



## **Facing a Strategic Endgame?:**

The US and the ambiguities  
of strategic thinking

**CHRISTOPHER COKER**



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President Trump’s last *National Security Strategy* told us that we are heading into an era of sustained big competition “for which the West collectively is unprepared.” One reason it’s unprepared is that the United States has been so strategically inept for the past thirty years. It told itself a compelling story in 1989 that the fall of communism was a great historical turning point but looking back it was also a point that failed to turn (to quote a British historian writing of another event in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Russia was not won for the West; China in crushing opposition at Tiananmen Square served notice that it would not be joining the liberal world order. Ten years earlier the Iranian revolution, another ‘turning point’ had transformed the face of the Middle East and radicalised a generation or two of young Muslims who to this day look back to it for inspiration in the same way that many young communists well into the 1960s were still inspired by the October Revolution of 1917. The Global War on Terror that followed 9/11 broke the back of the American Century.

And the Trump administration itself—though not as disastrous as many predicted—did at times seem in danger of casting the US itself as a revisionist power. “The paradox of our global situation,” wrote Kishore Mahbubani, “is that the biggest threat to the liberal international order is not from a non-liberal society like China but from a liberal society like the US.” Mahbubani is a suspect figure perhaps in the eyes of some—the title of his book *Has the West lost it?* (2018) gives him away. He is no friend of the West but many mainstream commentators in the US regret the fact that the country is still suffering from ‘hegemonic hubris’—the words are those of the Harvard Professor Steven Walt. And for that the blame can be shared by every administration since Bill Clinton’s. The US had lost the plot long before Trump and one of the principal reasons is that it had forgotten how to do strategy.

Asked in 2014 about what his administration was doing about ISIS, Barack Obama admitted “we don’t have a strategy”. A week later he came back with a ‘game plan’. Hillary Clinton his Secretary of State wrote in her memoirs: ‘Great nations need an organising principle’. Obama’s foreign policy slogan: ‘Don’t do stupid stuff’—like invading Iraq fell far short of being one. But when she herself fought the 2016 election she didn’t have a strategy, only a slogan, chosen from 83 different ones. ‘Stronger Together’ failed to resonate with the public. Besides which Trump had a better one: ‘Make America Great Again’. It was, wrote Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the major strategic thinkers in the US, in his last op-ed piece for the *New York Times* ‘a great bumper sticker’, but it offered no real strategic guidance. A country cannot live by slogans alone.

You could be forgiven for feeling caught up in a private argument. Where the pundits contradict each other so flagrantly, the field is open to enquiry. But then to be fair many of us in the West have not done strategy for a long time. One of the explanations, I suggest, for the economic crisis of 2008 was that the banks didn’t do strategy either. One of those most responsible for over-reaching was the Royal Bank of Scotland which came within 24-hours of collapse. And yet back in 2004 the London Business School had encouraged students to enrol on a course which treated the bank as a case study of success. Its title was telling: ‘RBS: the strategy of not having a strategy’.

## What is strategy?

Strategies come in many forms. One is organisational strategy, the basis of management consulting. The great attraction of hiring business consultants is that they send in a team from the outside which often has no specific knowledge of the business they are analysing; they analyse the data, write a report, and make sure they drop in an invoice before leaving the building. And they are not reluctant to invoke the great strategic thinkers of the past such as Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. The Boston Consulting Group once compiled a list of ‘best of business’ quotes from Clausewitz’s magnum opus, *On War*. I suspect that the great attraction of sketching an intellectual trajectory back to his work is that business consultants can finally transcend the numerical monotony of Excel spreadsheets and the simplicity of 2X2 matrices; they can even take their own discourse beyond the banalities of phrases like ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking and ‘core competencies’ which may merely serve to conceal their own business inexperience.

The attempt to introduce the business approach to American war planning in Iraq had disastrous consequences first in Vietnam and then Iraq. ‘Don’t give me your poetry,’ remarked Robert McNamara, President Johnson’s Defense Secretary when told by an aide that a reading of military history would suggest that the Vietnamese would be difficult to defeat. History couldn’t be fed into the computer models that McNamara brought with him from the Ford Motor Company. In the case of Iraq ‘just-in-time’ inventories had been

in fashion for some time—supermarkets kept stocks for two days and resupplied them from global supply chains. Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense in 2003, thought you could apply the same method to invading the country—he insisted on going in light. 150,000 soldiers were all that were needed to defeat the Iraqi army. His generals argued that you needed 400,000 to consolidate victory and prevent an insurgency from breaking out. Their concerns were simply ignored.

