

Rethinking Strategy: NATO and the Warsaw Summit

Christopher Coker

'We don't have a strategy', President Obama responded when asked about US policy towards ISIS in 2014.¹ A week later he came back with a 'game plan'. In her memoirs Hillary Clinton argued that 'great nations need an organising principle' (Clinton, 2014). She added that Obama's foreign policy slogan 'don't do stupid stuff' was not a good example of one. There seems to be some confusion in Western thinking about what a strategy actually is, and there is more than a suspicion that when it comes to strategic thinking, some countries, notably Russia and China, do it better than the West.

Initially one should begin by asking what a strategy is. It is not politics; it is not policy, and it is not diplomacy. It may exist in relation to all three but it does not replace them. It is what should give direction to policy and diplomacy. However, despite how conceptually good a strategy may be, if diplomats are not up to implementing it and the policymakers do not grasp it, then it is in trouble. This is an especially acute problem when in government different agencies and departments do not always follow the agreed line. This is even more of a problem when it comes to pluralistic alliances in which there may be no agreed consensus, and often conflicting interests and agendas.

So in crafting a response to the changing strategic environment in which the West finds itself, the principal interest must be grasping the main tenets of strategic thinking. Here are seven that NATO would do well to consider if it ever decides to come up with a new strategic concept, one to replace its last in 2010.

Tenet 1: Every political strategy should be adaptable

In his Reith Lectures *War and Our World*, John Keegan wrote: 'War is a protean activity ...like disease it exhibits the capac-

ity to mutate and it mutates fastest in the face of efforts to control or eliminate it' (Keegan, 1998). Every strategy must be based on adaptability because of the tendency of war to evolve. The two examples that confront the Alliance at the moment are hybrid warfare by Russia and the use of social media by ISIS.

With containment NATO developed a sophisticated and compelling strategy for dealing with the USSR. It was easy, you might say, because nuclear weapons 'froze' the conflict between West and East. Deterrence was never going to be put to the test. We should remind ourselves that NATO in the Cold War years always had to consider the prospect of hybrid warfare. The concept is not new. The 1957 Strategic Concept which introduced the doctrine of massive retaliation warned of 'hostile local actions' that might catch the Alliance off-guard and paralyse its decision-making. When NATO adopted the forward defence strategy in the early 1960s, special attention was paid to one city, Kassel (located on the Fulda River in Northern Hesse) for fear the Russians might seize it and then bargain it away for the Western zone in Berlin. Indeed, NATO put together the Allied Mobile Force partly to respond to any attempts to seize territory in Denmark or Norway after a prolonged period of subversion and political propaganda that might have undermined the political cohesion of the Alliance.

So adaptability has to be built in. As General Eisenhower, NATO's first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) famously remarked, 'strategy is useless, but strategic planning is indispensable'. Good strategic planning allows one to build resilience into strategic concepts. Of course, resilience means different things to different people. For engineers it is the degree to which a structure can return to its baseline state after being tested, such as a bridge in a storm. For psychologists it is about the ability to deal with trauma. For businessmen it is putting in place back-ups of data and research to

¹ 'Obama on ISIS in Syria: "We don't have a strategy yet"', *CNN*, 4 September 2014: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/28/world/meast/isis-iraq-syria/>

ensure continuous operation. But here is one excellent definition: 'It's the capacity of any enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances' (Zolli & Healey, 2012). The core purpose of NATO remains deterrence (in the case of Russia) and containment (in the case of ISIS).

Tenet 2: Strategy is about power

'Strategy ... is the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation ... it's the art of creating power' (Freedman, 2013). Power – and power alone – allows one to deter an enemy and to engage with it at the same time. This was the supreme insight of the Harmel Commission in 1967 which provided the underlying consensus that kept the Alliance on the road for the next 30 years. Deterrence and détente: both were based on power - the power to harm and reward. We have tended to lose sight of this recently because of two critical misunderstandings.

