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The Dragon and the Snakes: Emerging and Future Security Threats in the Post-Cold War Order

By David Kilcullen

Looking around in late 2016, it is hard to avoid a sense of chaotic unravelling, of rising menace in multiple places, across many categories of threat, some hard to define as warlike, while others are classical military challenges.

In the US, there is a sense of domestic disunity: race-based protests, a rising wave of armed and organised militias, cop killings, normalisation of mass shootings. The two most reviled candidates in modern American political history have just faced off in the dirtiest presidential campaign in living memory. Voters on all sides are expressing rage, frustration, and loss of faith in institutions. Over the course of the campaign both candidates, for different reasons, have moved away from free trade, globalised international norms and the western alliance system—in other words, from the very foundations of post-Cold War U.S. global leadership.

The challenges will be enormous for the next president, even if he or she *did* have legitimacy in the eyes of a clear majority of the population, which neither candidate does: and all of that means we can expect an extended period of introspection and turmoil, perhaps lasting six to twelve months, in the United States over the coming year.

That could not be happening at a less stable time in the global security environment. On the other side of the Atlantic, mass illegal immigration, fiscal and monetary weakness, failures of political integration and social cohesion in Europe—issues that overlap and reinforce each other to form the so-called “European poly-crisis”—are continuing.

According to DGSI and BKA (the French and German equivalents, respectively, of ASIO) more than 500 Syria-trained ISIS operatives are present in Western Europe—for context, that is the size of the whole IRA during the 1990s. Europe has seen an unprecedented influx of two to five million asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants over the last 18 months, mostly from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and parts of north and west Africa. The pace and scale of that influx is straining social cohesion: some German towns have tripled in size in the past

year, with all the newcomers coming from one town in Syria. There is rising anti-Semitism among Muslim populations in Europe, and a growing backlash against immigrants by right-wing (and increasingly mainstream) groups.

There is clear evidence that some of these protests, a significant amount of the immigrant flow, and many right-wing groups in general are being manipulated by Russian intelligence services in an attempt to undermine European cohesion. Brexit (even despite the British High Court's recent ruling that Article 50 requires a parliamentary vote) reflects a crisis in legitimacy for European institutions and a loss of confidence in European identity, exacerbated by overflow from the war in Syria, and the impact of failed financial policies in the wake of the GFC.

Russian political manipulation, amounting to information warfare, is occurring in both the US and Europe. In America over the past few months, this has often been presented as an attempt to influence the U.S. election in favour of Donald Trump. I think that actually underestimates Russian ambition: its not that Russia wants Donald Trump to be elected, rather the goal is to undermine trust in institutions and encourage a chaotic election outcome, creating a window of opportunity to move in Syria, Ukraine, possibly Venezuela and Cuba, and other places where Russia can benefit from a period of U.S. inactivity and introspection in the first half of 2017.

This is a testable proposition, by the way—if I am right, expect the most damaging *kompromat* to come out on Wikileaks and via state-sponsored hackers, after the U.S. election, targeting whoever wins. Likewise, expect the Russian naval task group, headed by the Russian Navy's flagship, the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which arrived off the coast of Syria last weekend, to launch a massive spike in Russian air and missile strikes across the region this week, expect that spike to continue in the months after the election, and expect Russian ground forces to move in Ukraine.

In Asia, Chinese expansion—political, military, and economic—into the Pacific continues. We are seeing island building (and the placing of missiles on manmade islands) in the South China Sea, continuing confrontation with Japan over disputed island territory, clashes with Indonesia over illegal fishing, infrastructure purchases (Darwin), a conventional military build-up including Fifth Generation fighters, more advanced land capabilities, high altitude long endurance UAVs optimised for weapons carriage, and blue water naval capabilities such as the *Liaoning*, the Chinese aircraft carrier which happens to be the sister ship of the *Kuznetsov*. North Korea is testing miniaturised nukes and long-range missiles, recently hacked U.S./Japanese media giant Sony, and has been described by Admiral Jim Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, as the “most dangerous country in the world.”

In South and Central Asia, violence is flaring in Kashmir, and there is an impending security crunch in Afghanistan with the Taliban now threatening Kabul, Lashkar Gah, and Kunduz, more than half the countryside contested or controlled by the insurgency, ISIS cells emerging in Kabul, AQ re-establishing

itself in its old stamping-ground in the east, and Tarin Kowt—familiar to a generation of diggers as the capital of Uruzgan province—briefly falling to the Taliban a few weeks ago.

