Research Division Issue – April 2016

Coping with Strategic Shock: The Strategy Dilemma

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"We did not see it coming!" – such a statement is often heard in the aftermath of an event causing a so-called strategic shock. The causal event can be man-made such as surprise attacks in conventional warfare, for example in the style of Operation Barbarossa 1941 or the attacks of Egypt

and Syria against Israel in the Yom Kippur War 1973; they can be suicide bombings and gun attacks by terrorists in the style of Paris 2015 or Brussels 2016; they can furthermore comprise of natural disasters such as tsunamis, or erupting volcanoes. It can also be a combination of the two causing, for instance, mass migration. But what is a strategic shock exactly? According to the UK's Ministry of Defence Strategic Trends Programme "strategic shocks have a cascade effect, leading to multiple, apparently unconnected and unforeseen changes. They transform the strategic context, changing behaviour and activity across the board." They are therefore, according to this definition, events that bring about changes of course in their aftermath.

The recent terror attacks in Paris and Brussels have once again brought back the dark and saddening realisation that in the year 2016 terrorism remains a clear and present danger. 2016 marks the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11 and the seventy-fifth anniversary of Pearl Harbour. In the midst of turmoil between the war in Syria, the struggle against Daesh also known as the Islamic State (IS), the ongoing quarrels between Russia and the West, as well as energy, financial and migrant crises, it seems appropriate to ask: How can we deal best with strategic surprise and shock? That is, not only governments but moreover international governmental organisations such as NATO, the EU or UN.

Dealing with threats and conducting foreign and security policy can be described as a form of risk-management. The state - or the respective international governmental organisation - cannot but try and balance its objectives against emerging threats. The threats, however, are relative to one's objectives. In simple terms, one has to know what is at stake in order to establish the threats against

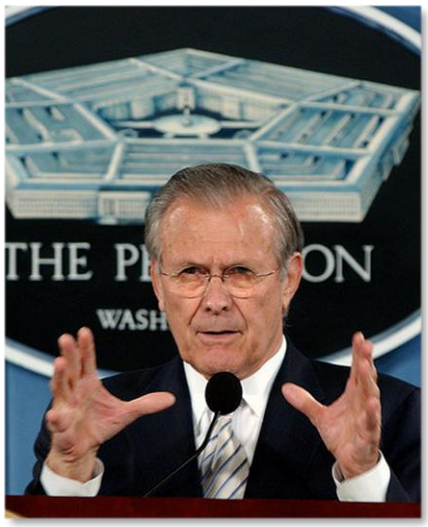
it. Territory, natural resources and energy, freedom of the high seas, human rights, general law and order, ideology and culture, can represent such endangered elements, and the objective can be to maintain, protect or develop them. Or, particularly when it comes to successful foreign policy, the objective can also be to shape the strategic and political environment to one's advantage.

However, in order to make policy and conduct any successful risk-management in this regard, decision-makers require knowledge and information. In security terms this information means intelligence. It is an ongoing debate in academia and politics, how much value intelligence actually adds to successful decision-making and how much intelligence actually is needed for a sound decision. This is even more pressing in the conduct of war with relation to victory. How much intelligence is enough? It is quite clear that intelligence as such is necessary, but is it truly *conditio sine qua non*? Some decision-makers might completely disregard the intelligence provided to them while others may rely on it heavily. The general relationship between the decision-maker and the intelligence provider is not always a fruitful and harmonious one, and there are many examples for the so-called Push-Pull-Problem referring to either side trying to deliberately influence the other. On the other hand, telling truth to power is regarded as an essential control within democratic states and in the face of the current waves of terror hitting Europe there seems mutual agreement on the need for close liaison and cooperation. That is, not only multilaterally between different governments and their respective agencies but also generally between intelligence and policy.

The basic purpose of intelligence is to reduce ignorance about factors that are likely to influence one's ability to maneuver. Intelligence enables one to map-out the operational and strategic environment. In a globalised world intelligence is without doubt an important tool in foreign and security policy, in the best case it is provided in real-time, and it is mostly able to support any assessment of the present and future strategic environment. Strategy, on the other hand, means inter-dependent decision-making in the face of the adversary. Every action a government or organisation takes will have an effect on the other side. Everything the West decides or acts upon

will cause a reaction from Daesh/IS, the Kremlin, North Korea, and pirates in Africa or the Migrants from Syria. With that, there will always be uncertainty about the exact outcome because external players are involved; external players whose intentions remain mostly hidden. This means that the element of uncertainty is represents a constant in the implementation of one's strategy on the way to achieving one's objectives. Or, as the strategist and scholar Lawrence Freedman puts it, "If strategy is a fixed plan that set out a reliable path to an eventual goal, then it is likely to be not only disappointing but also counterproductive, conceding the advantage to others with greater flexibility and imagination. Adding flexibility and imagination, however, offers a better chance of keeping pace with a developing situation, regularly re-evaluating risks and opportunities."