We have tended to over-estimate our power by setting ourselves what Richard Rumelt calls 'blue-sky objectives' (Rumelt, 2011). According to the Economist, Rumelt is one of the world's leading strategic thinkers. He is also a business strategist who was consulted in 2006 to help draft the Quadrennial Defense Review. Rumelt is scathing of the tendency of the United States to define strategic ambitions (for example, the export of democracy) when there is no understanding of how it is to be achieved, and at what cost. In an interview he gave with The Wall Street Journal in January, the former Defense Secretary Robert Gates cited another blue-sky objective: The West's insistence that Assad must go. About the objective Gates added 'I don't think presidents should commit to things that they have no idea how to make happen'.²

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Secondly, we have tended to under-estimate our power. We have tended to lose sight of the traditional currency of military power with the wholesale slashing of defence budgets in the last 10 years, whilst Russia has increased its budget by 230%. To be sure, there is nothing wrong in identifying soft power in the game of international relations, but soft power is precisely that. Last year's Soft Power Index named ten top countries in the world – all but one (Japan) – were Western.³ That is a power relationship: it is not an alternative to power. And of course the problem of disposing of so much soft power is that the West has highlighted its absence in the non-Western world. The upshot is obvious.

Tenet 3: In crafting any strategy, we must understand the other side's strategy

'The first, the supreme, most far-reaching act of judgement that the Statesman and Commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking ... This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive' (Clausewitz in Howard & Paret, 1976).

² 'The U.S. has no global strategy', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 January 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-has-no-global-strategy-1454108567>

³ 'Power: Softly Does It', *The Economist* Print Edition, July 2015: <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21657655-oxbridge-one-direction-and-premier-league-bolster-britains-power-persuade-softly-does-it>

In crafting any strategy, we must understand the other side's. The problem in dealing with a concept such as hybrid war is to decide exactly what it is intended to achieve. Is it war? Are we actually at war with Russia? Is it largely a political tactic? Is the methodology a way of understanding conflict that is quintessentially Russian and/or Soviet? Putin's mentality is often considered to be post-Soviet. Or is it merely the traditional Russian wish to be noticed? Remember the Russian proverb: 'If you're not sitting at the top table, you may find yourself on the menu'. Depending on what you think hybrid warfare is trying to achieve, you should craft a strategy accordingly.

Why is hybrid warfare attractive to Russia? 'It's more evolutionary than revolutionary ... it reflects more continuity than change' (Adamsky, 2015). This is one interpretation. It exploits local conditions: the ethnic heterogeneity of the Near Abroad (the Russian minorities in the Baltic States); the weakness of civil society in the region, and latent historical grievances. None of these of themselves mean conflict is inevitable, but they offer opportunities for Russia to increase its influence. If Russian moves are indeed opportunistic, intimidatory or intended to produce 'frozen conflicts', then the primary strategic purpose of NATO must be to prevent those opportunities from arising in the first place. By contrast, the use of hybrid warfare by ISIS can be considered revolutionary, and intended to subvert the entire state-system in the Middle East. The best way in the case of Russia is to not allow oneself to be intimidated by building up counter-veiling strengths, both nuclear and conventional. The best way of dealing with ISIS may be putting boots on the ground.

Tenet 4: Strategy involves a narrative

Every strategy involves storytelling and it is only as compelling as the story is believable. During the Cold War we told ourselves that the internal contradictions of the Soviet system would lead eventually to its collapse. The Soviets, for their part, told themselves much the same story about us: the internal contradictions of capitalism would prove our ultimate undoing. In short, there was no reason to precipitate a war. But what story do we tell ourselves about ISIS? We probably face a protracted period of turbulence in the Middle East. We do not know what the internal contradictions of Middle East politics actually are. We do not know who is on the right side of history in the Middle East: Iran or Saudi Arabia; Islamism or non-religious politics, authoritarian rule or democracy? As a result, it is very difficult to craft a convincing story. And in the absence of such a story we lack self-belief: the self-belief to commit ourselves to using force if and when appropriate.

