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Global strategic studies: a manifesto

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ABSTRACT

This contribution reflects on the state of strategic studies today and the criticism it has received in recent years, as being outdated and irrelevant. The authors formulate some premises for reinvigorating this field of inquiry by widening its scope and research agenda to do more justice to the wide variety of actors, perspectives and practices observable in the enterprise of strategy in our contemporary globalised world.

KEYWORDS Strategy; global strategy; strategic studies

Strategic Studies is an inter-disciplinary field of study, which at its core examines the ways in which military power and other coercive instruments may be used to achieve political ends in the course of a dynamic interaction of (at least) two competing wills. Since the subject matter is so broad, numerous insights from a variety of academic disciplines have been incorporated in order to enrich the study of strategy, including major insights from the sciences, arts, humanities, and the social sciences (especially International Relations, Political Science, Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology, among others). This history, and the composite nature of the discipline, is often overlooked by its critics, who in recent years have displayed a tendency to black box this field of inquiry. Strategic thought, succinctly understood as the leading ideas of military and civilian strategists about the threat and uses of force and the application of power to fulfil the ends of policy, provides the conceptual foundations that underpin Strategic Studies more broadly.

Presently Strategic Studies is confronted with several challenges. On the one hand, the scholarship is charged with a seeming lack of relevance and its perceived intellectual flaws highlighted by the wider community of security studies scholarship.¹ One contribution has, for example, even called

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¹Pascal Vennesson, 'Strategy Misunderstood: The "Broader Security" Challenge to Strategic Studies', Paper Prepared for delivery at the 2015 International Biennial Conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, Chicago, IL, 30 October–1 November 2015.

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Strategic Studies merely ‘the specialist military-technical wing of the Realist approach to IR’.² On the other hand, there is a challenge from those who more narrowly critique the absence of fresh thinking and new perspectives to be applied to the challenges facing contemporary political practice.³

Strategic Studies scholars need to take these voices and challenges more seriously; it is increasingly clear that in the civilian academy the field appears to have been increasingly outmanoeuvred and cut off by the new and normatively-driven mainstream, which is instinctively more appealing in the context of Western liberal democracies,⁴ while in the policy field the absence of good strategic thinking is becoming increasingly evident.⁵ These two dynamics become especially clear, for example, in the way in which policy-makers have reached for counterinsurgency as a silver bullet,⁶ divorcing it from wider strategic imperatives, and indeed in the way in which this kind of warfare has been discussed as a form of ‘armed social work’⁷ which frames conflict and intervention in a manner more appealing and acceptable to Western publics and policy-makers.⁸

In the light of these multiple practical, environmental and intellectual challenges, we signal here a need to rethink and rejuvenate the field in both its theoretical foundations and practical applicability. Strategic Studies today is ripe for revitalisation but in order to begin this process the field needs to consider moving beyond its traditional constraints:

The state-centred focus

It is true that states have played and continue to play an important role in international affairs. We cannot understand the many outbreaks of conflict and violence in the international system without recognising the role of the state.⁹ However, actors other than states have gained in importance and the

²Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 16.

³Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jeff H. Michaels, ‘Revitalizing Strategic Studies in an Age of Perpetual Conflict’, *Orbis* (winter 2016), 60.

⁴James Worrall, ‘The Evolution of Non-Traditional Approaches to Security’ in K. Zengeni (ed.), *International Relations* (New York: Pearson Longman 2013).

⁵Isabelle Duyvesteyn, *Strategic Illiteracy; The Art of Strategic Thinking in Modern Military Operations*, Inaugural lecture, Leiden University. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/20944/Oratie%20Duyvesteijn%20Eng.pdf>.

⁶See Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015). Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, ‘What Do Policymakers Want From Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 58 (2014), 227–246, 233.

⁷David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010), 43.

⁸Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones and MLR Smith, ‘Deconstructing Counter-Insurgency: COIN Discourse and the Devaluation of Strategy’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28/3 (2015), 348–372.

⁹Edward Newman, *Understanding Civil Wars; Continuity and Change in Intrastate Conflict* (London: Routledge 2015).

field compromises its relevance by not incorporating them in a more structured and significant manner. Individuals, non-state actors, transnational groups and international organisations all have strategies and increased power and agency, the field needs to urgently deal with them. States are important but they are far from the only significant strategic actors out there. This is equally of course the case for the study of the changing environments which enable and constrain actors, especially in terms of globalised structures and mechanisms of global governance.¹⁰

The rational actor model

The scholarship to date has relied heavily on these models to understand strategic behaviour and they have proven fruitful in many investigations. Still, they do not capture the full scope of strategic reason. Developments in cognitive psychology and related fields have the promise to renew the study of strategy and need to be further explored. Going beyond rationality as understood in rational choice theory would entail the study of emotions, intuitions and strategic imagination. Even Clausewitz, in whose footsteps many of scholars have trodden, asked that attention be paid to the idea of military genius and the role of passion in war. None of which are purely rational phenomena to which we can apply these dominant actor perspectives.

