

Rethinking the future:

Prediction and its perils

Russell Trood

The distinguished British strategic analyst, Professor Colin S. Gray, often commences addresses with insights from that most profound of twentieth century American philosophers, the baseball player, Yogi Berra. One of Yogi's most penetrating observations was 'prediction is difficult, especially about the future!'

Despite the agonising, tautologous quality of his remark, I suspect most of us agree with Yogi. Even international security or economic analysts of one kind or another can hardly be indifferent to the rich printout of history on our sometimes dubious record when attempting to think about the future. Sometimes strategists and their political overlords (and ladies, let us not forget that Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher were all wartime leaders) show prescience. But history's chronicles of war and conflict offer a rather depressing and, one would hope, salutary reminder of the perils of strategic prognostication. The evident failure of the United States to comprehend and prepare for the magnitude of its undertaking in Iraq, stands, at least for the moment, as a recent dramatic, and indeed tragic, example of the challenge.

Fraught as it may be, I strongly believe that long term strategic analysis can be undertaken constructively. I recently made some remarks to the Senate in which I expressed my concern with the ability of our intelligence agencies to undertake this long-term work. These remarks were not intended as a malevolent attack on agency capabilities. Rather they reflected an anxiety that steadily over the last few years, under the press of numerous operational deployments and periodic international crises, our inclination to engage in long-term strategic analysis and policy planning has been eroding. We appear to have fallen prey to the tyranny of short-term perspectives and imperatives. This problem can be easily rectified and I trust it will be, but at present, I remain very uneasy that we have a degraded capability in this area of intelligence.

It is precisely because I believe long-term strategic thinking can be of value to intelligence analysts and security planners that I am voicing my concerns. We can think usefully about next-generation threats and dangers to Australia and I

was delighted to see the recent inaugural conference of the Kokoda Foundation devoted to this task. I do not doubt the results of such efforts will be of considerable value, not just to our security planners but to those in business and elsewhere in the community.

Trap and pitfalls

While forward thinking can be of tremendous value, it can also be a fraught enterprise. This being so, it might be worth recording a few of the traps and pitfalls. Five come to mind though doubtless others might be relevant:

First, all military and indeed strategic thinking (and criticism of the same) is done through the prism of our ethnocentrism. This is not intended as a remark in deference to postmodernism and its preoccupation with the subjective. Rather it reflects one of the most enduring of Sun Tzu's strategic insights, namely the need to know both the enemy and yourself. Put another way, strategic cultures matter. They are shaped by history, geography and political culture and they influence the way countries think about their security and the best way to provide for it. No better example exists than Australians' historical preoccupation with threats to their nation's security and their dependence on alliances as a means to defend it.

Second, 'nowism' is a serious occupational hazard for those in the prediction game. All trends derive, hardly surprisingly, from efforts to extrapolate the present into the future. But the fashionable, the chic and the fads of the contemporary world can easily derail clear thinking. The revolution in military affairs is hardly chic and probably not a fad, but it is certainly fashionable. Undoubtedly it offers gains to the military but is it revolutionary? Will it change the nature of war as we know it? Current battlefield evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan should encourage caution on this point.

Third, defence planners, both civilian and military, frequently prepare for threats and dangers they would prefer to confront (or are willing to fund), rather than those they need to confront (or on which they should spend).

Wishful thinking is a common human shortcoming, and one not uncommon in foreign affairs, defence and treasury establishments – and it can be costly. One of our most recent brushes with it was arguably the narrowly-focused, ‘medium-low’ threat contingency posture that emerged from the 1987 Defence White Paper and imposed a vice-like grip on our policy-making and policy review practices for well over a decade. A more disastrous example was French strategic policy after the Franco-Prussian War, which left that great republic thoroughly unprepared for the military challenges of 1914.

Fourth, inevitabilities often have a dangerous seductive allure in defence *and* wider security planning. One of several useful things I learned in graduate school was that there are no inevitabilities in international relations. As time passes, I am more and more impressed with the wisdom of the Canadian professor who passed on this insight. One of the qualities that defines great military commanders and international statesmen is the instinct to reject the usual, predictable, the commonplace, and to think laterally. This is a quality all security establishments should encourage. A contemporary example of the problem exists in relation to the global economy. As John Ralston Saul, among others, has recently argued, globalisation may not be the irreversible phenomenon that the international economists and Mr Thomas L. Friedman would have us believe. If true, this could not but have a profound impact on Australian security policy?

Fifth and finally, the strategic soothsayer must expect the unexpected. There is a rather more indelicate way of expressing this ancient proposition but I leave this for the reader’s rich imagination. However it is expressed, if nothing else, we should have learned the importance of this insight over the last 15 years. After the collapse of the Cold War and the attacks of 9/11, strategic planning has taken a bit of a beating. But surprises will always occur, some are agreeable: most are not. But part of the art of national security planning (and it is more art than science) is to be prepared for them and retain the flexibility to adjust when they occur.