Then there's business strategy which tells you what series of tactical moves you need to give yourself an advantage over a rival company: coming up with a new product line or increasing market share by pricing out the competition. Dell famously revolutionized the PC industry by offering its customers an online sales platform which allowed them to cut out the retailer. Which brings me to military strategy, which is often defined as the art of bringing the enemy to battle and decisively defeating him. It's as old as the armies which states have been putting into the field for 5000 years and yet states still have difficulty framing successful military strategies. The 20-year campaign in Afghanistan (2001-21) offers a classic example. Instead of a snatch and grab raid to take out bin Laden and his organisation, it rapidly became a punitive mission to remove the Taliban government from power; soon after that the West attempted to solve the problem once and for all by 'terra-forming' a country that has been notoriously resistant to many attempts by outsiders to do just that. In the UK, the Chief of the General Staff Peter Inge claimed that the operation had 'mission creep' written all over it. At one point NATO gave itself eight different missions including ending corruption, eradicating opium production and ensuring that girls went to school. The result, claimed a member of the US 25 Infantry Division in Khost, is that "tactical adaptations in the field had to make up for strategic incoherence." "We did not know what we were doing most of the time" remarked a general who served both the Bush and the Obama administrations. The result was inevitable: strategic failure which is what

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happens when myth-making continues and institutional inertia persists, and the generals persist in reinforcing failure to cover their own reputations.

Finally, there's grand strategy so beloved of Great and not so Great Powers. A grand strategy in theory is meant to provide an intellectual architecture that can give structure to foreign policy, encourage governments to look beyond the operational needs of the moment, and help them align ends and means so that they don't set themselves unrealistic goals. In their book *Radical Uncertainty* (2020), Mervyn King and John Kay argue that the world is too complex these days to be captured by a grand strategic vision: think of the 'known unknowns' and more importantly the 'unknown unknowns' that Donald Rumsfeld got us to entertain. But then there are also the things we once knew but have forgotten and any grand strategy that encourages you to forget the past is unlikely to be very useful.

It said that when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell used to display a quotation on his desk from Thucydides *History*: "Of all exercises of power, restraint is the most important." It was the heart of what came to be known as the 'Powell Doctrine'. Thucydides, as it happens, never said it, but he might well have—it is one of the central 'takeaways' of his book. Strategy like war is inherently paradoxical: once applied, for example, military power can diminish very quickly as the US discovered in Iraq. Confident it was riding a wave: the so-

called 'Revolution in Military Affairs', confidently speaking the language of 'full-spectrum dominance', and assured that there was nothing to learn from military history—in the words of one American general 'Clausewitz had been abolished', the ultimate argument against the opponents of the invasion was compelling: if the US could not be defeated, there was no risk, so why not invade? Think of Walter White from *Breaking Bad* who tells himself that he has done everything for his family, not for himself but in the end is forced to admit to his wife that he engaged in criminal activity simply because he could. 'NATO just do'—a variation of the famous Nike advert—could be read on the T-shirts of young Kosovars in the run-up to the Kosovo War (1999). But NATO 'did it' because it thought it should, not because it could.

If you believe that you can act without consequences, you may find yourself in trouble soon enough. Insurance companies call this a 'moral hazard'. Insurance itself is paradoxical for that reason; it often encourages reckless behaviour. Clients with life insurance policies tend to take more risks knowing that their families will be provided for should they take one risk too many. Formula One racing drivers because they are much better than the rest of us drive cars at speeds that can prove fatal. A moral hazard in war arises when the most powerful side is so confident of success that it takes risks it really shouldn't, only to find that failure will usually result when a state adopts a plan that though tactically brilliant is strategically flawed.

History shows that victory can often prove elusive, or simply not worth the cost. War does not always produce significant gains: you can be undone by your own success. Whether you agree with this analysis or not it is a perspective that invites us to look at strategy from a unique vantage point—it is deeply *ambiguous*.

## Seven Types of Ambiguity

One of the most influential works of literary criticism was published in 1930—William Empson’s critically acclaimed book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. A poem is ambiguous, he wrote, when an alternative view of the subject might be presented without completely misreading the text. One example of ambiguity that he offered is the use of metaphor, when two things are said to be alike even though they have different properties. Another example involves two or more meanings which are resolved into one such as the words “lines of life” in Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 16* which can convey a multiplicity of meanings, from the wrinkles of old age to a subject’s genealogical lineage, and the lines of the poem itself: “So should the lines of life that life repair”. There is no need to go down the list. Ambiguity as philosophers have told us from the beginning inheres in the difference between appearance and reality. We may think we grasp what is real only to discover that life is problematic: because we are part of the world we are trying to describe, all truth tends to be paradoxical.