Tenet 5: Every strategy involves a paradigm

A paradigm is a way of looking at the world. Sometimes a paradigm shift can be dramatic.

The three Strategic Concepts that NATO adapted after the end of Cold War, respectively in 1991, 1999, and 2010, were all about collective security. And what characterised them all was a new security concept: risk management.

Every president, for example, who took his country to war since Woodrow Wilson in 1917, promised a New World Order. George W. Bush did not: After 9/11 he told the American people that they were likely to live for the foreseeable future in a 'global disorder' that bred terrorism and gave it a global reach. Bush's job was to manage it: to produce not security, but an acceptable level of insecurity. Or as the 2016 German Marshall Fund report describes it: 'durable chaos' (Baranowski & Lété, 2016).

Secondly, in the Cold War we defended ourselves against threats that were predictable and measurable. We were able to measure the capabilities of the enemy with a fair degree of accuracy, and to ascertain its intentions with a fair degree of confidence. After 1991 we had to secure ourselves against risks that were by their nature unpredictable and unmeasurable.

Thirdly, in the Cold War we deterred states from attacking us, or in the case of North Korea and North Vietnam, we engaged them in battle. After 1991 we had to deal with non-state actors and social/economic factors from migration to global pandemics such as SARS.

In the case of terrorism, which came to the top of the list, we came up with metrics: were we tackling its root causes; were we winning hearts and minds; were we encouraging terrorists to defect; were we dissuading states in supporting terrorist movements; were we dissuading people from joining terrorist groups; were we cutting off funds and preventing money laundering; and how many terrorists were we actually killing? Significantly, the body counts or 'capture or kill kinetics' were not considered the most important metric, even by hard-core neo-conservatives like Donald Rumsfeld.

The risk management model worked up to a point. The problem was that NATO kept piling on the risks from cyber-terrorism to piracy, which appeared for the first time in the 2010 Strategic Concept. The failure to prioritise was inevitable by virtue of the exercise itself. Risks are inherently subjective. If you are Italy, you will be most concerned about migration; if you are the UK you may consider the Global War on Terror to be the main priority. If you are Norway, you are most likely to be concerned about Russian activities and objectives in the High North.

Since 2004 we have gone back to collective defence against both Russia and ISIS. In fact, the Alliance now seems to be applying two different paradigms at the same time: Threat management against clear or present danger; and risk management in the case of migration, referring to the 1,000,000 migrants who entered Europe in 2015.

Interestingly, the rest of the world is still in the risk management business. Take this year's Davos World Economic Forum Global Risks Report. The strategy is simple but radical at the same time. It is networked and focused on impact. What is the most immediate problem? Migration. What produces it? Political instability, especially in Syria where 450,000 people have died. What produced instability in Syria? A four-year drought. In other words, the Syrian Revolution is at least in part the outcome of climate change. The idea is to target the problem

that has the greatest impact: environmental damage. This has a seductive simplicity. Sure, we face a variety of environmental threats, including carbon emissions, floods, droughts, sea-level rises and collapsing ice sheets. But they are all symptoms of one problem: burning fossil fuels. And they all have an impact because they are globally *networked*.

Could NATO come up with something so deceptively simple? It has tried to network risk management with Partnership for Peace countries, but it has not taken the exercise as far as it might. Or is the Davos strategy politically impractical for an Alliance such as NATO?

Tenet Six: Strategy is simple

'Everything in war is simple, but the simple is increasingly difficult'.

Those familiar with Clausewitz' writings will recognise that I have slipped in the word 'increasingly' into the quote. Complexity has become the prism through which we interrogate ourselves and the complexity of the world creates one outstanding problem: we may be the greatest risk to ourselves. 'Uncertainty is not merely an existing environmental condition; it's a natural by-product of war'(United States Marine Corps, 1996). The term of art is consequence management. This is at the core of the US Marine Corps Doctrine. Once you commit forces, everything changes. Because others will react to it no strategy, when implemented, is without consequences.