I could go on at even more length, but the pattern is clear—cascading chaos and violence across the greater Middle East and North Africa, the potential for societal and economic collapse in Venezuela, the ongoing crisis of drugs, criminality and people smuggling in Central America, the resurgence of core AQ in Pakistan and Syria, the Philippines’ turn toward China, the militarisation of the Arctic and, increasingly, the Antarctic.

I have been doing this for a while, and I have never seen such a wide variety of simultaneous threats, across such a range of threat types, at a time when what we might loosely call “the West”—Europe, the United States and the broader alliance—is in such a state of internal disunity, with weaker political will or less economic and fiscal capacity. It is almost as if key strategic leaders are suffering from a lack of bandwidth—or what pilots call “task saturation”—with so many things happening simultaneously that it is hard to know where to begin.

What is going on? How do we make sense of what is happening, and how do we think about how to deal with it? That is the question I want to try to answer tonight.

Let us start our search for an answer by going back 23 years, to February 1993, when James Woolsey, President Bill Clinton’s CIA director, was testifying in his confirmation hearing before the senate intelligence committee. It was about 18 months after the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Woolsey was asked (I think by John Kerry, now secretary of state, who was on the committee at the time) how he saw the coming “post-Cold War” period, and he said “we have slain a large dragon” (talking about the Soviet Union) “but now we live in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes, and in many ways the dragon was easier to keep track of.” He then laid out a strikingly accurate prediction of post-Cold War threats, emanating from weak and failing states and non-state actors (“snakes”), and requiring responses like peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, counter-piracy—the world that guys of my generation (I was an infantry Captain in 1993) grew up in.

I am going to call the next ten years the “Woolseyan security environment”—the period when we mainly worried about the snakes, not the dragon. I should mention that I had dinner with Jim Woolsey a year or so ago, and I asked him if I could name an entire era of U.S. national security history after him, and he very graciously agreed.

During that period, there was a dichotomy in defence strategy. At one level, the U.S. and its allies, including Australia, focused on constructing an exquisite set of capabilities to defeat state enemies in high-intensity warfare. The “revolution in military affairs” of the 1990s built a system of systems of battlefield communications and surveillance, precision strike, air-land battle, recon-strike

integration, and a host of advanced targeting and weapon technologies. Because the Soviet Union was gone, and China was still in the early stages of its rise, there were no peer or near-peer competitors to worry about, and so capability developers focused on gaining unprecedented dominance over a very narrow range of high-end military capability.

At the same time, on the ground, in a series of messy conflict zones worldwide, Special Operations Forces, ground troops, special mission aviators, intelligence operators, military advisors, and amphibious and airborne rapid-deployment forces engaged in low-level, often low-tech operations against or among non-state armed groups. Operations in Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone—Woolsey’s snakes—defined the 1990s even as our military theory and capability development focused more airily on transformation, stand-off precision strike, beyond visual range engagement and stealth, in case we ever had to confront the dragon again. My own experience was pretty typical of Aussies in the 1990s—I served as an advisor in Indonesia, trained troops for Bosnia, and operated in New Guinea, Cyprus, Bougainville and East Timor, in between professional military education and training where I learned to fight a series of made-up pseudo-conventional enemies like the Musorians and the Kamarians.

That Woolseyan security environment lasted almost exactly ten years and month. Woolsey testified on February 2nd, 1993. On March 20th, 2003, the United States—at the head of a western coalition that included Australia, of course—invaded Iraq. More precisely, at 0315 local time on March 20th 2003 the US Air Force attempted a “decapitation” strike on what was thought to be Saddams tactical headquarters at a farm outside Baghdad. The strike failed, and although the ground invasion that started that same day succeeded in its narrow objectives in only 3 weeks, the invasion of Iraq began a descent into chaos that showed all our adversaries exactly how to fight us, while causing maximum pain and avoiding our conventional military superiority.

For the next ten and a half years—from March 2003 to August 2013—we struggled in Afghanistan, Iraq, and a host of other places, against a particularly poisonous snake (radical Islamist terrorism, personified initially by Al Qaeda). That period had its successes—the Surge, the near-destruction of AQ in Iraq, the killing of Osama bin Laden—but they tended to be tactical rather than strategic.

Indeed, in multiple theatres of operations, again and again, the military proved capable of defeating armed enemies on the battlefield, but the nation—and the broader alliance—turned out to be unable to convert that battlefield success into enduring strategic victory. Repeatedly, the military element of national power delivered a tactical victory, narrowly defined as a successful combat outcome, but we failed to leverage the other elements of national power (informational, economic and diplomatic) to transform that combat outcome into an end-state that advanced our enduring strategic interests. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, we inflicted massive military defeats on the insurgents many times over, only to fail to consolidate—and so ended up fighting them again.

