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Wars in the Next Decade

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Forecasting in areas of strategy is particularly delicate as predictions may impact the course of events. While several major trends in the evolution of conflicts during the next decade can be identified, precise forecasts are impossible. Yet one thing is certain: in the next 10 years, decision-makers face unknown risks of significant consequence.

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It is standard practice for those working on issues of national and international security, from political and military leaders, to diplomats and bureaucrats, to academics and think-tankers, to found their work on forecasts of potentially dangerous developments. The record of success in this endeavor, however, ranges from the disappointing to the lamentable. Policy-makers are still regularly taken by surprise – by Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the sudden collapse of the former Yugoslavia into a series of violent conflicts, the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, and the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Here are some recent examples of surprising developments. They should be salutary to anyone who thought that wise and experienced commentators should be able to forecast how events might unfold. Expectations have been regularly confounded.

– Even as the EuroMaidan protests were intensifying in Ukraine in early 2014, some saw that the Russophile President Yanukovych might end up out of office but most assumed that any response by President Vladimir Putin would be in the realm of energy prices or supplies. Few predicted that Crimea would be annexed. Once this had happened, and with Russian-backed separatists carving out enclaves in Eastern Ukraine, opinion moved in the other direction. Fears were now expressed that Putin was in an aggressive mood, and that other neighbors better watch out. Yet, at least to now, the aggression was

confined to Crimea and the initial enclaves. Late in 2018 Russia was opening a new form of coercion by trying to close off the Sea of Azov to Ukrainian shipping. This once again led to speculation about an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine without explanations of why Russia would wish to do this.

– Until the votes were being counted in November 2016 few expected Donald Trump to become the 45th President of the United States (including Mr Trump). Many of the foreign policy positions he took as President – including his distaste for free trade and alliances, and his sympathy for authoritarian leaders – followed on from positions he had adopted as candidate. An area of great concern was whether the stage was being set for a confrontation with North Korea. The North was already close to a long-range nuclear-tipped missile capable of hitting the United States and its testing led to tensions rising. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un exchanged insults in 2017. Many then hoped for some diplomatic initiative to calm the tension but no one predicted that the two men would end up exchanging warm letters of mutual admiration in 2018. As part of this Trump predicted that North Korea would "denuclearize", although Kim had made no promises and little has happened to justify the optimism.

– Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was watched anxiously as he combined reckless behavior abroad, fighting a cruel war in Yemen while trying to isolate Qatar, even while attempting to reform Saudi society at home. But it took an unusual degree of recklessness to allow the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who worked for the *Washington Post*, to be crudely murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The reaction exposed the fragile support the Saudi Royal Family enjoyed even amongst it closer allies.

– Many were taken by surprise by Britain's vote in June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU). This is taken as the classic example of how pundits can misunderstand the political currents at work in their own country, although actually polling showed that it was always a possible outcome. The implementation of the decision was then affected by a series of strategic misjudgments made by Prime Minister Theresa May that weakened both her position in the Conservative Party and bargaining leverage with the rest of the EU, so that she eventually ended up with a Withdrawal Agreement for which she could not get parliamentary support, leading to the country being faced with a prospective choice between the two extremes of crashing out of the EU with no withdrawal agreement at all or a second referendum.

The point about all these developments is not that the underlying issues were misunderstood or that the possibilities of conflicts were missed altogether, but that the particular turn that they took depended on both chance events as well as decisions that might have gone differently. Specialists warned that North Korea had no intention of abandoning the nuclear capabilities that had already given a boost to its international standing and so it proved. The authoritarian nature of the Saudi regime was well known but had been played down because of its importance to oil prices and the arms trade. During the referendum debate many explained why the negotiations were likely to be difficult for the UK, why the EU would be bound to stick to the core principles underlying the single market, and why despite incessant claims to the contrary the UK's bargaining leverage was weak.

These examples indicate that the problem is often less one of forecasting than what is done with the forecasts, less a lack of advance warning or a failure by specialists to grasp the underlying issues but that policy-makers saw no reason to take warnings or analysis seriously. An example of this came in July 1990 when analysts warned that the Iraqi military buildup close to the Kuwaiti border was consistent with an actual invasion and was more than a bluff. President George H.W. Bush, however, preferred to believe assurances from other Arab leaders that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was bluffing and so did little to warn him of the potential consequences of occupying Kuwait. It may be that Saddam had not yet decided what to do – but once the Kuwaitis decided that he was bluffing, and so made no concessions in the face of his demands, he decided he had to act. Just after this his administration received largely accurate intelligence assessments of the risk of Yugoslavia breaking up. They did not doubt the assessments but judged that the US had no particular interest in acting to stop this from occurring. After a decade of bloodshed, policy-makers in the US and the EU were more sensitive to the dangers. By the late 1990s they could see the risk in Kosovo. Still their actions were insufficient to prevent violence. Montenegro was next in line. In this case timely action did deal with a developing crisis. There have therefore been instances when warnings were acted upon and conflicts averted.