The Western world

Western states have indeed been responsible for significant armed conflict in modern history. In public perception, war is often associated with a dominant image of states as loggerheads, such as in the two world wars. This image overrides the many smaller and even deadlier engagements in other parts of the world.¹¹ As has been pointed out time and again, civil wars in the non-Western world form, since the end of the Napoleonic wars, the dominant pattern.¹²

The field of Strategic Studies needs to recognise more fully the global roots of strategic thinking and action and incorporate these non-Western perspectives. The rise of new actors, notably India and China, pose both intellectual and policy challenges which require more informed thinking.

¹⁰IR has developed some useful ideas in this area but they are rarely influenced by understandings of strategy and coercion. See, for example, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (eds.), *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010) and Frank Bierman, Phillip Pattberg and Harro van Asselt, 'The Fragmentation of Global Governance Architectures: A Framework for Analysis', *Global Environmental Politics* 9/4 (2009), 14–40.

¹¹Jeremy Black, *Introduction to Global Military History; 1775 to the Present* (London: Routledge 2012).

¹²See, for example, Kalevi Holsti, *The State, War and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996).

In a changing world, the field must adopt a truly global outlook, if it is to remain relevant. Relatedly, there is a need to move beyond the dominance of American and British perspectives and scholarship. Recognizing and respecting the huge debt we owe this scholarship, we see a clear need to give greater attention to continental European and more importantly non-Western perspectives on strategy. Examples which could easily be built from are Sun Tzu and Kautilya, and especially the way in which their thinking has influenced scholars and policy-makers in China and India.

The Realist paradigm

This paradigm has formed a cornerstone of the field and has contributed to many insights furthering our understanding of strategic behaviour. However, closely linked to problems with the state-based framework, we see a pressing need to incorporate alternative approaches. There are many other ways of looking at international affairs, which have not made sufficient inroads within the study of strategy so far. We need to more fully conduct investigations from the perspectives of other research traditions and points of view. In the study of International Relations, strategic ideas are part of all the main research traditions, such as Constructivism, Liberalism or Marxism, and in turn these perspectives have shaped, and continue to shape, strategic thinking and action. The Realist research tradition will obviously remain significant for Strategic Studies, as indeed it will in wider IR given, for example, the foreign policy actions of Russia in Syria and Ukraine, and China in the South China Sea but Realism is not and should not be the only analytical tool in the toolbox of Strategic Studies. We recognise that this could be difficult given path dependencies and normative issues on both sides but it is essential to explore possibilities further in order to reinvigorate the field.

The present and the short term

Strategic Studies has, as a distinct field of study, always held a particular relevance to gauge pressing and contemporary security challenges at the expense of deeper and longer term reflection. The risks of short-termism have, however, been very real. For example, in the debate about new terrorism, historic roots were denied and *hodie*-centric reasoning dominated.¹³ The field would benefit from looking further back into history and we suggest that a perspective from the *longue duree* is essential. This

¹³Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Leena Malkki, 'The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis', in Richard Jackson and Justin Sinclair (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Terrorism* (London: Routledge 2012), 35–42.

long-term perspective should notably include pre-nineteenth-century global history, enabling longer-term patterns to come to light in assisting with the study of today's challenges.

The concentration of strategic scholarship in military institutions

Traditionally the study of strategy was conducted within the walls of military academies and institutions. In the nineteenth century, the civilian strategist was almost non-existent. This changed with the advent of nuclear weapons and scholarship moved to think tanks like RAND and also to civilian universities, since nuclear war remained a theoretical exercise. While we would encourage the continued engagement in military colleges and academies of higher learning with strategy, it should not be its only locus. The study of strategy needs a firmer base in civilian institutions as well. From the perspective of cross fertilization and the different intellectual and policy foci present in those locations, renewal and new ideas can be born. This exchange of perspectives between the military and civilians was, of course, where the Golden Age of Strategic Studies in the 1950s also originated.