This turns out to be a much broader pattern than just counterinsurgency, by the way, though in the specific circumstances of our COIN campaigns of the past 15 years I think it is accurate to say that the armed forces have repeatedly shown they do not have a problem achieving the military goals of counterinsurgency (that is, the subset of counterinsurgency that used to be called “counter-guerrilla warfare”). Rather, the pattern indicates that the nation has a problem translating battlefield success into long-term stability.

I want to suggest a reason why this might be, but before I do let me finish my little potted history of the “post-Woolseyan” security environment. You will notice I ended that second decade in August 2013, more precisely on the 21st August 2013, ten and a half years after the invasion of Iraq: the day of the Ghouta chemical attack in Syria, when Bashar al-Assad called President Obama’s bluff by using nerve gas against his own people. If the invasion of Iraq showed everyone how to fight the US asymmetrically, President Obama’s inability to enforce his own “red line” showed adversaries that whatever our technology, western leaders lacked the stomach for a fight. The red line was thus a failure of conventional deterrence. After thirteen years of war, amidst ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and with the failure of the Arab Spring, there simply was not the political commitment behind the capability to make the advanced weapon systems a credible threat. Unsurprisingly, a significant lesson for some players—notably Iran and Russia—was that acting against U.S. and allied interests was essentially risk-free.

Within months we saw Russia seize Crimea, move against Ukraine, ramp up air and maritime incursions into the Baltic, the Arctic and the North Sea, begin building advanced conventional ground forces and professionalising its marines and airborne forces, provide surface-to-air missiles to Ukrainian proxies who promptly shot down a civilian airliner with massive loss of innocent life, and eventually intervene directly in Syria. Russia’s move into Syria at the end of September 2015 was the first Russian intervention outside the former Soviet Union since the collapse of the USSR, and their first combat operation in the Middle East since the 1940s. Likewise, encouraged by the Iranian nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions on Iran, we saw increasingly open collaboration among Russia, Iran and Syria, a flood of Iranian money and influence into Iraq, the emergence of Islamic State and its blitzkrieg that seized almost half of Iraq, the Turkish and Russian interventions in Syria, the war in Yemen, and so on.

Since August 2013, the post-Cold War era—and with it, the security environment Woolsey described 20 years earlier—is definitively over. We live now in a *post-Woolseyan* environment (again, I use that term with permission). Rather than worrying about Woolsey’s snakes, in this new environment, the dragon is back—or should I say, the dragons (state-based adversaries) are back. We are dealing with both dragons and snakes at the same time, and in many of the same places. But the dragons have watched us struggle since 2003, have figured out how to fight us, and are adopting many of the same methods as the snakes.

You can see this in the convergence between state and non-state adversaries. Right now we have a major terrorist organisation—ISIS—that thinks it is a state,

fighters like a state, organises using state structures, fields conventional capabilities like tanks and artillery, governs cities, and applies conventional tactics but with non-conventional means. [e.g. Ramadi 2015 suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, assault]

Conversely, state actors—Syria, Iran, Russia, North Korea, China—are actively copying the methods of non-state actors. Russian defence minister Sergey Shoygu announced two weeks ago that the Russian army is organising “superlight” brigades, based on experience in Syria, that are mounted in technicals and directly copy the tactics, organisation and weapons used in Syria. China, Russia and North Korea have all allegedly sponsored hackers and cyber-crime groups to target state adversaries and economic competitors to further state interests. And we have Iranian and Russian forces working closely with non-state groups such as Hezbollah, Ukrainian rebels and others, and closely copying their methods while providing them with advanced weapons systems that used to be the preserve of governments.

In fact, looking at these groups, one of the things that strikes me is that they all define warfare much more broadly than we do. Whereas we have gone for exquisite capabilities to achieve unquestioned dominance over a very narrow band of conventional warfighting capability, both state and non-state adversaries have defined warfare much more broadly and are seeking a suite of capabilities across that full range. Marxist groups like the FARC—which actually gets a lot of its military theory from the Vietnamese and Chinese Communists—talk about a strategy embodying “the combination of all forms of struggle”, in which military means exist alongside political, informational, economic and criminal capabilities, and whenever the group suffers a setback in one arena it uses capabilities from another to bounce back. Likewise in 1998 two Chinese senior colonels of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army published *Unrestricted Warfare*, which called for a strategy of “interlocking and addition”, where the goal is to pose the widest variety of simultaneous challenges to an enemy across the full range of legal, informational, propaganda, cyber and physical domains. The aim is to overwhelm the enemy by creating a bandwidth challenge. In 2013 General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, published an article in the Russian military press in which he wrote:

The very “rules of war” have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.