The question of forward looks therefore goes beyond the established problems with prediction, whether simple-minded extrapolation of established trends or failures of imagination. There will always be a need to provide "health warnings" when it comes to prognostications about the coming decade. The challenge is to understand the interaction between forward looks and policy debates. As forward looks are often undertaken largely to influence the policy debates they tend to be geared towards certain types of problems and even the promotion of certain sorts of solutions. In this article I first discuss the problems of forecasting and making security policy.

Political forecasting: uncertainties and consequences

Meteorologists now have powerful computer models to capture the many variables that affect the atmosphere. If the readings fed into the model are reasonably accurate they can provide reliable guidance about weather patterns for a week ahead, and indications for the succeeding weeks. But even for meteorologists after a while the guidance becomes less helpful. They can identify long-term trends, an activity that has become both more essential and controversial because of climate change. In some areas, for example rising water levels, they can point to risks to be addressed. But their forward looks may come down to nothing more specific than warnings about the likelihood of more extreme weather events – from unbearably high temperatures to hurricanes. This sort of advice adds to the urgency of contingency planning but is also frustrating because of the lack of details about where and when these events will hit populated areas. Firm information may only arrive days rather than months before the event. All that can be said is that governments in areas that have been afflicted with such events in the past should step up their preparations for those that might occur in the future.

In practice the position of political forecasters is not that much different. In the short term it is possible to focus on a few possibilities. Over the longer term the big interest tends to be in extreme events because they will be the most disruptive and dangerous. Less attention will be paid to calm, stable and normally functioning countries. Those countries and regions that have been conflict-prone in the past are most likely to be conflict-prone in the future. The question of surprise is not whether there is any warning at all but whether the warning is timely enough to take either preventative or mitigating action. With the weather the problem lies in the chaotic nature of the atmosphere; with international affairs the problem lies in the chaotic interaction of numerous individual decisions.

There was a time when people believed that through prayer and rituals they could influence the weather. Political forecasts are sought not to prepare for the inevitable but to influence what might yet be changed. Because the exercise is about preparing for trouble these forward looks tend to pass by things that are good and positive. They encourage a preoccupation with the dark side of human affairs, for if the signs of possible danger are missed the consequences may be severe. Nonetheless there is also an optimistic aspect to the exercise in the presumption that if the signs are identified well enough in advance precautionary action can be taken. Every forecast therefore carries a policy implication. This is why the process can often appear upside down, with those promoting a particular

remedy – say a new weapons system – seeking to identify dangers that will justify the investment. A scenario with expensive implications will be challenged more rigorously than one that either is beyond remedy or else can be dealt with easily with existing capabilities. Those who fear that reluctance to commit the necessary resources is leaving the country unprotected will fear complacency and warn about potential dangers with even greater stridency.

For a possible event to represent a threat it must impinge on a known vulnerability. Bad and sad events happen all the time but are barely noticed or acted upon because their effects are contained. Because security policies must be about prioritizing effort and resources the risk register must not only identify events that may take place but also evaluate them according to the likelihood of them actually occurring and the consequences if they do. A variety of possible events might be considered – coups, civil wars, humanitarian disasters, and refugee flows – in different parts of the world. How much concern will be shown will depend on the extent to which they might affect national interests. This is why the many conflicts afflicting Sub-Saharan Africa, though they have been going on for years, are largely ignored. Their effects are dire but largely restricted to the region. In these cases the surprise may not lie in the events but the fact that demands are placed on policy-makers that they did not anticipate, for example if citizens are affected by piracy, being trapped in a war zone, or kidnapping. By contrast, upheavals in the Middle East gain attention not only because Western forces have been directly involved but also because their effects, including desperate migration to Europe, are not so easily contained. Developments in the South China Sea are clearly of considerable importance to the United States and its regional allies and partners but Europeans take less interest, perhaps because they feel that there is little that they can do about them.