As Yogi Berra might have said, forward thinking can take us forward, despite the obstacles. But the current international strategic environment is an especially dynamic and challenging one. Arguably more unsettled, unstable and complex than at any period since the end of the Cold War. Geopolitically, the world’s pre-eminent superpower seems to have rediscovered its revolutionary roots and appears anxious to project them onto the world stage. In doing so it has attracted a backlash (one, by the way, that should trouble us here in Australia). The world’s most populous country is driving towards an economic and political greatness that will one day, at the very least, profoundly alter the regional balance of power in East Asia. A relatively small extremist sect from within one of the world’s great religions threatens further death and destruction and has caused governments everywhere to reassess the foundations of their security policy. Finally, the dominant economic paradigm of the age is showing distinct signs of distress and unravelling, and perhaps drawing us back to the dangers of mercantilism.

Beyond these developments, global institutions, such as the United Nations are suffering from institutional inertia, are under severe pressure to reform and seem unable to do so. And we confront a raft of new challenges: global warming, a breakdown of the nuclear non-proliferation and anti-ballistic missile regimes, the phenomenon of failed states, health pandemics and escalating transnational criminal activity, to name but a few.

Fresh approaches

We all need to apply fresh approaches to sorting through the relative significance of all these challenges and to assess their implications for Australia’s future. Let me make a modest contribution to this enterprise with a few observations specifically related to Australia.

First, the security risks likely to confront Australia will be global as well as narrowly regional and local in origin and character. This is a familiar theme in our history. Australia has always been a globally engaged country, with a national security posture more broadly forward-defence and collective in character than anything else. It should remain that way. This does not preclude, I hasten to add, giving a priority to Australia’s own Asia-Pacific region. Indeed we should do so.

Second, the notion of security defined narrowly in terms of protection from military threats is longer adequate. We need to think in terms of a distinction between traditional and non traditional threats. This is an important distinction, and although I am instinctively a realist, a middle power realist in fact, I do not believe we have moved very far in incorporating its implications into our security doctrines, our operational planning or security decision making. Elsewhere, strategic thinking around ideas such as human security, environmental security and economic security are more advanced than here in Australia. It is time we addressed them more convincingly.

Third, I suspect Australians are placing greater expectations on their governments to provide protection. They certainly want defence, traditionally conceived, but they are also demanding security from an increasingly wide range of threats – environmental catastrophe, global health pandemics, border intrusion, terrorism, transnational crime, energy shortages, resource depletion and much more. It may be that not all of these dangers deserve respectability as ‘threats to national security’ but they are certainly dangers needing to be addressed. This expands appreciably the threat spectrum for security policy planners and creates management issues for politicians.

Fourth, if the last point is correct, then defence and national security are likely to cost more. This doesn’t necessarily mean more expensive high-tech military kit, though clearly there will be some needs in that area. Not least is the requirement for a slightly larger defence force to better handle current and likely operational tempos. As we have seen, it already means providing more resources for intelligence agencies.

Eventually we will also have to confront the reality that for far too long we have deprived the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the resources it needs to meet

the growing demands on Australian diplomacy. In 2005 we observed the 70th anniversary of the re-establishment of the department under the formidable Col Hodgson. While every other agency of government with responsibilities touching foreign and security affairs has enjoyed significant growth, DFAT's operational budget has barely altered. To be fully effective in a challenging environment we need a better resourced department. Radio Australia also needs to be reinvigorated to assist in explaining Australian beliefs and policies in a relatively neutral and non-confrontational manner, and to help counter potential threats and difficulties stemming from myths, misconceptions and untruths about Australia among foreign audiences.

Fifth and finally, the new threat environment and the demands it now places on national security necessitates a serious review of our security planning arrangements. The time has come for Australia to develop a comprehensive national security policy that better integrates both the traditional and non-traditional threats to security and the means to address them. We need to look seriously at

improving the machinery of national security policy planning and implementation through the creation of something akin to the US national security council with broad responsibility for whole-of-government security co-ordination. This need is not just in relation to federal agencies, but also incorporates state responsibilities. The current government has moved somewhat towards this goal over the last few years, but it is now time to take the next logical step. ♦

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Conference Calendar

ADA members and other Defender readers may be interested in the following public conferences and activities:

- **Australian War Memorial International Art Exhibition**
Shared Experiences of War: Australia, Britain and Canada in the Second World War
Until 26 February 2006
Australian War Memorial, Canberra
(02) 6243-4598 or www.awm.gov.au
- **Australian Defence Magazine Defence Industry Conference 2006**
Tackling Future Capabilities
14-15 March 2006
Hyatt Hotel, Canberra
(02) 9080-4307 or www.informa.com.au/ADM2006
- **Royal Australian Navy Seapower Conference 2006**
Challenges Old and New
31 January – 02 February 2006
Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour
(02) 6127-6514 or www.seapower2006.com
- **Anzac International Military Tattoo 2006**
A Salute to the Anzacs
22 April 2006 (1:30PM and 7:30 PM and 25 April 2006 (4PM)
Sydney SuperDome, Sydney Olympic Park
(02) 9699-5199 or www.ticketek.com
- **Royal United Services Institute of Victoria**
Did Singapore have to fall?
(An address by Professor Joan Beaumont)
Thursday 23 February 2006, 1130 for 1200
Defence Plaza, 661 Bourke Street, Melbourne
(03) 9282-7498 or rusi.vic@defence.gov.au
- **International Police Tattoo 2006**
05-07 May 2006
Adelaide Entertainment Centre
www.policetattoo.com