Linking this back to intelligence requires us to understand that it is not only the task of intelligence agencies to enable good planning as such, to assess the adversary's capabilities and intentions, but also to foresee their reactions to one's own actions in order to avoid surprise. In the strategic versus the tactical context this means that emphasis in establishing intelligence is being laid on mid- to long-term indicators (i.e. strategic intelligence). However, in every step the certain flexibility and imagination is needed that Freedman is talking about. Without it the whole exercise is useless and makes strategic warning impossible. To a certain extent this is about thinking the unthinkable, going beyond reason and imagining so-called Black Swans, i.e. things one cannot imagine to be true only because one does not know them or has never heard of them, but they are or one day will be real. In other words, these are the "unknown unknowns", as Donald Rumsfeld put it in 2002.



Hence, thinking the unthinkable requires unconventional approaches, it needs unconventional thinkers. Analysis and warning in this regard start with so-called red-teaming, namely with a hypothesis that, even though it begins with evidence, can be so much outside conventional thinking that it may seem absurd. The inherent condition and frustrating irony, however, is that this hypothesis, even though analysis and conclusion were correct, can only ultimately be tested and

validated against reality. That is, when it happens. This is the great paradox in intelligence and strategy, namely that where all intelligence is on the table, where all data mathematically predict the outcome, where every law of logic seems to tell the truth, common sense may not be of any help whatsoever. The adversary's course could be entirely illogical and beyond reason. That condition is particularly complex when dealing with an adversary who is willing to sacrifice their life – something that is traditionally anathema to Western thought. For example, it is widely agreed that suicide bombings do have very real strategic implications. That is what Thomas Schelling in 1966 already called the "rationality of irrationality." Wherever we fail to realise this paradox, we suffer strategic surprise and the shock which stems from either intelligence or political failure. Moreover, on a daily basis a security apparatus confronts the complexities of dealing with both "known knowns" and "known unknowns". Having appropriate intelligence does not guarantee victory, as can be seen in many examples from the past. To this end, Keegan is right. Intelligence is not decisive.

Whatever the category, status of knowledge and analysis may be, i.e. "known" or "unknown", failure still occurs in a somewhat timely fashion and either warning does not take place at all, at the wrong time or in the wrong context. Grabo suggests that "the most frequent impediments to warning are: Inadequate Examination of the Evidence; inadequate understanding of evidence or precedent; excessive preoccupation with current intelligence; predominance of preconceptions over facts; failure to come to clear judgements; misjudgements of timing; the reluctance to believe: search for other explanations; the reluctance to alarm; and the fear of being wrong."

Going into greater detail would exceed the scope of this paper, but it must be emphasized that the ability to cope with strategic shock is closely related to the study of intelligence. That is, failures and successes by both intelligence machinery and policy. It lies in the nature of the subject that successes remain mostly unnoticed whereas failures usually go along with extensive publicity and outcry.

Coping with strategic shock requires first of all the ability to strike the right balance between shaping the politico-strategic environment pro-actively on one hand, i.e. having an actual agenda, and building resilience capabilities as a reaction mechanism in the case of failure on the other. A successful strategy is aware of its limits. It will understand that occasional failure and strategic surprise according to the above definition are inherent, that they are in fact natural and inevitable. However, a good strategy also strives to uphold two equally important abilities: first, the institutional mind-set and ability to learn and embrace structural change where necessary; this refers to institutional culture. Second, the ability to look at precedents, draw conclusions in order to make sense of the past, and also of the present.

That being said, one may well stick to one's objectives, but the course will have to be altered now and then. This necessary behaviour will lead to detours. It is often forgotten that achieving one's strategic objectives takes time, political will and resources.

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Russia's Syrian Adventure and the Security Implications for Europe

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Midway through March and seemingly out of the blue, President Putin announced the planned withdrawal of most of the Russian military forces in Syria. The timing of this announcement coincided with the resumption of diplomatic talks in Geneva between many of the warring factions, stakeholders and their international backers. Russian forces first intervened last October providing air support, training, logistics and other battlefield support to the Syrian Regime and this has played a decisive role in the conflict allowing the Regime to regain lost territory and place forces of the Syrian Opposition on the back-foot.