Every forecast carries a policy implication

The policy process should therefore seek out developments with consequences, identifying contingencies against which governments might plan. The more specific the scenarios the better for planning purposes, although more specificity requires moving away from forecasting. A scenario for planning purposes will describe a set of events that could occur but in such a way as to test the state of military preparedness or improve crisis management capacities. They need to be grounded in some reality, ruling out conflicts that would seem preposterous, such as war between two close allies. They are therefore inevitably drawn to familiar possibilities but must give them features that will help explore preparedness. So they might take current tensions between or within

states to extremes or add twists that complicate the responses (such as a coincidence of two big crises in different parts of the world occurring at the same time).

The methodology does not depend on predictions of bad things happening but of possibilities. If the possibility is high enough, and the consequences sufficiently severe, then the next question is what might be done either to prevent this bad thing coming about or to mitigate its effects. If the bad things then do not happen then some satisfaction can be drawn from the fact that timely action was taken. This creates a familiar paradox. Those dangers properly identified may not materialize precisely because they have been identified and provisions have been made to address them. This after all is the basis of any strategy of deterrence. It is also of course often extremely difficult to prove that deterrence has worked unless one party visibly backs away from a course of action because of warnings from another. Otherwise, action might not be taken because there was never any intention of taking it or, even if there was, it has been called off for reasons unrelated to the deterrent threats.

On this basis the real problems are likely to result from dangers that have not been identified in forward looks. It is indeed difficult for intelligence communities and policy-makers to imagine a massive discontinuity in which an active conflict develops where it had previously been absent or at least barely latent. For example, projections of coming conflicts prior to 2011 did not include either Libya or Syria. There are, however, other dangers that are recognized but assigned low probabilities, or their full implications are not appreciated, or are addressed by measures that prove to be misguided or ineffectual, or cannot be dealt with other than by hoping that they will go away, or not turn out to be too bad if they do materialize. There are classes of problems that might be identified but are the equivalent of some extreme weather events. Little can be done about them in advance because their sources are complex and not easily influenced by external actors.

The main problem is not that it is impossible to anticipate how events might unfold, on the basis of informed analysis, but that the unfolding depends on choices to be made by political leaders – our own as well as potential adversaries and putative allies. Some political scientists have developed methodologies for trying to predict these choices. They may suggest "on balance" how they might work out. But this is of limited value because there are always unique elements shaping any decision. Even if it might seem obvious what a rational decision maker would do, the circumstances may not favor rationality. Senior policy-makers may be facing great

stress and uncertainty, trying to address a number of quite separate issues at the same time and accommodate a range of often contradictory pressures. As a result they may be paralyzed with indecision. Alternatively they may act boldly to pre-empt some grave danger or else to seize a valuable opportunity. They might make a reasoned decision on how best to act only for the action to be undermined by incompetent implementation. Moreover many decisions that turn out to have a significant impact will not be taken by those in leadership positions but those lower down the hierarchy who find that they must act before there is time for proper consultation, or perhaps do not realize the implications of what they think is a minor decision. Then there are those shadowy figures who have decided on a terrorist campaign or even the numerous individuals who have been persuaded to join a demonstration or a strike who can suddenly burst into media headlines, as with the *mouvement des Gilets jaunes* in France.

The future of warfare

Although the tendency is to look for the most extreme events, because these are the ones that will most test preparedness and risk the greatest costs, most disturbing and disruptive events will be well short of major war. Wars do not happen that often, especially among great powers. The phenomenon of the Long Peace has attracted considerable scholarly attention since John Gaddis first coined the term in 1985. His point was that the widely feared World War III had been avoided. Another 30 or so years have passed since then and we have still thankfully avoided another major war between major powers. To describe this as a peaceful period is obviously quite wrong – millions have died in terrible conflicts. Nor – equally obviously – is it the case that major powers have avoided war altogether. But they have avoided wars between themselves and have sought to contain the effects of those that they have fought.

For major powers wars have become unprofitable. The prospective losses exceed the prospective gains. It is arguable that this has long been the case but what is different now is that this judgement is generally accepted. It is less true for those with little to lose, which is why most violent conflicts take place in the poorer parts of the world. For those who do have much to lose, however, war looks to be an expensive proposition for uncertain gains. If they do feel obliged to use armed force they will seek to limit their liabilities. There is now little scope for wars of conquest. There are three reasons for this. First they are clearly against international law. The UN Charter puts aggression as the highest sin: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state". There are parts

of the world where sovereignty is still contested, for example Kashmir, or where there are old claims that might be revived at some point. But these are largely bits and pieces of territory on either side of borders. Most territory is now spoken for. Second, active colonialism has come and gone. Until into the last century European countries assumed that they had a right to colonize distant territories by virtue of their higher levels of civilization as well as superior power. When they were after new territory to colonize they created a risk of conflict with like-minded rivals. In the early 20th century that was described as one of the most like causes of a great power war. After the Second World War it was evident that colonial era was coming to an end and the issue was how territories would become self-governing. The process of decolonization is now largely complete.