Strategy for that reason should be treated, not as a tool for forecasting success or failure but as a way of organising our thinking. If we want to explain America’s strategic failures since 2001, we might argue that it has failed to grasp seven types of strategic ambiguity.

1. No strategy survives unchanged on first encountering the enemy. It must be adaptable. The challenge is to think beyond the strategy, not just within it.
2. Power is paradoxical—the more powerful you think yourself to be the more powerless you are in danger of becoming. You can be undone by success.
3. To understand an enemy you need to empathise with its predicament: you must avoid the evils of strategic narcissism, of thinking only about yourself.
4. All strategy involves storytelling, so be very careful about the stories you overhear yourself telling others. Other players may look at the world differently and have more compelling stories to tell.
5. Every strategy involves a paradigm: an understanding of the world but you mustn’t allow yourself to be locked into a single understanding of reality.
6. Strategy is simple but the simple is often quite complex
7. You will always be caught out by events however hard you try not to be. Beware Black Swans.

If you were attending a business convention these might be the ‘takeaways’ you would take home. So, let’s run through each of them in order.

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1 “Strategy is useless but strategic planning is indispensable.” The observation is General Eisenhower’s and it’s a good point of departure. Every strategy must be resilient—it must be open to the prospect that others will do their best to scupper it if they can. Resilience is a catch-all term, to be sure, and it means different things to different people. To an engineer it might mean the ability of a bridge to remain intact after a major storm. To a psychologist it might mean the ability of people to function optimally even after experiencing a traumatic event in their lives. For the military it must always be its ability to second-guess an adversary. As the authors argue in their book *Resilience: why things bounce back* (2012), resilience ultimately is: “the capacity of any enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.” And the core purpose of NATO, America’s principal alliance remained and remains the defence of Europe against future Russian adventurism. In the event it was caught out by Russia’s occupation of the Crimea and its subsequent destabilisation of Ukraine. 2014 was the year that it ‘discovered’ hybrid warfare. It was taken by surprise; it really shouldn’t have been.

Its grand strategy in the Cold War had been a stunning success. Containment gave American policy a shape and, in the end, stability, thanks to two principles: defence and deterrence to which was later added the concept of detente. Russia had to be deterred from attacking, but also engaged diplomatically and economically. It was a deceptively simple strategy based on a compelling ‘reference narrative’ which ironically was shared by both superpowers. Both told themselves that as long as war could be avoided, the other side would collapse thanks to the ‘internal contradictions’ of their respective systems: capitalism and communism. It was an easy strategy to implement you might think, because nuclear weapons concentrated the minds of both sides. Deterrence

was never going to be put to the test, was it? Perhaps, but let's admit we don't know, and it almost broke down in 1962 and 1983. One only knows deterrence doesn't work when it fails. And containment always invited both sides to find a way round it. One option was hybrid warfare.

Interestingly, NATO's 1957 Strategic Concept warned of 'hostile local actions' that might catch the alliance off-guard and paralyse its democratic decision-making. What such actions might look like was spelled-out in the 1960s when the alliance adopted the strategy of Forward Defence. Special attention was paid to Kassel, located on the Fulda river in northern Hesse, which it was feared might be seized by the Russians and bargained away for the Western zone of Berlin. And the decision to put together an Allied Mobile Force in the 1960s was dictated in part by the wish to respond to any attempt to seize territory in Denmark or Norway following a prolonged period of political subversion designed to undermine the political cohesion of the alliance.

With the end of the Cold War, successive American administrations simply hoped for the best in the relationship with Russia—they hoped that it would come to terms with its defeat, that liberal democratic forces would force a change of policy, or even that Vladimir Putin might have a change of heart. The US developed an imperfect understanding of the huge task that awaited it in changing the course of Russian policy away from confrontation and possible catastrophe. Unfortunately,

as the Hollywood Director James Cameron once observed: 'hope is not a strategy'.

2. What strategy is, writes Lawrence Freedman—why it is 'the central political art' is that "it is about getting more out of the situation." Strategy, he adds, is 'the art of creating power' (*Strategy, A History*, 2015). And you can soon become powerless when you set yourself unrealistic goals. This is one of the central lessons imparted by the two greatest works on strategy: *The Art of War* and *On War* which form part of the 'canon', an accepted collection of works which are still taught in military academies. The ultimate question about any canon, of course, is who defines it, and who decides what works are in and which are to be kept out. Even the very idea of a canon of work is challenged these days—an example is Harold Bloom's list of the great western literary works *The Western Canon* which was dismissed by the critic Terry Eagleton as a reification of white, male, imperialist values, "a cultural Stonehenge created by the National Trust." And it may well be asked what is a canon for? Is it a litmus test of wisdom, or merely a product of fashion? Writers, after all, fall in and out of fashion all the time and it counts for something perhaps that the title of Sun Tzu's book has a good ring to it. Think of modern works like *The Art of Seduction* and of course *The Art of the Deal*. And thanks to Hollywood the author has name recognition that Clausewitz does not. In the movie *Wall Street* Gordon Gecko declares: "I don't throw darts at a board. I bet on sure things. Read Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. Every battle is

won before it's fought." The remark is a very loose translation of one of the few insights of Sun Tzu's which many people know.

