

Do Alexander's Asian Campaigns suggest he was essentially a cautious commander or one willing to take serious risks in battles and sieges?

First reckon, then risk Helmuth von Moltke ("The Elder")

Qui ne risque rien, n'a rien He who risks nothing gets nothing (French proverb)

Decisions are the responsibility of commanders at all levels of warfare. Decisions involve an element of risk, which must be accepted and managed by respective commanders. Modern warfare provides a division of command based on the levels of warfare. The responsibility for decisions and the associated risk is thus shared between commanders from the tactical to the strategic level. Ancient commanders often operated across all levels of warfare and were responsible for strategic decisions and their tactical implementation.

Alexander the Great's campaign to conquer the Persian empire required him to fulfil the roles of hegemon, king, commander, general and leader.¹ In his political and senior military roles, Alexander was responsible for constructing the strategic outline of the campaign. As the General Officer Commanding, he was required to plan and command battles and sieges. While in his position as leader or foremost soldier of his troops, it was necessary for him to provide the personal example of leadership in battle. At all levels of the campaign Alexander held considerable responsibility for the majority of decisions and inherent risk.

This essay will focus on decisions of a tactical nature. In relation to Alexander's campaign this means the decision to accept battle or raise a siege. However, tactical decisions cannot be divorced from their strategic context. Indeed, campaigning with a small, albeit professional, force long distances from the home base every engagement or conflict could be considered a risk. Therefore, serious risk may be considered to be those tactical decisions which threaten curtailment of Alexander's aim to become Lord of Asia.² Set in this context Alexander's tactical risk taking appears to be a combination of prudence and passion.

So what was the strategic context? Alexander's aim was to conquer the Persian empire. Historians have disputed the reason behind this objective.³ More important to this essay is the strategy he designed to achieve the objective. Alexander clearly enunciates his policy in his speech to his 'staff' before the siege of Tyre.⁴ The strategy is to "conquer the ships from the land".⁵

Alexander intends to strangle Persian sea power, one of the pillars of the Persian strategic outlook, by dominating the coastal areas.⁶ Deprived of access to ports, supplies and manpower Persian sea power would be negated. Simultaneously, Alexander planned the continued success of his land operations to prevent the transfer of the war to Greece, where Sparta and certain elements in Athens remained openly hostile, by reducing the political arguments and threat against him. Commentators generally accept this as a sound strategy.

This is not to say the policy was without risk as his decision to disband the fleet demonstrated in 333 B.C.⁷ The subjugation of Tyre ends both further speculation and Persian influence in this area. Alexander's strategy is not in question. Even Keegan, who is generally critical of other aspects of his generalship, acknowledges him as an "incisive strategist".⁸ However, both Keegan

and other critics find weaknesses with his tactical capabilities as a general and a leader.

Keegan believes Alexander's generalship in tactical situations, such as that confronted at the Granicus, was overly risky. Keegan writes "The battle was to set the stereotype of Alexandrian generalship precipitate, apparently reckless and highly personal."⁹ Yet Keegan himself argues that one of the necessary functions of command is what he describes as the imperative of action. The essentials of this imperative are "knowing and seeing."¹⁰

In modern tactical terms these essentials equate to the general's ability to conduct effective reconnaissance, which provides "knowing" - intelligence - and "seeing" - control. Control in Alexander's army could only be effectively provided by the commander pre-battle. This was achieved through the formulation of a plan and the passage of orders. A measure of Alexander's generalship is his ability to conduct reconnaissance, create a plan and deliver orders. These essentials of action are designed to minimise if not eliminate any significant risk posed by the tactical problem at hand.

The use of reconnaissance was an important weapon in Alexander's arsenal as a general. It is well documented that before each of his major battles reconnaissance provided Alexander with the ability to prepare for each tactical conundrum the Persians presented. At the Battle of Issus Alexander uses a naval sortie to confirm the existence of the Persian force.¹¹ The more conventional cavalry is then employed to provide both operational security and intelligence. Finally Alexander is prepared to wait until he views his opponents' formation before finalising his own plan.¹²

This prudent use of reconnaissance also occurs at the Battle of Gaugamela. Reconnaissance provides Alexander with early information on the strength, likely tactics and intended use of chariots by the Persians.¹³ Alexander again uses his first sight of the enemy to confirm his forward reconnaissance. Arrian informs us that he halted his troops and conducted;

a wide reconnaissance with his light infantry and Companion cavalry, minutely examining the whole terrain where the battle would be fought.¹⁴

Alexander's apparent caution seems well justified given he faced a numerically superior force operating on ground specifically chosen and prepared to enhance its perceived advantages in size and cavalry.