After all, the Russians like to claim that we invented hybrid warfare. They cite our attempt to 'destabilise' the neighbourhood through the Orange Revolution and Maidan Protests in Ukraine. They cite our propaganda attempts via social media and the internet to subvert the Russian state and attempt regime change. This was certainly not an intention or policy, but if it had been, we would be reaping what we have sown.

Sometimes we can indeed be our own worst enemy. In crafting any strategy, we therefore face what sociologists call the 'risk trap'. A good example is the West's strategy towards Iran. Doing too much (bombing nuclear installations); or doing too little (no sanctions) would both have been harmful. Allowing Iran to get the bomb or preventing it by military force could both have been dangerous: the former in the long term, the latter in the short. Our intention was always to steer a middle course. Obama's policy in Iran may be considered by historians to be the greatest success story of the administration, or it may not. Only historians will be in a position to tell us. It could be argued, nonetheless, that the penalties on Iran worked, especially the threats to Russia that were made behind the scenes for breaking the sanctions regime. The deal with Iran is not optimal, but it is probably the best that we could have got in the circumstances.

Tenet 7: Always plan for surprise

The final strategic tenet is this: always prepare for 'black swans'. The man who introduced us to the idea, Nasim Taleb, reminds us that black swan events are large, improbable and highly consequential. An example is the rise of the internet or the outbreak of the First World War. And by definition they are

unpredictable. In today's world they are also increasing all the time. The solution, he tells us is to make our institutions and policies not merely less vulnerable to the unexpected, but actively 'anti-fragile' – poised to benefit or take advantage from stress or change. It is not clear how this can be done, and Taleb does not exactly spell out how best to proceed. But one lesson from recent history is obvious: do not box yourself in by trying to eliminate surprise.

An example is Tony Blair. Just before coming to office he declared: 'Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war' (Blair, 1997). In the end, he fought five, making *Blair's Wars* the title of a book (Kampfner, 2003). Two years later – 22 days into the Kosovo War – he argued that the dark side of globalisation had thrown up new strategic challenges that required military intervention. It was the popular theme of the time. Wes Clark, NATO's SACEUR, talked of the Alliance being a 'facilitator of globalisation'; the EU's first and so far only comprehensive strategy referred to the EU as being a 'facilitator of global civil society'. Then came 9/11 and the Global War on Terror. On leaving office in 2007, Blair went so far as to say that the only purpose of the Royal Navy was to maintain a permanent British military presence in north-west Asia.

What this illustrates is how a sophisticated, intelligent and very successful politician kept getting it wrong because he ruled out surprise. ISIS may have peaked. The oil price may yet force Russia out of Eastern Ukraine. Something else may appear on the radar quite soon. Keep always in the forefront of one's mind this final lesson. Judgements are unavoidable and choices have to be made. We have to plan on the basis of trend analysis, but we have no way of knowing the end of a trend line, or its trajectory, or whether we should be looking at counter-trends. The lesson to be learned is to be found in a book *Super Forecasting* by one of

America's top prediction experts, Philip Tetlock. 'Knowing what we don't know is better than thinking we know what we don't' (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).

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About the Author

Christopher Coker is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and a Visiting Professor at the Swedish Defence College. His areas of expertise include security, war, US and British foreign policy, and contemporary ideas and ideologies. He is a former NATO Fellow and has served two terms at the Council of the Royal United Services Institute. In 1996 he helped to draw up the British Conservative Party's defence platform in the European Parliamentary Elections. In addition to being a serving member of the Washington Strategy Seminar and the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis he is also a regular

NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | info@nupi.no

lecturer at the NATO Defence College (Rome), the Royal College of Defence Studies (London); the Centre for International Security (Geneva) and the National Institute for Defence Studies (Tokyo). His most recent books include *Future War* (Polity, 2015), *Can War Be Eliminated?* (Polity, 2014) and *Warrior Geeks: how 21st Century technology is changing the way we fight and think about war* (Hurst, 2013).