It is always worth venturing beyond the canonical works into more obscure terrain but both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz remain key writers: both present us with two distinct but related ways of looking at strategy and their message is very similar in some respects, though not all. And both are canonical because they grasp what strategy brings to war—it helps order our thoughts.

Limit your ambition is a key theme of their respective works. We are told by Sun Tzu that human agency should be governed by necessity: we should do only what we have to, no more. And we are admonished by Clausewitz to recognise that unlimited ambition tends to fuel the innate tendency of war to escalate and escape political control. To be successful we should learn from the fate of Napoleon and his disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812. In today's business vernacular we might say that he should have quit while he was ahead. He should have avoided optimisation and learned to embrace redundancy; indeed, redundancy may even be necessary for long term survival. He should have rejected the lure of remote payoffs and put less emphasis on past success. As today's financiers have discovered 'stress testing' and 'scenario analysis' which are both based on past results are often unreliable because past success can be deceiving. The more you rely on the methods that have brought a profit, the more atypical

your past success may at first appear. Set yourself short, objectives that are achievable at relatively little cost. And since we are always in danger of miscalculating the odds of success, don't let yourself be persuaded by highly decorated generals to stay the course when those very generals have failed to achieve the victory they promised and probably could never deliver. Think Afghanistan where the US has spent \$2 trillion only to see the Taliban steadily gaining ground.

The problem for the US was that victory in the Cold War went to its head. It set itself unrealistic targets or 'blue-sky objectives.' It developed, one might say, a 'herd immunity' to critical thinking which is why Donald Trump's National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster was critical of past administrations for displaying 'strategic narcissism'—such as insisting that every country should choose sides. 'You're either with us or against us' declared President Bush after 9/11. Fifteen years later Nikki Haley, Trump's first UN ambassador introduced herself to the Security Council with this Mafia style warning: "for those of you who don't have our backs we are taking names." For the most part, most countries wish to sit on the fence which often is the price of retaining their independence. Think of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Cold War. Unfortunately, American security policy after 1989 became truly hegemonic in scope. The War on Terror, starting from a limited campaign against Al Qaeda, became a campaign against terrorists 'with global reach', as well as an 'Axis of Evil' that was

deemed to support them; in no time at all it became a struggle against a historical force called 'Islamofascism'. The result was that the US found itself fighting the 'Forever War.' Over the years as the sense of danger grew more generalised and systematic it gave rise to an entire industry that was addressed to a non-existent global conspiracy. At one point, 120,000 companies were working on terrorism in Washington DC alone.

When Obama came to power the rhetoric changed but not the ambition. In a revealing interview that he gave *The Wall Street Journal*, Obama's former Defense Secretary Robert Gates admitted that in the case of Syria—one of the great humanitarian disasters of recent times—the administration had simply lost the plot. Its insistence that Assad must go was a case in point. "Don't commit to things that you have no idea how to make happen." He added: "it only renders you powerless in the eyes of others." The insistence that Assad must go found the US identifying with a weak rebel force which couldn't oust the government because of the divisions within its own ranks. At one point the CIA was found cooperating with Al Qaeda elements against another Islamist group that was thought to be even more extreme. It also took its eye off the main ball—the fact that Assad would only go if Russians decided he should. The CIA failed to predict Russia's final intervention, a major failure of intelligence though it was able to tell the President about Angela Merkel's pizza-topping preferences as a result of listening in to her private cell phone conversations. When this was eventually

discovered, it led to the expulsion of the CIA station chief in Berlin.

And today? The Biden administration is run, we are told, by 'progressive idealists', not realists but it wasn't the realists who delivered Libya and Afghanistan but idealists like Samantha Power. And in 'reimagining' national security as it has promised to do to include addressing such challenges as "400 years of systemic racism", the new administration is setting itself a new set of blue-sky objectives which will detract from the single-mindedness it needs to adopt in facing the twin challenges of China and Russia.