Alexander also uses reconnaissance during the sieges he carried out. Arrian records at Tyre that Alexander methodically felt for a weak spot in the defences.¹⁵ This probing of the defences using small assault elements is also conducted at Halicarnassus.¹⁶ Even at the Battle of the Granicus, where his actions and plan have drawn criticism from Parmenio¹⁷ and Keegan,¹⁸ he still employed reconnaissance as a vital aid in the preparation of his plan.¹⁹

Alexander's use of reconnaissance emphasises his understanding of the need to 'know'. It does not necessarily demonstrate a cautious approach but rather a sensible and rational attitude to the magnitude of the tactical and strategic problem before him. Commentators as diverse as Plutarch and Keegan claim his plans do not reflect the considered approach that his use of reconnaissance would suggest.

Alexander's handling of the Granicus has often been the focal point for such criticism. Keegan

alleges he simply "charged to glory" - a charge he also applies to the tactically more demanding scenario confronted at Issus.²⁰ Plutarch records the battle seemed more like "the act of a desperate madman rather than that of a prudent commander".²¹ Alexander's response to Parmenio's appeal for caution also appears to support these criticisms. He claims the Hellespont would blush with shame if he failed to cross such a mere trickle of water as the Granicus.²²

Perhaps Alexander was convinced that his superior numbers, fighting ability and morale of his troops would be sufficient to overcome a strongly defended enemy position.²³ Such a belief would indicate that the criticisms of the risk he exposed his campaign to at this juncture are not as significant as his detractors claim. Failure would delay his progress but not significantly effect his intention to pursue the capture of the coastal area. The strategic and tactical situation at Issus, Tyre and later Guagamela would require a more innovative, calculated and careful approach. Failure at these encounters would probably mean oblivion.

At Issus Darius threatened the entire campaign by outmanoeuvring Alexander and arriving unexpectedly and unannounced behind him. Darius had wrested the initiative away from Alexander by cutting him off from his supplies and communications. Defeat for Alexander would leave him nowhere to withdraw, re-equip, replenish and reverse his fortunes. Alexander was left with no other strategic alternative but to win the tactical struggle. Nor was the tactical situation any less challenging - a numerically superior enemy located on a strong defensive position.²⁴

Darius' aim was to hold the Macedonian phalanx and by massing his cavalry on the Persian right in an attempt to outflank Alexander. Alexander's counter was to contain the threat on his left flank while delivering the coup de grace with his Companion cavalry on the Macedonian right flank. His final reconnaissance convinced him to bolster Parmenio's forces with the late addition of the Thessalian cavalry. The deployment of these troops was conducted behind the phalanx in order to achieve tactical surprise. He also moved against the Persian troops located in the foothills in order to secure his right flank.²⁵

Alexander's carefully arranged order of battle was deliberately advanced in order to prevent any break in the line from occurring. However, once within missile range the order to charge was given. Thus, Alexander's plan and his considered actions in constructing it reflect workings of a mind well versed in the tactics necessary to overcome the Persian position. Keegan's allegation that Alexander simply used "brute force" to charge to victory overstates his reaction to the strategic risk he was presented with. Alexander's prudent preparations are aimed at minimising the tactical risk and increasing the likelihood of success both tactical and strategic. It was a risk Alexander would face again at the siege of Tyre.

The siege of Tyre was a necessary tactical element in the overall campaign. With the Persian counter offensive gaining momentum Alexander elected to lay siege to Tyre in order to pursue his strategy of defeating Persian sea power from the land.²⁶ As his speech before the siege confirms. The plan that Alexander composed signifies both his mastery of siegecraft and his intention to take tactical risks in order to gain strategic advantage.