Either the purely practical or the purely theoretical

Not only in Strategic Studies but in the wider field of international relations there has been a debate to what extent the scholarship has divorced itself from practical relevance and gone off into the purely theoretical for the sake of theory alone.¹⁴ This also applies to the study of strategy. Scholars should consider recalibrating the needs and necessities of the study of strategy for both practice and academia. In the more distant past, the purely theoretical approach has been found to be problematic, with examples of Cold War abstract reasoning that were very far removed from reality. In recent years, the field has been accused of being too close to policy, so as to lose its independence and risk being co-opted by policy-makers, this trend is the more worrying given the seeming lack of strategy in many recent foreign policy adventures.¹⁵ For Strategic Studies to be relevant, a careful balance needs to be found between theoretical rigour, solidity and relevance for policy.

¹⁴Stephen M. Walt, 'The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations', *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 23–48; Bruce Jentleson, 'The Need for Praxis: Bringing Policy Relevance Back In', *International Security* 26/4, (2002), 169–183.

¹⁵Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War; Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013).

A positive vision

There are pressing world events that demand input and answers from scholars who have studied and theorised on the phenomenon of strategy. This is a field which still has much to contribute both intellectually and practically. What we are suggesting here is the plotting of a course between the hidebound Cold War perception of strategy and the wilder utopian shores in the broader field of security studies. As a plan of action to strengthen a global Strategic Studies enterprise, we formulate the following:

- The need to encourage research and publications exploring and developing the points suggested above in more visible and developed ways.
- The need for a scholarly outlet. This could come by rejuvenating existing journals such as the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, which would be the preferred option to build the necessary bridges. Alternatively a new journal devoted to the topic of Global Strategic Studies could be established but it would remain important to reinvigorate rather than splitting the field, any new journal should be focused on offering opportunities for dialogue and fostering a sense of common purpose.
- The need for a greater concentration and framing of research efforts and the establishment of a network of scholars devoted to the study of strategy from a truly global perspective.
- The organisation of panels at major conferences both within and beyond the field of Strategic Studies itself.
- The acquisition of research funding to pursue these goals with greater purpose.

Where should such a recalibration and redirection of the field towards global Strategic Studies lead us? First and foremost, it would create an area of research and investigation that is fit for the future. It would operate on the basis of the recognition that strategic challenges in the international system today are far more diverse and require a refreshed input than hitherto acknowledged. The challenges we see as most pressing are linked to a variety of non-state actors in the form of terrorists, insurgents, warlords, militia leaders, pirates and, most recently, the difficult to identify and easily deniable 'green men' that NATO is worried will be used to infiltrate the eastern frontiers of alliance territory. These diverse actors engage in a variety of different violent activities ranging from the purely criminal to the completely indiscriminate, and anything and everything in between. If we want the field to remain relevant, and make further development of strategic thought a serious and useful addition, we need to focus more on these actors and *their* ideas of strategy. A large-scale effort since the end of the Cold War has indeed tried to grapple with these agents in both local and global contexts. Most attempts have, however, been informed by tried and

tested approaches, such as the extrapolation of balance of power theories and the security dilemma to non-state actors. This exercise has run into trouble with shortcomings in this theorisation rapidly becoming apparent.¹⁶ We currently witness a concerning trend that with the increased assertiveness of Russia, some Strategic Studies scholars have been harking back to the Cold War literature on escalation dominance and deterrence. Even though the scholarly efforts are laudable, we should be wary of simply dusting off old concepts that seemed logical but were beyond utility already at the time of their conception.

Not only is it necessary to recognise the panoply of strategic actors, we also need to broaden the understanding of their behaviour from viewpoints other than that of the rational actor perspective. This could be highly beneficial for any grasp of the real driving forces of violent activity. It is not very helpful, as is common today, to assess the strategies of perceived opponents as something which we are familiar with but which they are not, i.e. ISIS is not a terrorist organisation.¹⁷ Furthermore, developments in the study of psychology and emotions in relation to war could lead us to new and productive insights. This is just one example of where the field could head.¹⁸

Most of the violent actors, listed above, operate in the non-Western world but with links between battle theatres becoming increasingly and pressingly relevant for policy and strategy. As others have pointed out, the *banlieues* in many a Western metropolis are now directly linked to battle theatres further afield in Asia and Africa.¹⁹ Working from a perspective where we link the local, the regional and the global and also the particular with the general would be highly beneficial for deeper investigation. Transgressing the boundaries between security perspectives that focus on the domestic and the international would also be highly productive to push the existing boundaries of the field. Conversely, most military operations today are carried out in coalitions or based on alliances in which non-Western partners participate, e.g. the most prominent participants in United Nations operations have for a number of years been non-Western states and the coalition of states fighting Daesh/ISIS consists of a mix of both regional and Western states. These facts deserve a more thorough treatment, if only to add to a better understanding of converging and diverging strategic cultures and 'ways of war'.