3. The first principle of strategic thinking claimed Hans Morgenthau should be a 'respectful understanding' of the other side. Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan insists that what the US wants from its relationship with China is "a steady-state of clear-eyed coexistence through competition and cooperation." But that would demand what Zachary Shore calls 'strategic empathy' - the ability to see the world and oneself through the eyes of others. It would require one side to understand the other's strategic culture. In devising a strategy, in other words, one should be inclined less to enact a quarrel with others than with oneself. Calling Xi a 'thug' and Vladimir Putin a 'murderer' as Biden did in his first hundred days in office may be good for maintaining the bipartisan consensus on Russia and China—the only consensus that apparently to be found on Capitol Hill—but it is not especially helpful

in navigating the strategic challenges that lie ahead. (N.B. According to a poll commissioned by Brightline Watch, almost one in three Americans now support the breakup of US into like-minded regions and that includes 41% of West Coast Democrats. It should be added that the idea that the US might fall apart has been a hidden thread running through its history from the Loyalist opposition to independence to the North/South divisions exposed by the war of 1812).

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To return to the main point, the fact that Putin is a murderer who uses global finance to launder and hide his money does not make him any less Russian—which is not a reason of course to deny oneself the trouble of analysing what is new about his rule. Remember the only certainty is the Kremlin's quest for domestic legitimacy.

Why is empathy (not sympathy) so important? Wars are fought twice, first on the battlefield and then later in the memory and every major power has a historical memory. Old enemies are often today's enemies and in Russia's mind its oldest enemy is the West. It remembers the Great Patriotic War (1941-5) in which 27 million Russians died which used to be depicted under communism as a struggle against fascism. Today, writes the sociologist Lev Gumilev thanks to the deteriorating relationship with the West it is often described as a victory against it, not Nazi Germany. For the regimes in power the enemy has always been ideological—Napoleon's republicanism, the Western powers who intervened in the Russian Civil War, and the liberal internationalism of the US today with its presumed interest in 'regime change'.

Geography has also determined Russian thinking as it does Britain's (Brexit). It matters a lot if you are an island like Japan or a landmass with multiple borders and if most of the invasions have come from the West beginning with the Vikings, then the Teutonic Knights and most recently American capitalism. Such thinking pervades works like Alexander Dugin's *The Foundations of Geopolitics* in which the Cold War is characterised, not as we tend to think of it— as a struggle

between communism and liberalism but a struggle between the Atlantic Sea powers led by the US and the world's then principal land power, the Soviet Union. Finally, every Russian leader will have absorbed one lesson above all others: act from a position of strength and never back down. When in 1964 the Central Committee voted to remove Khrushchev for his 'arrogance, adventurism and mistakes' his climbdown over Cuba two years earlier received special attention. Putin has no intention of suffering the same fate. Every Russian leader has had to act from a position of strength because the country has always tended to think that it is permanently at war. The Zapad military exercises every two years are intended to show the West that it can deploy hundreds of thousands of soldiers within weeks. And its actions in Crimea and Ukraine are fully consistent with an age-old strategic thinking—to keep the enemy guessing.

Here is another 'takeaway' from Clausewitz's book *On War*: "the first, the supreme, most far-reaching act of judgement for the statesman and commander is to establish the kind of war in which they are embarking." The challenge with hybrid warfare is to decide exactly what it is—is it a war (are we already at war with Russia in all but name, open to cyber-attack every other day)? Is it a political tactic by a country whose understanding of conflict is inherently different from our own? The West tends to see Putin as a master strategist but remember he is a judo player, not a chess grandmaster, and

that the essence of judo is to throw your enemy off balance. Or perhaps hybrid warfare in Ukraine may merely be opportunistic, providing Russia with a unique opportunity to exploit local conditions such as Ukraine's ethnic diversity, the weakness of its civil society and its endemic corruption? Or perhaps is it meant to intimidate us—the Zapad exercises usually end in the occupation of at least one Baltic state and a nuclear strike against a western city (more-often-than-not Warsaw). Or at the end of the day is it largely to be explained by reference to the traditional Russian wish to be noticed? Remember the old Russian proverb: "if you're not sitting at the top-table you may soon find yourself on the menu."

Back to Morgenthau. His principal insight was that an enemy does not have to be considered demonstrably bad which would rule out any hope of accommodation, nor does it have to be demonised or rendered entirely unsympathetic. It may still be possible and even desirable to do business with it while defending oneself against it at the same time. What is important is to live peacefully with it while never being fully at peace because any accommodation can never rule out the possibility of war.