Alexander's plan was to build a mole to approach Tyre, which was situated a considerable distance offshore. This would allow Alexander to bring his siege equipment to bear on Tyre. He employed new and improved equipment designed to facilitate access to the fortifications. Each of these tactical innovations may be viewed as a risk, but a calculated risk designed to

reduce the strength of the Tyrian position and hasten victory.²⁷

In the case of the siege of Tyre, and later the seemingly impregnable Gaza, a certain speed was required. The longer the siege lasted the more tarnished Alexander's shield of invincibility became. The use of innovation was a necessary tactical tool aimed at securing the strategic plan through the defeat of the enemy. Guagamela would confirm Alexander's ability to accept and manage such risk.

Keegan claims Alexander would risk all to win all in a single throw of the dice. The clear implication here is that Alexander was a serious risk taker. Keegan's claims at first appear well justified. Alexander was opposed by a Persian army, which was significantly larger than previous opposition. For the first time the terrain favoured the Persians traditional tactics of envelopment. Indeed, the flat open plains had been specially prepared to foster the use of Darius' large element of cavalry and re introduction of chariots.

Alexander would respond with perhaps his most audacious plan of the campaign. His plan incorporated the flank guards used at Issus. However, the real innovation came with the oblique manoeuvre of his front allowing his right flank to engage the enemy before the left. The aim of this manoeuvre was to avoid the chariots and regain the initiative by forcing Darius to react to his plans. This would also stymie the Persian threat to overlap Alexander's flanks.

Keegan believes this innovation "a supreme risk".²⁸ This view is countered by both Griffith and Fuller who contend Alexander's generalship was exemplary at Guagamela.²⁹ His 'gamble' a necessary by product of the threat offered by the Persians. Although his plan was risky there appears little alternative except to be enveloped by the larger Persian force.³⁰ Yet plans are useless unless they can be effectively translated into action. This is achieved through the orders process.

Orders are used to ensure subordinates have the requisite information to understand and participate in battle in accordance with the plan. Thus, orders are a precaution that enable the commander to manage a battle and the associated risks. Alexander delivered orders to individuals such as Parmenio at Issus, assembled senior commanders for timely orders groups and issued general motivational speeches to all his troops.³¹

An investigation of Alexander's capability as a general has revealed that as Arrian points out "more often than not Alexander took risks in his battles".³² These risks with the possible exception of his encounter battle at Granicus were pre-meditated and calculated. These tactical risks were weighed against the severity of the strategic situation. Moreover, the use of reconnaissance, considered plans and orders was aimed at further minimising the risk.

However, no plan survives contact with the enemy.³³ Battlefield leaders therefore become responsible for ensuring the commander's intent is achieved and the battle ends victoriously. Keegan refers to this as the imperative of example.³⁴ Example often requires leaders to demonstrate their ability to share the risk of combat with their troops. Alexander was both expected as foremost soldier and required as leader of the Companion cavalry wedge to share this risk.

This personal risk was one that Alexander did not shrink from accepting. His bold tactical charge at Granicus was characterised by his almost impetuous personal behaviour. Arrian

records that Alexander was "in the thick of it" and that he suffered from a blow to the helmet and cuirass. Only Cleitus the Black's timely intervention saved Alexander from an early exit from the battlefield.³⁵

Alexander's actions at Issus are consistent with his behaviour at Granicus. At Issus he leads the right wing cavalry in the attack across the Pinarus.³⁶ While Curtius adds that it was Alexander's example which strengthened his troops resolve.³⁷ His determination to be at the forefront of the action resulted in a further wound, this time to the thigh.³⁸

The sieges of Tyre and Gaza appear to confirm his propensity for battle. He is recorded at Tyre to have climbed the highest siege tower and to be personally responsible for the fall of the city by leading his troops into the breach.³⁹ The personal risk he takes is magnified by conspicuous dress which signals him as a significant target. His example at Gaza is even more noteworthy. Arrian writes he saved the Macedonians from a serious reverse by rallying them at the point of gravest danger. He suffers a serious wound from this engagement.⁴⁰

These actions have drawn widespread criticism. Curtius speaks of his recklessness and has Darius disparage him as "headstrong and crazy".⁴¹ Hamilton finds he takes undue risks which almost cost him his life.⁴² While Hammond finds him a paradox, a man of reckless courage who had many of the qualities of the noble savage.⁴³ These criticisms neglect Alexander's pragmatic approach to participation in battle, particularly the sieges.