This article has received a lot of attention, with military analysts across the world talking about the Gerasimov Doctrine or Russian Non-Linear Warfare. We can talk at length about that, and about whether this is truly something new (I tend to think it isn’t really) but what is certainly clear is that Russia, China and other potential state adversaries have a much broader definition of what constitutes warfare than we do.

What does all this mean for us, and what should we be doing about it? Obviously we could talk all night about this, and I hope to kick it around more with you in Q&A, but to start the discussion here are five observations:

First, we need to beware of conceptual envelopment. What I mean by that is that, if our definition of warfare is too narrow, we run three really significant risks. One is that an adversary can be engaging in warfare against us, without us realising it. The other is that we can be doing things that look like war to an adversary, but not be aware of what we are doing. So, for example, in the U.S. election there have been persistent allegations of Russian hacking and political interference—as we have seen, these activities may count as warfare under some circumstances in the Russian, or Chinese theory of war, but not in ours, and so it has been fiendishly difficult to craft an effective response even though most intelligence agencies believe the hacks and leaks are foreign-sponsored. Conversely, if you sit in Russia and look at the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, the expansion of NATO, or the wooing of Ukraine and Georgia, you might consider yourself under attack from the West, while politicians in Europe and the United States blithely go about their business unawares.

Or if your definition of warfare includes legal manipulation and “lawfare”, as the Chinese unrestricted warfare theory does, then you might regard the recent ruling against China over the south china sea as a form of lawfare, and take steps to counteract it by, say, drawing the Philippines out of the western alliance, gaining control of a major port facility in northern Australia, and placing anti-ship missiles and air defences on your south china sea islands.

The third risk of too narrow a definition of war is the one I mentioned earlier—too narrow a concept of war means that you think of it as something the armed services do, not something the nation does. Politicians and the public can then look to military commanders to somehow translate tactical battlefield success into enduring political outcomes, and get upset when that does not happen, without realising that transforming “victories into victory” or turning battlefield success into a better peace is precisely the point of war and simultaneously something that military forces alone cannot do.

My next observation is that we have to do a better job of figuring out how to deal with boomerang effects. This term comes from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who pointed out in the 1970s that repressive security measures that imperial powers apply overseas in their colonial possessions eventually come home to be used on their domestic populations. UK-based urban theorist Stephen Graham, a few years ago, applied this idea to the war on terrorism and pointed out that many of the tools developed in Iraq and Afghanistan are now being used on the streets of London and Washington DC. The broader point is that as well as the convergence between states and non-states, we are seeing a convergence between domestic and international space, crime and war, and therefore between law enforcement and the military. In the United States (and to some extent in Australia) civilian law enforcement agencies are becoming militarised, while in countries like France and Belgium, military forces are being

used for public safety tasks on the street. These are not aberrations, and they are certainly not the “fault” of those agencies: rather, they are a natural response to the spill over effects from overseas conflict and the increasing militarisation of the threat.

This underlines another observation, which I have made several times in print—most recently in my book *Blood Year* last year—and that is the observation that because of the breakdown between the categories of war and crime, domestic and international, physical and cyber, a purely defensive strategy will not work. At some level, it might be tempting to think that we could withdraw from the world, pull up the drawbridge and simply put in place a series of domestic defensive measures in order to protect ourselves at home. There are two problems with that: on the one hand, there *is* no drawbridge. We are connected to the global system whether we like it or not, and as a maritime nation with a huge territory, a small population, and an economy built on trade, we need to remain connected to that system. But even if we wanted to cut ourselves off, the threat is already here. As Hillary Clinton asked on the campaign trail, “How high do you have to build a wall to keep the Internet out?” The second problem is that, if in fact we were to try to construct a purely defensive system to protect ourselves, it would involve such intrusive surveillance, policing and security measures that we would basically be putting our whole society under protective custody, running the risk of destroying our free society in order to save it.

That means—and this is my final observation tonight—that any viable approach to dealing with this new world of both dragons and snakes must involve capabilities that allow us to defeat the enemy at a distance, outside our own territory. We are currently at the low point in the 30-year wave of cyclical interventions—the pattern by which western countries engage in a large scale or long duration intervention overseas about once a generation—so defeating the enemy at a distance, for now and the immediate future, primarily means making the light footprint work. Australia needs, if anything, a more active regional and global engagement under these circumstances, especially in the face of possible U.S. introspection and isolation under President-elect Trump.