4. Every strategy involves a narrative. We are still essentially a storytelling animal. We live our lives according to a narrative structure including the long periods of childhood that our species experiences. A child understands the complexity of the world by internalising it as a story. We

have been trying to understand the world by storytelling since we first sat by the campfire and told tales.

Storytelling is at the heart of strategy too, but one should remember two caveats. The first is don't make it up as you go along simply because you find the complexity of life too challenging. The Second Gulf War is a case in point. First, the neo-conservatives in Washington assured the American public that the invasion of Iraq would be a great success—that American soldiers entering Baghdad would be greeted with the enthusiasm with which the American army had been met when it entered Paris in August 1944. As the conflict in the country descended into near anarchy in 2005–6 the neo-conservatives changed the story. Particularly popular for a time was the idea of a terrorist 'Super Bowl' (the analogy was George Bush's). Jihadists across the world were encouraged to come to Iraq and battle the American military in what the administration imagined would be an 'end of day's' final confrontation. No wonder that at the height of the insurgency the well-known conservative columnist P.J. O'Rourke summed up the neo-conservative strategy: "Sure Iraq is a mess. But it is our mess. And it's a mess with the message: Don't Mess with us!" And then as the country looked likely to be plunged into civil war with the Shias and Sunnis fighting it out among themselves there was even talk of capitalising on the situation. If as Samuel Huntington predicted the world would witness a 'clash of civilisations,' wasn't it just as well to get the Islamic world to

exhaust itself in an internecine struggle? Fortunately, the neo-cons were dismissed from office and General Petraeus invited to execute a new strategy: the Surge which eventually salvaged the situation, averted a civil war and helped secure a regime in Baghdad that though anti-American, was relatively secure.

The second caveat when spinning a narrative is to make sure that it's believable. Take the case of China. Rejecting the idea that containment was either desirable or possible, both the Clinton and Bush administrations chose to embrace engagement instead. As the Quadrennial Defense Review in 2006 asserted: "we seek to encourage China to make the right strategic choices while hedging against other possibilities". Encouragement included folding China into existing international institutions and fast-tracking its membership into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) while at the same time keeping Russia out. Hedging included the famous 'pivot to Asia'—beefing up the US military presence in the Pacific and revitalising its Asian alliances. For their part, the Chinese were happy to encourage such thinking—'rising invisibly' during the War on Terror they were effectively off the radar. But the strategy was flawed from the beginning because it was based on wishful thinking—successive administrations told themselves that China would eventually discover democracy. With open borders would come open minds, and with open minds would follow an open society. It was an assumption that was not just wrong but

looks as though it might have set the stage for a second Cold War, if not something worse. The critical date may be 2024 the year that the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) believes that it will find itself in a position to invade Taiwan. The US military thinks the first realistic opportunity won't present itself until 2028. Probably we can split the difference.

5. Every strategy demands a paradigm, a way of looking at the world, what the Germans call a *Lebenswelt*, or worldview. But worldviews can change overnight—it's called a 'paradigm shift,' a term that was coined by Thomas Kuhn back in 1962 to explain how science changes when scientists find that their existing model of the world has too many anomalies that either cannot be accounted for in the traditional framework, or that contradict the framework's main assumptions. From time to time, scientists are forced to abandon old ideas for new ones. In the social sciences by contrast paradigms don't change as a result of internal contradictions so much as in response to external events. In both cases however they reshape our understanding of the world.

Together with its Western allies the US moved rapidly after the Cold War to embrace a new paradigm: risk management that was to be found at the heart of three successive NATO Strategic Concepts (1991/1999/2010). The US *Quadrennial Defense Review* (2001) described risk as 'the single most important strategic tenet' of national security thinking. Every President who had taken his country to war since Woodrow Wilson in 1917 had promised the American people a 'New World Order'—a world free from the threat of war. George H. W. Bush did precisely that when he took his country to war in 1990–1. By contrast, his son departed from the familiar script. Regime change in Iraq promised only to reduce insecurity to acceptable levels—in future the nation would have to accept a global disorder which with luck could be managed. And whereas in the Cold War the 40,000 Soviet tanks parked along the inter-German border and the 12,000 missiles pointed at the US had concentrated minds (it was an objective

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reality) the world now presents a series of risks including nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation, terrorism and even transnational organised crime which was discussed for the first time at a G8 meeting in 1998. Unfortunately, risks have continued to proliferate and it's difficult to prioritise them because different countries tend to identify different levels of risk. The exercise is inherently subjective. 'Risk mapping' is one way by which we attempt to identify the forces that put us most at risk; 'risk profiling' is another, such as identifying the members of a supposed Axis of Evil.

