

Defence Planning, Surprise, and Prediction

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Introduction

1. I wish to thank my greatly respected friend, General Jim Mattis for the invitation to speak to you. It is an honour and a privilege, indeed.
2. The 'Multiple Futures' project is hugely ambitious. It is beyond merely challenging and difficult, in a key respect it is mission impossible. Specifically, the Project peered into an evidence-free, not evidence-light, country – the future. The future has yet to happen. Of course we know this, but sometimes we forget it.
3. Mission impossible or not, we are obliged to attempt to 'anticipate' the future, since we need to do defence planning, and every decision we take, or fail to take, today, must have some legacy value for that unknown future. It is simply a fact that we cannot know, really know, what legacy our successors in 2019 and 2029, and so forth, will wish they had from our choices today.
4. Overall, I believe the 'Findings and Recommendations' of the 'Multiple Futures' project, perhaps adventure, to be outstanding – especially is this so, given that its mission is impossible.
5. I know that the project aimed only at 'strategic anticipation', rather than prediction, but I suggest that is an unintended euphemism. To anticipate is to predict. The study is careful to specify four 'futures' for 2030, and wisely does not commit to any of them. It is a better than reasonable bet that 2030 will reveal itself in that year to be a future number 5, rejected as uninteresting by analysts today.

6. I am not at all critical of the 'Multiple Futures' exercise, per se, because NATO does need to try to anticipate the future, even though it cannot know that future. We have to do the best we can.
7. So, what I am going to offer are constructive and friendly comments, though I admit some of them may seem to be unsympathetic. Trust me, they are not intended as such.
8. My plan of attack is clear and simple, though possibly overambitious. I shall offer a series of comments on the project's 'Findings and Recommendations', all of which have some bearing upon 'defence planning, surprise, and prediction'. They range across the theoretical and the historical, the general and the particular.
9. Because I am not a responsible official, but am only an opinionated academic, I can be rather more blunt, less diplomatic, than most of you are obliged to be.

Commentary

1. As a professor with a doctorate I am a card-carrying intellectual, an ascription that is not usually employed in Britain with approval, but I need to warn you of the dangers in over-intellectualising strategic matters. Learned disputes among gifted defence experts can lead theorists to be too clever. It is possible to lose the essentials of the plot in politics and strategy by excessive analysis. My late lamented boss and friend, Herman Kahn, was too clever with his extravagantly developed 'escalation ladder' in 1965. Similarly, just possibly, the currently fashionable concept of 'hybrid' warfare may well express a degree of sophistication too far.

2. As a general warning, be very careful of the concept of the day, the newly fashionable big idea, because: (a) there really are no new ideas in strategy; (b) prophets are apt to fall in love with their message, and unintentionally take their self-critical faculty off the field of play; and (c) the popularity of a notion is no guarantee of authentic merit.
3. I think that 'hybrid' warfare is a fairly sound idea, and it always was, even before we called 'it' that. The problem is one of verification, potentially of confusing an abstract concept (hybrid warfare) with a material reality. This can be a case of what philosophy knows as the nominalist fallacy; the mistake of confusing a name with an actuality. I can imagine some clever defence analysts, and defence-minded doctoral students, setting forth to hunt and capture hybrid wars and warfare.
4. The problem is that the reasonable argument behind the recent discovery, epiphany perhaps, of hybridity, may obscure the even better argument for recognising the oneness of war and warfare. We should be very careful about the adjectives with which we decorate the phenomena of war and its warfare. At another time and in another place I will have much more to say about the 'hybrid' adjective, not all of unfriendly let me hasten to add.
5. Uncertainty is inevitable when we contemplate the future, but it is not a policy and neither is it a strategy. I should add, with an eye on the White House, that hope, also, is neither a policy nor a strategy.
6. Our mission cannot simply be a search for strategic truth, because we need our truth to be a useful truth. The truth about the future is that it is deeply uncertain, it cannot be predicted or even anticipated with any confidence, let alone reliably. It is not foreseeable, so do not refer to 'the foreseeable future'.

But, alas, in NATO we have to do our best to provide for, and against, this future that lacks definite shape. Somehow, we have to find a functional truth that is good enough to guide defence planning.

7. No matter how many times, mantra-like, we say that the future is unknown and therefore uncertain, in practice we are obliged to conduct our defence planning with the claimed authority that we have good reason for the choices that we make. The reality is that defence planning rests upon guesswork. We may talk about calculated risks, even educated guesses, but defence planning must be moved by judgment that is educated by historical sense and by intuition. It is guesswork. It can be nothing else. It is not random guesswork, but it cannot draw upon the authority of any reliable calculation.
8. What about trend spotting and analysis? The identification of trends is not difficult. The challenge is to know what they mean for the future. Tomorrow must be constructed by the consequences of the trends of today, with additional calories from some new trends, and probably with the intervention of a major systemic shock or two. If this sounds plausible, what it means is that the 2010s and 2020s will be the consequence of the interacting and dynamic trends of today, plus anything else that truly shakes the play board. An asteroid strike; a financial meltdown; a political revolution (e.g. demise of the Soviet Union).
9. So, what broad principles might we adopt to help shape our defence choices? My master guiding principles are the following:
 - (a) Try to get the big things right enough.
 - (b) Acknowledge that you will make many mistakes, but strive to restrict the inevitable errors to relatively minor matters.