¹⁶See, for example, Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Esther Visser, 'The Irrelevance of the Security Dilemma for Civil Wars', *Civil Wars* 16/1 (2014), 65–85.

¹⁷Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'ISIS is not a Terrorist Group; Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat', *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2015), 94.

¹⁸Iain Hardie, Dominic Johnson, and Dominic Tierney, 'Psychological Aspects of War', In Christopher Coyne and Rachel Mathers (eds.), *The Handbook on the Political Economy of War* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 2011).

¹⁹See, for example, Andrew Hussey, *The French Intifada: The Long War Between France and its Arabs* (London: Granta 2014); David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains; The Coming of Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (London: Hurst 2013).

With a widening of the theoretical approach to the study of strategy, we could attain a richer understanding of what strategy is all about. When we move beyond the purely power- and interest-driven ideas and further relate to norms, expectations, appropriateness, consequence and culture, we can increase our grasp of not only what we are doing ourselves, and of how our partners perceive common problems but also what is driving our opponents.

Incorporating a longer-term vision would do justice to the many challenges we have faced in implementing by force the political desirables of restoring order, building democratic states and creating sustainable peace. These are all processes that have occurred before, for which history offers a wealth of insight but also sounds a note of caution. They require, among other things, staying power to attain success. If the stamina is not present, as history demonstrates, these types of undertakings should be avoided.²⁰

Building up further civilian expertise could help widen the currently small circles debating strategy and help prevent the risk of group think. Bringing in more outsiders would aid in curbing the tendency to simply regurgitate old ideas in new garb and increase the potential for critical self-reflection. The risk of narrow groupthink is more real than imagined; it is exemplified by the ideas coming out of NATO presently with a renewed attention to Cold War thinking, such as the importance of deterrence and escalation dominance. Providing and discussing alternative approaches to military challenges, which the alliance perceives itself as facing might be helpful in lessening the danger of intellectual straight-jackets. Civilian and independent expertise could help to broaden and deepen the debate.

Finally, finding a proper balance between the theoretical and the practical application would boost the field, not only scientifically, as it would increase its academic standing as a mature field of inquiry. It would also provide an impetus for practical application that is sufficiently divorced from day-to-day demands and the flavours of the month but still meets the requirements and challenges of praxis.

It seems then that we have a tremendous opportunity at this juncture to refresh and reinvigorate a field which has lost its lustre and is perceived to have been unable to respond to the wider circle of security studies scholarship which has either by-passed or enveloped the field. As Security Studies as a field *appears* well placed to explain the policy challenges facing the world, from different perspectives and seemingly with a truly global outlook,²¹ it has become all too easy for Strategic Studies to be painted as

²⁰Or at the very least we should better understand disengagement before entering, see, for example, Robert Johnson and Timothy Clack (eds.), *At the End of Military Intervention: Historical, Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal* (Oxford: OUP 2014).

²¹See, for example, the new *Journal of Global Security Studies* Available at: [<http://jogss.oxfordjournals.org/>].

a parochial, obsessive and introverted area of study which is increasingly irrelevant. The stripping out of strategy from this field, and increasingly from policy-making, has had a deleterious effect. Strategic Studies clearly has both the flexibility and tools within it to respond to today's challenges – the potential for renewal and relevance is clearly present, and is in many areas emerging in an exciting way – but in order to counter the assumptions which are increasingly made about the field and the successful (seemingly wilful) caricaturing of the discipline, it is necessary that the field of Strategic Studies changes and is *seen* to change. Renewal is necessary, this does not mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater but instead infusing new ideas and bringing a truly global scope to the field. In order to respond to a changing world, Strategic Studies must be able to respond with clear strategic answers to today's problems. The absence of good strategic thinking when facing the panoply of threats from both state and non-state actors is becoming increasingly evident; it is time for Strategic Studies to re-assume its rightful place at the forefront of the intellectual study of the threat and uses of force and the application of power to fulfil the ends of policy.

Around 20 years ago in an overview article Richard Betts asked 'should Strategic Studies survive?'.²² His answer then was a clear yes. Today, we argue that Strategic Studies indeed has a bright future, if we take these challenges seriously and see them as an impetus and inspiration to bring the community of scholars together with new focus. We look forward to the constructive debate that this manifesto is intended to provoke and welcome ideas about how the field can be reinvigorated and how Strategic Studies can become truly global.

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²²Richard K. Betts, 'Should Strategic Studies Survive?', *World Politics* 50/1 (1997), 7–33.

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