Alexander appears selective in his example choosing to enter the fray when the decisive moment has arrived. At Tyre he is well placed to lead the breakthrough. At Guagamela he controls the battle on the right wing until a gap appears in the Persian line and he leads the Companion cavalry forward to exploit this tactical opportunity. Such personal criticisms must also be set against the military era in which Alexander thought and fought.

Keegan has defined this era and Alexander's leadership style as heroic. In a warrior society, the foremost warrior (Alexander), is expected to set the example. Without this example the military apparatus, even the state, will suffer. Witness Darius inglorious withdrawals from the eventual routs of Issus and Guagamela. Also the disintegration of Alexander's empire when death removed his example.

Perhaps Alexander's selectivity is based on a recognition, only achieved in the latter stages of the campaign, that the greatest strategic risk, and therefore the most serious, he ran was the personal one. The loss of his life would cut off the head from the body. The campaign would not function in his absence. Again the feuding which followed his death suggests this would have been the case.

Alexander during his campaign to conquer the Persian empire combined a plethora of roles, political and military, which his more modern counterparts would divide in order to share the decision making and risk taking responsibility. Whilst accepting the interplay between the various roles this essay has concentrated on the strategic risks Alexander took in his tactical capacity as general and leader.

Alexander was generally prudent and thorough in the preparation of his army for battle. He endeavoured to formulate an effective plan but was not frightened of incorporating either new equipment or new ideas into his battle plans. His generalship was not without error or void of

serious risks such as his plan at Guagamela or decision to besiege Tyre. However, set against his strategic intentions these risks were calculated to minimise the impact on his campaign. The same can not always be said for his performance as leader of his army.

As the leader of the Companion cavalry it was Alexander's responsibility for leading that tactical element into battle. It was a duty carried out exemplarily in the major battles of the campaign. However, the boldness he displayed as a general was too often reflected as recklessness as a leader. His willingness to lead from the front, although necessary militarily and politically, was a serious risk which may have ended his campaign.

Endnotes

1. **John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, Penguin, London, 1988, p.11** suggests success in military affairs requires the adoption of a number of different roles or masks. Each mask must be "made in such a form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need". **N.G.L. Hammond, *Alexander the Great King, Commander, and Statesman*, 2nd edn, Bristol Press, Bristol, 1989** and **Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*, Spa Books, Stevenage, 1991** both argue that Alexander's success indicates his successful adoption of these often competing 'masks' or roles.
2. **Flavius Arrianus Xenophon, *The Campaigns Of Alexander*, trans. A. De Selincourt, rev. J.R. Hamilton, Penguin, London, 1971, pp. 127-128.** **Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History Of Alexander*, trans. J. Yardley, Penguin, London, 1984(A.D 41), 4.1.14.**
3. **Arrian, 1971, Plutarch, *The Age Of Alexander*, trans. I Scott-Kilvert, Penguin, London, 1973.** Arrian's Anabasis records Alexander's successful completion of his aim to conquer the empire with little consideration for the reasons. **J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander The Great*, University O Pittsburgh Press, 1974.** and particularly **N.G.L Hammond, 1989** argue that Alexander developed the forerunner to a utopian United Nations. This is in contrast to Keegan's allegations that Alexander was consumed by the pursuit of glory and the fulfilment of his ambition to conquer the world.
4. **Keegan, p. 40-44.** highlights that whilst a modern general staff did not exist Alexander was able to draw advise from a range of experts from engineers to generals.
5. **Arrian, pp. 81, 131-132, Plutarch, 17, 24.2**
6. **A.R.Burn "Notes On Alexander's Campaigns" in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. LXXII(1947), p. 82,** lists the three pillars of traditional Persian strategy as Phoenician sea power, Greek allies and Persian gold supply. A strategy which had successfully blunted previous 'Greek' forays onto Persian soil.
7. **Arrian, p. 83, Hamilton, p. 60, Hammond, p. 81.** There are a number of theories behind the decision to disband the fleet. The most of plausible of these is the recognition that

the quality and loyalty of his fleet in comparison to the seafaring Phoenician fleet was doubtful. Victory on land would eventually obviate the apparent need for strength at sea. In the short term the ceding of control of the sea to Memnon, and later Pharnabazus, provided the Persians with the impetus to mount a campaign to re-establish the status quo prior to Alexander's successful offensive in the Asia Minor.

