



POLICY, STRATEGY, AND DOCTRINE

Last Reviewed: 27 Feb 2015

The term “[doctrine](#)” is frequently (and incorrectly) used when referring to policy or [strategy](#). These terms are not interchangeable; they are fundamentally different. Because policy and strategy may impact each other, it is important to first understand their differences before delving into a discussion of doctrine.

- ★ **Policy is guidance that is directive or instructive, stating what is to be accomplished.** It reflects a conscious choice to pursue certain avenues and not others. Thus, while doctrine is held to be relatively enduring, policy is more mutable and also directive. Policies may change due to changes in national leadership, political considerations, or for fiscal reasons. At the national level, policy may be expressed in such broad vehicles as the National Security Strategy or Presidential Executive Orders. Within military operations, policy may be expressed not only in terms of objectives, but also in [rules of engagement](#) (ROE)—what we may or may not strike, or under what circumstances we may strike particular targets.
- ★ **Strategy defines how operations should be conducted to accomplish national policy objectives.** Strategy is the continuous process of matching ends, ways, and means to accomplish desired goals within acceptable levels of risk. Strategy originates in policy and addresses broad objectives, along with the designs and plans for achieving them.
- ★ **Doctrine presents considerations on how to accomplish military goals and objectives.** It is a storehouse of analyzed experience



Although air officers have not been prolific writers, they have expressed their beliefs freely.... In fact, one may almost say that the Air Force has developed an oral rather than a written tradition.

— Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907 - 1960*

and wisdom. Military doctrine is authoritative, but unlike policy, is not directive.

In practice, as leaders develop strategies for particular contingencies, political, economic, or social considerations may dictate strategic and operational approaches that modify or depart from accepted doctrine. As an example, doctrine may support long-range, air-to-air engagements beyond visual range, or high altitude interdiction of surface targets, both using long-range sensors; ROE, however, may require visual identification of all targets before firing due to political concerns over fratricide or collateral damage. If policy seriously affects the application of doctrine, military commanders should describe for political leaders the military consequences of those adaptations. However, because war is “an instrument of policy,” military commanders should ensure that policy governs the employment of military power and thus tailor their operations accordingly.