However, Russia will maintain control of an airbase in Latakia and its naval facility in Tartus allowing it to reinforce its remaining military presence should it feel the need. Russia has already threatened to carry out unilateral action if the to end alleged violations of the "cessation of hostilities" agreement reached in Geneva; an agreement that does not include either the al-Nusra Front or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

So what has Russia gained from its Syrian Intervention? In six months Putin has managed to propel his country from the side-lines to an integral actor within the conflict and very much on the inside of the ongoing peace process, with a place arguably on par with the US. Russia has also shown the capability to deploy its armed forces outside of its immediate neighbourhood to defend Moscow's interests abroad. The Kremlin will also be satisfied with the performance of its military as it has swiftly and dramatically altered the situation on the ground to one far more favourable to a Russian

standpoint, while largely being free from disciplinary failures, accidents or other incidents that could damage or embarrass the Kremlin and without getting itself bogged down in a manner reminiscent of Afghanistan or Chechnya.

Russia has demonstrated a will and ability to act decisively in a conflict in which the US has dithered. This has boosted Moscow's international credibility while undermining Washington's, which is already perceived to be retreating from the region. The actions of Russia (and Iran and Hezbollah) in contrast to the US's relative inaction has prompted regional powers such as Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi Arabia to take their own course of action relying less on Washington's assent than previously. Moscow has also forced a reappraisal of the diplomatic conditions of the peace process with the role of the regime, and maybe of Assad himself, no longer set in stone.

But what of Europe? What effects have Russia's actions in Syria had on Europe? Europeans learned in 2015 that they were not shielded from the effects of Middle Eastern conflicts. The waves of refugees fleeing the conflict and making their way through Europe has exposed European states lack of preparedness or willingness to deal with a humanitarian situation. European states are also experiencing rising tensions within their societies as a result of the Migration Crisis, a situation that is compounded by terrorist attacks in Paris and more recently in Brussels.

More seriously (from Russia's point of view at least), it has unmasked a worrying lack of cooperation between a number of European states who have failed to reach any sort of consensus. The refugee crisis has discredited a number of European institutions, particularly the European Union (EU) in the eyes of states, political parties and citizens throughout Europe. This could arguably have not come

at a more crucial time as the UK, one of the EU's most powerful members holds a referendum on European membership.

Then of course, there is the issue of Turkey. A member of the NATO Alliance and an EU Candidate located at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and therefore of immense strategic importance to both Europe and the United States. Yet for all this, Turkey does not fit in easily with its Western allies. Turkey is an overwhelmingly Islamic country bordering the Middle East, Iran and the Caucasus and in the middle of a conflict with its Kurdish minority in the South East of the country. Turkey is led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), who is a controversial figure to say the least and not one who is particularly popular internationally.

Turkey's hostility to the Assad regime in Syria have brought it into conflict with Russia, resulting in the downing of a Russian fighter creating tensions between the two causing great concern to Turkey's NATO allies as a Russian retaliation could have potentially sparked a wider conflict or even war between Russia and NATO. The tensions have cooled off somewhat and this scenario grows increasingly unlikely but it was alarming for everyone at the time. With regard to Syria itself, events have unfolded to Turkey's detriment. The Assad regime has recovered and made significant territorial gains, the "moderate" opposition forces have taken significant losses to their territory and to their credibility. In addition, this has caused even more refugees to head for the Turkish border. The Syrian Kurds have emerged as a serious regional force that is courted by the Russians and the Americans. Turkey is also fighting accusations about lax border security allowing ISIL to recruit foreign fighters and collect revenue through Turkey. All in all, from a Turkish point of view the Syrian conflict has been disastrous.

Turkey has also created tensions with the US and others with its campaign against the Kurds inside Turkey and Syria (though not Iraq), as the Kurds are regarded as highly capable allies against ISIL. This crackdown against the Kurds has produced a terrorist campaign waged by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and various splinter groups that have targeted security forces, civilians and tourist areas throughout the country. Turkey is also frequently criticized by its Western partners for its human rights abuses and government crackdown against dissent. However, European states are easing up on this as Turkey occupies a crucial position and plays a critical role in reducing the flow of migrants into Europe.

To conclude, the Syrian Conflict is a massive security headache for European governments on several interconnected levels, such as humanitarian, terrorism, military strategy and international relations. With regard to Russia, they have demonstrated a willingness to take action and a capability for expeditionary warfare while gaining diplomatic clout and international credibility. This in turn could be used to further the Kremlin's interests on other 'fronts' that are sensitive to Europe's security such as Eastern Ukraine or the South Caucasus. Turkey has shown itself willing to take unilateral actions that can range from European eyes from distasteful to downright dangerous. Yet for strategic reasons, Ankara must be engaged with as it plays a key role in European Security and this is a fact that the Turkish Government is very much aware of and they make use of it when they can.

On a humanitarian level the Syrian Conflict has exposed Europe to the largest migratory movement since the Second World War. Europe has found itself unprepared in a literal sense, but also socially, with large differences opening between governments, between their people and between states. The migration issue has now become a political issue, one that is used by

states within Europe and by states outside of Europe. The disunity brought about by this issue could potentially unravel into the weakening, or even dismantling of the European Union and so bring about a complete re-write in the European security Landscape.