Third, and a lesson from the colonial period, occupying territory against the wishes of the local population is demanding and ultimately futile. The story of the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq shows how difficult life can become for foreign forces when supporting a weak local government. Ukraine shows that it can be possible to seize territory where there is a sympathetic population – as in Crimea – and also the difficulty where there is not – as in Eastern Ukraine. There are of course brutal options available to deal with recalcitrant populations. We have examples of beleaguered governments taking back territory held by rebels by forcing populations to flee. As this normally creates large refugee flows it may well prompt external intervention, although there have been recent cases (notably Syria) where governments have adopted such techniques successfully, albeit ensuring a legacy of bitterness and resistance. For the moment the main effect of these counter-insurgency operations has been to leave Western countries less willing to put ground forces in harm's way. Even limited wars now turn out to be extremely expensive.

Even limited wars now turn out to be extremely expensive

Two world wars demonstrated the ruinous costs of major war, especially those fought over national territory. Now there is a possibility that nuclear weapons will be used in a great power war. Although there are important issues about the credibility of nuclear threats, nobody as yet has been disposed to test them in practice. The fact that it only takes a very small risk of nuclear war to encourage great caution has led to a sort of stability. The very large downside of this beneficial stability is that if it is lost then the consequences would be catastrophic. War has always had high potential cost in terms of mobilization and sustaining fielded forces. But such costs only accrued over time. The costs in the event of nuclear war will be huge and immediate. This is why the 'red light flashing' issues

on the international risk register have tended be those that create some possibility of nuclear use (US and its allies against Russia or China and also India versus Pakistan). Other military actions, or prospective actions, have been justified as attempts to deal with nuclear proliferation (Iraq, Syria, Iran, North Korea).

This was not however, the only factor that discouraged great power wars. Deterrence during the cold war was based in the first instance on alliance – an aggressor would need to reckon on taking on the United States. In the period since the conclusion of the Cold War the United States and its allies have had an irresistible predominance on military power. One of the major issues for the future is whether or not the US will continue to enjoy this predominance. Russia is challenging it in Europe, although it will struggle to succeed. China is mounting a much more significant challenge in the Asia Pacific region. Yet even if the US maintains its military superiority there is a larger question about whether the United States will continue to provide the sort of guarantees it has provided in the past to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries and to Japan, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan. President Trump has made clear his distaste for this role, especially when coupled with his conviction that America's allies do not pay a fair share of military contributions and take advantage of the US on trade. The policies of both Obama and Trump have already left the US as a far less important power in the Middle East. A continuing withdrawal from what successive US Administrations had assumed to be the country's global responsibilities will force allies to reassess their security arrangements. This may be the major source of instability over the coming decade.

There are already discussions in Europe about the need to boost defense capabilities to reduce dependence upon the United States, but this will be from a relatively low base. Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is less than each of the other major European countries so in principle there is no reason why they could not build up their joint capabilities to cope with Russia's conventional forces. Whether the UK and France could compensate for the loss of the US nuclear umbrella is another matter.

In the Asian-Pacific region the position is more complicated. The US has an alliance in Europe but only allies in Asia, and some are not natural friends with each other. China is large and wealthy and has been building up its military capabilities, thus making it clear that it expects to be treated as the dominant regional power and its interests respected accordingly. This is sufficiently blatant to alarm countries in the region, but the US military presence has been the main counter to any even more aggressive push by Beijing. The vast expanses of water separating some of the powers from

each other is one factor reducing the risks of war and China may conclude that there is no need to push hard against local powers, for the long-term trends are in its favor. But under Xi Jinping it has taken a much harder stance against any perceived slights and this could lead to an otherwise manageable crisis escalating.