At present, the US is much more preoccupied with collective defence against the threats posed by Russia and China but risks of course remain—*vide* COVID-19. What the story illustrates is that it is unwise to privilege one paradigm over another, a point that is made tellingly by David Kilcullen in his new book *The Dragons and the Snakes: how the Rest learn to fight the West* (2020) The book's title is drawn from remarks by James Woolsey during his confirmation hearings for CIA Director in 1993. 'Dragons' are possible successors to the Soviet Union as major state competitors though they vanished from the radar altogether after 9/11. 'Snakes' are much less deadly but more profuse—smaller states and lethal non-state actors that threaten international security or are at least deemed to. Regrettably, a focus on snakes meant that the US paid too little attention to the dragons. And they in their

different ways learned and adapted to what they saw as the strengths of the western way of warfare.

6. Everything in war is simple but the simple is increasingly difficult. Those of you who have studied Clausewitz 101 may recognise that this is a quotation; you may also recognise that I have slipped in the word 'increasingly.' Our world compared with his is increasingly complex and the reason why it's complex is that our own actions are increasingly unpredictable.

One way to understand this is to think of the phenomenon of side-effects. Visit your local pharmacy to self-prescribe for a headache; when you open a packet of aspirin you will find a leaflet advising you to think twice before taking the drug if you happen to suffer from a whole list of allergies or complaints. Visit your GP if you think the side-effects may be worse than the condition for which you may be suffering. Side-effects are a major concern of today's world. They underpin our whole approach to global warming. Industrial growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was seen entirely in positive terms of progress and wealth creation and, for the first time in history, it offered the world the prospect of self-sustained economic growth. Only in the 1960s did we begin to recognise that these goals had side-effects—increasingly high carbon emissions as well as the pollution of the rivers and oceans and the degradation of the biosphere. The result was the emergence of a green agenda.

It is called 'consequence management' and it is now at the heart of today's strategic thinking. Interestingly, the concept of responsibility for our own actions did not play a central part in the moral systems of the past and there is an explanation for that. Responsibility is a function of power as well as knowledge, and until recently both were limited. Action was restricted to the here and now. Today, we have immense power and much greater knowledge though not necessarily greater wisdom. Today we are constantly enjoined to anticipate the negative effects of our decisions; we are urged all the time to bring the future into a calculative relation to the present. The search for security impels us to act; indeed, failure to act may exacerbate the risks we may run in the future. There is no better breeding ground for risk than denial or inactivity. But if one is too fearful and tries to secure the future using knowledge that may of necessity be incomplete, or if everything becomes a danger that must be acted upon while there's still time, then risks may proliferate, making us feel even more insecure than we were before. The trick is to do just enough. At the heart of America's strategy towards Iran is what is called 'the Risk Trap.' Doing too much and doing too little can be equally harmful. Allowing Iran to get nuclear weapons is a long-term challenge; preventing it from doing so in the short term could be equally dangerous if we try to bomb it to the negotiating table, or to delay the inevitable with economic sanctions that may not work.

7. Black Swans. Every strategy must anticipate redundancy. History may deliver the unexpected or what we have come to know, thanks to Nassim Taleb as a Black Swan event—an event that is highly improbable but immensely impactful. Being caught out by an event should always be priced in any strategy but there is a natural tendency to assume that the future is likely to be, in its main details at least, not unlike the past. We have thought this for a long time. Back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Ibn Khaldun told his readers that 'the past resembled the future' which is another way—if a more striking one—of saying the same thing. In truth we can't second-guess the future simply with reference to the past. We can find ourselves in uncharted territory. Here is an example. On the morning of 12 September 1933, Leo Szilard was crossing Southampton Row in London. He was in exile from Nazi Germany and was working in the sphere of atomic science. On that day, writes Richard Rhodes he saw the shape of things to come: the possibility of creating a nuclear chain reaction which in turn could be utilised to build an atomic bomb. If he had his epiphany 10 years earlier in 1923, the Second World War might well have been fought by both sides with nuclear weapons.

Since the end of the Cold War however, the US has locked itself into one strategic narrative after another, only to be caught out by events. Take the (in)famous 'Strategic Pause' which Bill Clinton

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What is the lesson? Don't box yourself in by presentism—the idea that what's happening now is going to be of interest to the future.

