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America's strategic stupidity

Obama's new foreign policy team must beware of generals bearing predictions

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12 January 2013

Every few months, America's four-star admirals and generals gather at a military base not far from Washington to participate in what General Martin E. Dempsey, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, calls his 'strategic seminar'. The aim is to foresee the future, anticipating security challenges that the United States will face in the coming years, thereby enabling the Pentagon to prepare itself accordingly. With that end in mind, Dempsey and his colleagues engage in what the *New York Times* has styled 'a lethally earnest game of Risk', participants striding across 'a giant map of the world, larger than a basketball court' as they posit various crises and speculate on the response each might entail.

The enterprise invites derision. The photo accompanying the *Times* story shows Dempsey, arms akimbo, apparently deep in thought. He is standing astride Central Asia. Surrounding him are aides, dressed in civvies and wearing plastic booties to protect the map, notepads at the ready. Your thoughts, boss? It's a made-for-Kubrick set-up.

One ought to sympathise with General Dempsey. He is, after all, the principal military adviser to the president. In the formulation of basic national security policy, his voice counts. If the United States, maintaining far and away the world's most powerful and expensive military establishment, can chart a course that not only protects its interests but also advances global

peace and harmony, then Dempsey will deserve some measure of the credit. But unlike Dempsey's map, the real world is not fixed. Contra Tom Friedman, it's not flat. And it's not small. At a Pentagon strategic seminar you might stroll from Quantico to Cape Town for a cup of coffee without the boss even noticing you've left your post. In the real world, the trip's more difficult.

Yet Dempsey's map hints at the dirty secret that members of the fraternity of strategists, civilian and military alike, are loath to acknowledge. The formulation of strategy begins by assuming away complexity, reducing reality to a convenient caricature. Strategic analysis is almost by definition dumbed-down analysis. To conjure up solutions, you start by simplifying the problem.

Granted, on odd occasions, simplification may yield outcomes that are at least partially useful. The Cold War era provides one example. After the second world war, the world did not divide neatly into opposing eastern and western camps. Bipolarity was a largely fraudulent construct, as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and India's Jawaharal Nehru among others never ceased to point out. Yet bipolarity provided the United States with a made-to-order template for basic policy. The communists were the bad guys. The leaders of their camp were seemingly hell-bent on expanding; our camp was going to prevent that. Oversimplification yielded oddities (classifying Japan as western) and blunders (the Vietnam war being the largest), but by and large containment made sense.

Post-Cold War efforts to devise a strategy to replace containment have not made sense. The most important of those efforts occurred in the wake of 9/11. Once again, with George W. Bush at the helm, the United States sought to divide the world into two camps, with terrorism supplanting communism. As Bush famously put it, 'Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.' This time, however, Washington did not consider it sufficient merely to contain the threat. It was intent on entering the enemy camp, eliminating not only the terrorists but also the conditions giving rise to violent anti-Americanism. Confident that its military forces were unstoppable, the US waged preventive war and launched into the Global War on Terrorism.



Problems ensued. Not least among them was the fact that US forces turned out to be better at initiating hostilities than concluding them. Simply put, the troops proved unable to win, a shortcoming painfully evident in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet of far greater importance were developments away from the battlefields of the global war that Bush initiated and Barack Obama inherited. Post-9/11 bipolarity — ‘us’ against the terrorists with the world’s fate at stake — failed to account for what really mattered. Indeed, the Global War on Terrorism was irrelevant to the power shifts and re-alignments that were creating the international order of the 21st century. While the Americans were expending trillions of dollars in their futile effort to pacify Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Awakening was turning the Middle East upside down. China and India, along with Brazil and perhaps Turkey, were emerging as powers of the first rank. The global energy picture was being transformed (to America’s considerable advantage). And climate change was posing threats far beyond anything Osama bin Laden ever dreamed up.

I am not faulting Washington, preoccupied with the bugaboo of radical Islamist terrorism, for failing to devise a strategy that takes these matters into account. I am certainly not asking strategists for clever ideas on how the America can shape the future, whether by providing arms to Syrian rebels (who are, after all, terrorists) or by ‘pivoting’ toward East Asia in order to prevent China (America’s banker) from getting uppity.

Rather, I fault Washington for its unwillingness to acknowledge its persistent cluelessness in the face of all that has occurred since a prior US strategy purportedly ‘won’ the Cold War. What I am asking from strategists is this: fess up to your failures. Acknowledge the limits of your predictive abilities. Quit simplifying. Shut up.

In the present age, strategy as such has become a dangerous chimera. Strategy sustains the illusion that the United States can and should determine the course of world events, thereby keeping America in the global driver’s seat. Yet whatever is coming down the pike, you can count on one thing: it’s going to be something other than what General Dempsey anticipates as a

result of his strategic seminars. Nor should we expect Secretary of State John Kerry (or Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, if he wins confirmation) to do any better. When it comes to looking round the bend, the civilians are no more adept than the soldiers. As always, the United States — like every other nation — will be left to cope as best it can.

The one thing that the US actually could do to secure its future is the one thing that it refuses to do: demonstrate a capacity to manage its own affairs; live within its means; set its own house in order. In Washington, talk about global strategy provides an excuse to avoid doing what needs to be done.