We therefore can identify some observable tendencies in international politics and can speculate on how they might work out, especially in the relatively near term. There is a standard list of problems that invariably come up in any forward look: the role of Russia in Europe or China in Asia; continuing instability in the Middle East; the persistence of civil wars in Africa; the revival of protectionist pressures and the possibility of a major economic recession; the impact of climate change. We know the new technologies that are starting to come on stream – from hypersonic missiles to artificial intelligence – even if we do not know as yet their full operational implications, or indeed whether they will be that relevant in the sort of wars that do come about. We know that President Trump will leave office at some point but there is an enormous difference between 2021 and 2025 in terms of his political legacy. Can we assume that the build-up of debt in the US is going to lead to a recession relatively soon? If so, that could have severe knock-on effects in Europe which is ill-equipped to cope with another Eurozone crisis, especially around Italy. Does Putin have a way of getting out of the Ukraine mess or will he look for new ways to put the squeeze on Ukraine? Can Syria begin reconstruction? How fragile is Mohammed bin Salman's rule in Saudi? How serious is the instability in North Africa? The tariff war Trump has started with China may peter out but if it does not that will have big knock-on effects on international trade, which could deepen any recession. Even if it does, there are enormous uncertainties about what is actually going on with China, politically and economically. Is China going to keep on pushing on the South China Sea? And so on. So we have a "watch list" of problems that may turn critical in the coming decade, even if we cannot be sure of the nature of any crises that might be generated.

We cannot be sure of the nature of any crises that might be generated

Much will then depend on how governments respond to those crises which do arise. Forward looks require not only a view about what is going on in other countries but also in our own. Western military interventions in recent decades have not so much been responses to direct assaults on national territory (other than post-9/11) but because of the likely effects of instability or malign developments elsewhere – continuing persecution of Kosovar Albanians in 1999 creating a local refugee crisis, Al-Qaeda being able to carry on using Afghanistan as a base for super-terrorism in 2001,

Iraq reconstituting its weapons of mass destruction in 2003, Libya about to murder rebels in Benghazi in 2011. In 2014 Russia justified the annexation of Crimea by reference to developing threats to Russian-speakers in post-Maidan Ukraine.

These examples point to another feature of contemporary warfare. They are often fought on behalf of someone else – or alternatively someone else fights them on behalf of you. This is now described as proxy or surrogate war, although the term can be misleading because the so-called proxies will have more of a stake in the conflict than their external sponsors. They are best considered as clients with their own needs and agendas. There are plenty of examples of the proxies creating dilemmas for the sponsors, for example in supporting brutal methods in order to ensure victory or demanding more overt support in order to prevent defeat. The dilemmas created by the combination of past support for Saudi Arabia and the cruel and incompetent conduct of the war in Yemen provides a case in point. There might also be risks when supporting one faction in a civil war of not only getting caught in a struggle against an opposing faction, but also their external sponsors. The difficulty of finding credible and competent proxies, and the risk of becoming the agents of their local interests, has been a feature of all the recent counter-insurgency campaigns.

For all these reasons states usually prefer to deal with conflicts by methods short of war. They therefore rely on non-violent forms of coercion – from hostile resolutions at the Security Council to travel restrictions on individuals, sports boycotts, economic sanctions, energy cut-offs, and withdrawal of foreign aid. Cyber and information operations are normally included in this category of measures short-of-war, although they are less helpful as overt coercive signals. This is because they are often done covertly and denied.

When big countries wish to pursue their interests against small countries these methods can be stepped up. China is flexing its muscles increasingly by using threats to withdraw access to its markets to try to censor criticism of its practices in foreign media and academia. The US has often made it clear that continued largesse to aid recipients depends on holding back on overt criticism of American policies. Russia has relied on such methods, often involving raising the price of gas supplies or blocking imports to secure its interests in its near abroad with quite striking frequency – and also some success. There is now quite a lot of experience about conflict in this "grey zone" – far more than in all-out war. We have little guidance on what would happen should the armed forces of the major powers clash with each other and this in itself acts as an additional deterrent.

The safest prediction is that something will happen during the coming decade that will be entirely unforeseen and will have significant repercussions. For the moment the proper focus of policy must be the set of issues that are already being faced and have yet to run their course. Rather than leap ahead to some possible events we need to concentrate on the meaning of China's rise, whether it is sustainable and the consequences if it is not, and how if at all the more assertive foreign policy under Xi can be checked. Whether the West will be able to cope with new crises in the 2020s will depend on how well the current challenges posed by the Trump Administration to its allies around the globe are managed. The credibility of the EU as an independent actor requires that it can cope with the fissures evident among its members, especially if the Eurozone is shaken by another financial shock. The questions about future conflict arise out of the present. One thing we need to keep in mind as a source of major uncertainty but also helpful restraint is that we have no idea what a modern conflict will look like.

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