9 Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective

The evolution of resource access and denial in strategic thought and practice has followed a pattern of increasing scope and intensity, keeping pace with the expanding scope and intensity of conflict generally, and the increasing dependence of war economies on raw material imports, particularly since the rise of industrial or 'mobilization' warfare. Early instances of the attack or protection of trade, with the object of restricting or securing sources of revenue, and thus the capacity for financing military establishments and operations, led to campaigns and policies aimed directly at restricting or assuring the flow of militarily important materials—for instance, naval timber in the 18th century, oil and strategic minerals in the 20th. Ultimately, resource-related strategy during the two world wars came to embrace the attack and protection of resources vital for the functioning of war economies and societies as a whole.

Resource denial in the 20th century emerges as a 'counter-value' strategy; a means of attacking an opponent's economy and society without having first defeated his forces in the field. Moreover, the attack on resources was seen as a means of carrying forward the offensive in situations of strategic stalemate, or where opportunities for the direct engagement of enemy forces were restricted or unavailable. While nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles have replaced the blockade instrument as the ultimate counter-value weapon, considerations of resource access and denial are still relevant to military strategy, and will continue to be of central importance at many levels of conflict and crisis short of full-scale nuclear war.

Throughout this study, it has been asserted that perceptions of resource vulnerability—including the vulnerability of adversaries—have played an important role in the formation of strategic plans and policies; they continue to do so today. Most frequently, it has been the perception of vulnerability, rather than the reality of vulnerability which thrust resource issues into the forefront in the determination of strategic priorities for offence and defence.

It was the perception of Britain’s vulnerability to even brief interruptions in her sea-borne imports of raw materials which stimu-

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lated the development of French naval doctrine aimed at exploiting this vulnerability. In the years leading up to World War I, increasing British concern with regard to dependence on imported food and other raw material resources, and the threat posed to this trade by French and later German naval forces, lent considerable weight to arguments for a continuing expansion of naval power. The vision of economic chaos and widespread starvation which was seen as the likely result of a successful guerre de course against British trade is echoed in current concerns about the consequences of the interdiction of Western sea lines of communication for vital resources, particularly at critical 'choke points'. The possession of appropriate bases and adequate naval forces to control areas essential to the flow of resources clearly continues to shape Western, and particularly American strategy in the nuclear era. The protection of Western access to resources, and the associated sealines of communication, constitutes a vital interest of the Western allies, the historical antecedents of which are very much in the minds of contemporary strategists.

While considerations of resource access and denial in strategy have been closely tied to perceptions regarding resource vulnerability and the potential for effective supply restriction, these perceptions have quite frequently been false. Study of economic warfare in the two world wars, together with earlier experience, clearly demonstrates that a strategy of resource denial faces great obstacles and is rarely as straightforward as perceived. Even the most active efforts to disrupt the supply and use of resources (for instance, the German submarine campaigns in the Atlantic, and the Allied strategic bombing campaigns against resource-related targets) could not be decisive in their own right—although in some respects both campaigns came close to achieving their objectives. A clear lesson of the World War II experience is that a strategy of resource restriction will be most effective where adequate intelligence is available with regard to raw material supply and distribution bottlenecks. With the development of more sophisticated intelligence gathering capabilities, prospects for the effective attack of resource-related targets may be very much better than they have been in the past.

The most significant lesson to be derived from the experience of the two world wars concerns the remarkable flexibility and adaptability of modern industrial economies to resource constraints and the scope for technical and strategic counter-measures. Here, again, resource vulnerabilities have rarely been as great as anticipated. The