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COOPERATE, CONTAIN, OR CONQUER: PRIORITIZING STRATEGY 70 YEARS ON

— Sir Lawrence Freedman

A common lament is that our leaders neglect strategy, leaving policy uncertain and inchoate. The agenda seems full. Relations with Cuba are being mended. Those with Iran are reaching an uneasy mix of shared interests and deep hostility. There is a series of confrontations with Russia, and uncertainty about how to manage the challenge and possibilities posed by China.

It all seems less easy than it did in the heady days of the early 90s, when globalization was spreading Western influence and the “End of History” could be proclaimed.

Faced with this agenda, our governments are often chastised for being myopic and short-term, and are compared unfavorably to our leading adversaries who are often assumed to be much cleverer. The term “Putin Envy” has been coined to refer to the tendency to admire the Russian president’s ability to make bold moves that leave the West looking flat-footed by comparison.

Even if this assessment of Mr. Putin’s strategic brilliance was fair, there are two reasons why Western governments are rarely able to follow a similar approach.

The first is that such boldness can require a degree of release from the encumbrances of democratic politics. Russian politics has taken a deeply authoritarian turn over the past few years. In modern democracies, strategy in practice will always be shaped by the need to gain public support, consensus among government departments, and to negotiate with allies as well as anticipate opponents.

We should not feel contemptuous if politicians worry about public opinion and future elections.

Kennedy’s speechwriter Ted Sorenson concluded that quarantine was the best response to Soviet missiles arriving in Cuba in 1962 when he could not write a convincing alternative speech explaining air strikes.

More accountable governments in July 1914 might have made more careful choices. Autocrats have more latitude. But that also makes it easier to make some terrible decisions without being challenged.

The second factor is that Western countries are largely status quo powers. They are comfortable with the existing system of alliances and trading relationships.

Status quo powers want nothing too disruptive to happen. When they do try to bring stability to regions such as the Middle East, their interventions tend to go awry as they try to get to grips with the complexities of local politics and then get caught out by the unexpected consequences of their actions.

It is often suggested that there is a third factor, a cultural predisposition to think differently about strategy, so that President Putin, for example, is playing chess, thinking a number of moves ahead, while President Obama is thinking poker, relying on bluff to get through difficult situations.

But Putin as strategist is impulsive, setting events in motion without being sure where they will end. If there is a cultural difference it may lie more in a Russian inclination to hide weakness by pretending to be stronger than is in fact the case.

In this way, while Putin’s moves are offensive in practice his motives are defensive. He acted in Ukraine because a state of vital interest had

rejected Russian entreaties to joining the Eurasian Union and was moving toward the EU, and possibly NATO, instead.

In September 2015, just as he was appreciating the limits on what he could achieve in Ukraine, he began air strikes in support of a long-standing client, President Assad of Syria, whose position was looking increasingly fragile.

In the case of Ukraine, although there have been calls for Western policy to be tougher, the strategy, as developed, has worked reasonably well. Russia has been put on the defensive diplomatically and under pressure by economic sanctions.

In Syria, by contrast, Western policy has been much less impressive. It took time to appreciate the dynamics of change in Syria, and when the case for intervention appeared compelling, both Obama and Cameron hesitated. There remain deep concerns that without another intervention along the lines of Iraq or Afghanistan there are limits as to what can be achieved.

The development of ISIS has been particularly alarming, but if only air strikes are possible then success depends on who is providing land forces to take advantage of these strikes.

Putin, by contrast, can work with Assad's forces, but they are now much depleted and it is not clear how Russia will respond should its client face yet more setbacks on the ground.

It must be assumed that Western powers will still find it necessary at some point to intervene in the Middle East and Africa. European powers discovered during 2015 how hard it is to insulate themselves from the consequences of disruption and distress.

Yet the main strategic priority of the West must be to maintain the structures that have served them well over the past 70 years, especially the network of alliances and systems of international trade and finance. Other powers might be frustrated by their existence, but they can't match them, and in the end if they want to prosper they need to adjust to their presence.

Globalization and the final victory of the West may have been oversold in the warm glow after the end of the Cold War, but it would be wrong to swing in the other direction and assume that our core strengths do not draw others in our direction in ways that they will never be drawn to Russia.

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