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announced in his first term as President (the prospect that nothing much would happen for some time to threaten the security of the country). Or take the NSC report a few months into the George H. W. Bush Presidency which predicted that Russia would not be back in the picture for at least 15 years because of its failure to globalise successfully. Or take the War on Terror in 2001 in which China and Russia were both considered to be 'allies of a kind'. Now the talk is of a coming confrontation with China. War between the two powers is 'not imminent, but it is no longer unthinkable' writes *The Economist*. What happened in the intervening years was the occupation of Crimea, the illegal building of a sea wall in the South China Sea and the prospect of an alliance between China and Russia (the strategic nightmare that keeps Henry Kissinger awake at night). None of these are Black Swans, and even the concept is rather misleading for nothing is new. Global pandemics and climate change have influenced the shape of war for the last 5000 years though only recently have historians begun to pay attention to them. Nevertheless, they have been hiding all the time in plain sight.

What is the lesson? Don't box yourself in by presentism—the idea that what's happening now is going to be of interest to the future. "The future is there... looking back at us," writes William Gibson in his novel *Pattern Recognition*, "trying to make sense of the fiction we will have become." If you don't recognise this then you may find yourself endlessly firefighting which is what the US and its allies have been doing for the past 20 years—the 2011 intervention in Libya being a good example. Firefighting is not a strategy, it is a tactic. As the Parliamentary report in 2010 on the UK's National Strategy maintained: "we have found little evidence of sustained strategic thinking or a clear mechanism for analysis and assessment. This leads inevitably to a culture of fire-fighting." In fire-fighting, the West has squandered its reputation for competence as well as much of its moral authority. It has also probably brought forward, a little earlier than necessary the end of its own 'moment in history.'

## Surfing the future

It is not all bad news. There are some encouraging signs from the Biden administration, in particular cutting loose from Afghanistan—at last, and seeing off Russian bullying of Ukraine a few months ago and turning the Quad into a more credible association of states. But has it learnt the lessons of the country's strategic mistakes? And what are they. I think there are three.

The first is that the US is no longer a superpower let alone the unipolar power that it thought itself to be in the 1990s. It is still the greatest of the Great Powers, but it must be more modest in its ambitions, and it needs to be less ideological and escape the gravitational pull of liberal internationalism. It could begin by adopting a policy of 'defensive liberal internationalism' (John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy* 2020) and put its own house in order, thereby setting itself up to be in better shape economically and politically to face the challenges ahead. Secondly, it needs to tell itself a different set of stories about Russia and China—in the case of the former how to deal with the sub-optimal strategic power which is still dangerous, and which could aid China in the same way that Stalin aided Hitler in 1939–41. And thirdly, it needs to rejuvenate its alliances (its unique global brand) and listen to its allies more often and not expect them to be loyal followers all the time. That

will be important if it wants to expand the Quad by bringing in Indonesia and South Korea and possibly the UK and France.

But there is a more immediate challenge. Steven Walt has criticised his country for not being ready to enter an era of post-hegemonic cooperation. Another liberal author Joseph Nye has questioned whether the US is willing to share the provision of public goods which it created after the Second World War. Both writers have raised the critical question of whether the US and its partners in the West will be collectively prepared to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century if they cannot persuade China to remain on side.

The present world order is disintegrating; quite possibly it is being rebuilt from the bottom up. But China may have other ambitions. A contest is taking place between a set of largely free-market economies on the one hand and an alternative set of capitalist state-directed economies like Russia and China on the other. Liberalism isn't obsolete, as Vladimir Putin claimed in his interview with the *Financial Times*, but it is certainly under challenge at home from populists and nationalists. But perhaps the real challenge is this: can we survive a post-hegemonic world because we haven't been asked to do so for 200 years. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was Britain's; the 20<sup>th</sup> was America's. There is no sign that China would be able or for that matter would want to replace the US as the

hegemon as opposed being in pole position—the greatest of the Great Powers in a world in which other countries will be expected to know their place and show it the respect which it has always demanded in its history. Does this matter? Perhaps the real danger is what Ian Bremmer calls a G Zero world—a world which is unable to tackle global issues like climate change because of a global governance gap.

If we are to avoid finding ourselves trapped in such a world the Great Powers will need to think strategically and privilege the long-term over the medium or the short. There is no evidence that Russia is thinking along these lines; China is suffering from its own malady: strategic autism which has been manifest most recently in its notorious ‘wolf diplomacy’. It is autistic, writes Edward Luttwak in mirror-imaging and attributing to the US what it would also do in America’s place. And the US? Nothing, alas in its strategic thinking suggests that it is up to meeting the challenge. ■



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# Facing a Strategic Endgame?: The US and the ambiguities of strategic thinking

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The disastrous strategic failures by the US in the past 30 years can be explained by its failure to understand what strategy actually is and how ambiguity lies at its heart. As a result it has stumbled from crisis to crisis. There is no reason to think that it is any better placed under Biden to address the challenges of a 'post-hegemonic' world, argues Christopher Coker.

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