8. **Keegan, p. 88.**
9. **ibid., p. 24.**
10. **ibid., p. 325.** He believes there are imperatives of command; kinship, prescription, sanction, action and example. A successful commander applies these imperatives.
11. **Arrian, p.112.**
12. **Arrian, pp. 112, 114,116-117.Curtius, op.cit., 3.8 17-18,24**
13. **Arrian, pp. 159-161. Curtius 4.10.9-11, 15, 12.4-5**
14. **ibid., p. 162.**
15. **ibid., p. 140.**
16. **ibid., p. 84.**
17. **ibid., p.70. Plutarch 16.1**
18. **Keegan, pp. 24/86.**
19. **Arrian, p. 70.**
20. **Keegan, p. 86.**
21. **Plutarch, 16-1**
22. **Plutarch, 16-1. Arrian, p. 70** has Alexander rather than the Hellespont blush with shame.
23. The calculation of army strengths based on the ancient sources is usually fraught with danger. **Keegan, p. 24** using **Arrian** understands the opposing armies to be evenly matched. **Fuller, p. 147** with the same sources surmises that Alexander had a significant numerical advantage. There is also some debate over what military action actually occurred at Granicus. **Arrian pp. 70-73, Diodorus Siculus vol.7, trans, C.L. Sherman, Loeb, London, 1963, 17.19 and Plutarch 16** provide differing accounts.
24. **Keegan, p. 82, Arrian, p.118** are critical of Darius' decisions: to use the Pinarus River as an obstacle, and to enhance his defensive position through the use of stockades and other artificial constructions. Keegan and Arrian believe such embattlements indicate Darius lacks the necessary moral strength for the coming conflict. **Hammond pp. 101, 107-8.** states

that although Darius selected an excellent defensive position it did not allow him to maximise the combat power provided by his superior numbers. **Fuller, p.99** believes Darius made a tactical blunder in not pressing home the advantage gained by his arrival in the rear echelon of Alexander's forces. It is probable that Darius desired to avoid battle in the mountain areas where his numerical superiority would be negated.

25. **Arrian pp. 116-18, Curtius 3.9.7-12, 3.11.1-3**
26. **Burn pp.81-84** outlines the serious strategic threat posed by the Persians during this time.
27. **Hammond p.113-116. Fuller p.101.** The success of this decision is reflected in Alexander's ability to capture in seven months what Nebuchadrezzar could not capture in thirteen years.
28. **Keegan, p.86.**
29. **G.T. Griffith, "Alexander's Generalship at Gaugamela" in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. LXXII (1947) Fuller pp163-180.**
30. Notably, Darius is also taking a supreme risk. Defeat at Guagamela would surely destroy any lingering hopes of Persian victory.
31. **Curtius, 3.9.10** Orders Parmenio to extend his troops to the sea at Issus to prevent Persians from outflanking his position, **4.13.17** assembles officers for orders at Guagamela, **4.13.33-4** provides instructions to men on general battle discipline before Guagamela, **4.13.38, 4.14.1-7** inspires soldiers and commanders alike with oratory. See also **Arrian pp.112-3** for exhortations delivered at Issus, **p.131** for outline of strategic position at Tyre aimed at convincing Companions that a siege was the correct tactical riposte to their dilemma and **p.163** for encouragement to officers before Guagamela.
32. **Arrian p.163.**
33. Attributed to **Helmuth von Moltke "The Elder"**.
34. **Keegan, p. 329.**
35. **Arrian p.73-74.** See also **Plutarch pp.268-9 and Diodorus 17.20**
36. **Arrian p.118. Plutarch 20.1**
37. **Curtius 3.11.9. Diodorus 17.34.**
38. **Curtius 3.11.10. Plutarch 20.1.**
39. **Arrian p.141. Curtius 4.4.10.**
40. **Arrian P.146. Curtius 4.6.14-20**

41. **Curtius 4.9.23, 4.14.18.**
42. **Hamilton, p. 165.**
43. **Hammond p. 270.**

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