(c) Recognise that you and your successors will be surprised many times in the future, so that your challenge is to plan with consequences that are surprise-tolerant. You will be surprised, but you need not be disabled by the effects of surprise.

(d) Plan flexibly, adaptively, and inclusively. This is what is meant by prudent defence planning.

10. Fortunately, it is not our duty to 'get it right' in anticipating the problems for our security in the future. Rather is the challenge only to get it right enough on the matters that are of most significance. Perfection is not required.
11. Contrary to the way we often appear to talk, defence planning is not a game of solitaire and it is not a struggle to prepare against disinterested nature. It is not akin to mountain climbing. For NATO planners K-2 (non) equivalents counter-plan and fight back. Strategy is ironic and paradoxical, it is a duel.
12. I realise that this point refers to a difficulty that is above the pay grade of this gathering, but I have to say that the greatest challenge to the strategist and defence planner is folly in high political places. Excellence in strategy, in the defence planning that expresses strategy, a superior command performance, and troops willing and able to fight well – will all be for nothing, or much worse, if policy is foolish.
13. I am a professional strategist, but I acknowledge that if the political narrative your policy identifies as its purpose is ill judged, competence in strategy probably will elude you because you will be attempting what you ought not to be attempting. This has been, and continues to be, our fundamental problem in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Just as the tactician cannot usually save the bad strategist, so the strategist cannot rescue the bad policymaker.

14. I have noticed of recent months some useful employment of the potent metaphor of the compass, as in the 'strategic compass' and the 'moral compass'. Very recently indeed, a distinguished British defence expert claimed all too plausibly that those directing the British armed forces seems to lack a strategic compass. I suggest to you that important though it is to have a moral and a strategic compass, it is even more necessary to have a political compass for the prudent guidance of strategy.
15. NATO's basic challenge in strategy today is not so much that it lacks a convincing strategic compass, though that claim is certainly plausible. Instead, the challenge to the Alliance is the obvious absence of a political compass 'fit for purpose'.
16. I have recently completed a lengthy very detailed study of U.S. and then NATO policy and strategy from 1945 to 1953 (sponsored by General Jim Mattis). In 1949-50, the new NATO was founded and proceeded to follow a North Star that was the purpose of containing the Soviet empire. NATO's strategy was highly debateable, and its military means were substantially inadequate, but it knew what it was about politically. And that was enough for the Alliance to mature in the light of events.
17. Today, it is hard to settle upon a central organising strategic concept for the Alliance that has useful meaning, because NATO lacks a functioning political compass upon which there is genuine multinational consensus. It is a maxim that you cannot have a sound strategy when policy is absent. If the political ends are vague or unspecified, how can you choose methods and means that are fit for purpose. There is no clear purpose. For example, this is the problem for NATO in Afghanistan today.

Conclusion

1. For well evidenced judgment there is no satisfactory substitute for historical perspective. Historians have a rearview mirror that delivers the benefits of hindsight. Unfortunately, defence planners today cannot buy a mirror on the future. They can, however, try to educate themselves by the study of history. What they will discover is that most efforts to anticipate the future have been seriously in error. There has usually been somebody who got it right enough at the time, but at the time people had no way of knowing who that person was.
2. Minerva's owl only flies at dusk.
3. I will close with a comment on concepts and a sweeping specific judgment on great power threats. On concepts, or theory, I was surprised and disappointed to locate a major error in the 'Findings and Recommendations' of the Multiple Futures project. They appear to confuse instrument with purpose. I quote with reference to 'hybrid threats': 'The compression of the strategic level to the tactical level of war will be even more pronounced under these conditions'. This looks like a fundamental conceptual error. Strategy and Tactics are different in kind and cannot be compressed as in conflated. To claim that they can be is akin to suggesting that a dog somehow can become a cat. Tactics, tactical, is military behaviour. Strategy, strategic, is about the direction and consequences of that behaviour. This is why it is a nonsense to talk about so-called 'strategic corporals'.
4. My close-out judgment on threats – hybrid, compound, and simple – pertains to Russia and China. For NATO these great states are by no means total

rivals, or adversaries, let alone malignly active enemies. But, each in its unique way, for familiar reasons, I predict, or should I say anticipate, will contribute more to the problems column than to the solutions file, for NATO in the future. I believe this anticipation on my part to be entirely reliable, resting as it does upon my deep respect for Thucydides, the Athenian general and historian who identified 'fear, honour, and interest' as the principle eternal and universal motives behind political behaviour.