, I think we can actually teach problem-solving skills and build up the capacity of the new generations because this is a well-studied field. So, for instance, problem-based learning methods have been used for a long time in medical schools, and there's actually a great study at the US Army War College in 2021 applying problem-based learning and showing its utility and value. And earlier this year I spent some time at Harvard Business School learning about the case method, which is another way of teaching students how to work through real-world problems [and] building up their skills in analysis, communication, and decision-making.

So, I think those three benefits of clarity about strategy, of tools for practitioners, and of education methods for the next generation make this, actually, a really attractive and practical approach to strategy.

### Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts you'd like to share about this topic before we go?

### Carr

I wrote this paper partly because I've become a bit unhappy with the abstract nature of a lot of strategic analysis that I was reading. You know, it was sensible, it was serious, but it ended up often just recommending that we produce these big documents and grant statements and didn't seem to help us really, kind of, face head-on the kind of problems that we're facing in the West.

So, I see this paper as a bit of an attempt to bring strategy down off the mountain to try and clarify its role within organizational structures and to say that at its best, strategy is the way that we diagnose and begin to solve genuinely complex problems. So, you know, how do we succeed in strategic competition with China? How do we deter regional threats? How do we make sure that we're clearly translating military force into political outcomes? Strategy requires that kind of hard, grinding work of overcoming today's problems so that we're slightly better placed to tackle tomorrow's problems.

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And the more I got into reading this, the more I came to see that, actually, this is a very old way of thinking—that strategists such as Keenan, who I mentioned, or Andrew Marshall, who led the [Department of Defense’s or] DOD’s Office of Net Assessment and tried to think about long-term problems, tried to think about how do we better understand them and tried to focus on, you know, really understanding the problem and not just rushing for solutions. I think we somewhat lost that approach in the slightly easier post-Cold War years where efficiency of resources was the key issue, but it definitely needs to come back, given the significance of the problems that we face today.

### Host

Listeners, you can download the article at [press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters). Look for volume 54, issue 1. For more War College podcasts, check out [Conversations on Strategy](#), [SSI Live](#), and [A Better Peace](#).

Andrew, thank you for making time to speak with me today.

### Carr

My pleasure, thank you.

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