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DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

The official journal of the
NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

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Construction of 'the Indo-Pacific'

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Foreword

Is this the Age of Disinformation or the Age of Strategic Communications?

This is not as abstruse a question as might first appear at a time when many governments around the world are enthusiastically embracing what they believe to be the latter, only to conflate it unwittingly with its more empirical cousin. In short, there is a difference between these two concepts. And how one understands each has consequences for how we approach the turbulence of politics and geopolitics in the early twenty-first century.

How to bridge the two conceptually becomes the innovative challenge for both emergent disciplines.

My question—Age of Disinformation or Age of Strategic Communications?—is prompted by a coverline on a recent issue of the *Economist* magazine. Its claim was to a ‘new science of disinformation’ which would be accompanied by headlines in the subsequent feature announcing ‘the fog of information war’. Meanwhile, its editorial had taken the long view of history, suggesting that ‘Disinformation has existed for as long as there have been two sides to an argument’, only to bring us to a sharp stop revealing ‘concerns that technology, by making disinformation unbeatable, will threaten democracy itself’.¹ That said, debates around disinformation have moved on since being pushed to the fore a decade ago.

¹ ‘Disinformation: Truth or Lies?’, *The Economist*, 4 May 2024, p. 10.

To engage with governments anywhere today is to be drawn increasingly into the reactive and transactional; less so, the visionary. At the same time, a hunger on the part of politicians and civil servants to commission capacity building in strategic communications is undeniable. The world out there is a frightening place, filled with turmoil and fear, inviting the heated language of threats and vulnerabilities. And the world, and our lives in it, is becoming ever more securitised. Consequently, strategic communications is intuited as offering nation states a fresh way of seeing and a new way to put things right. But what is it? Where is it? And how to measure the change that it inherently promises? Not unreasonable questions from officials charged with exacting value for taxpayers' money and accounting to political overlords keen to demonstrate positive change to their electorates.

How do these two concepts, disinformation and strategic communications—each a lexical minefield—speak to one another? Are they distinct or symbiotic; do they conjure the image of chicken or egg? Much depends on the starting point—understood as the conceptual common denominator which makes sense of diverse types of political persuasion and coercion. For the next few pages, influence will serve as that overarching denominator. A longer discussion will be necessary to differentiate either from other types of terms and contexts to which they are applied. But first a review of some main assumptions and criteria that characterise each.

Strategic Communications: The Short and Winding Road

Strategic communications has followed a circuitous and interrupted course since its entry into the lexicon of politics, taking what were probably its first hesitant steps in Kofi Annan's report to the United Nations in 1997.²

2 Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations* (New York: United Nations, 1997).

Until then it had led a generic, if unspectacular, life in the corporate world and business schools, focused more on markets and the interests of shareholders. But a report commissioned by Annan and delivered by Mark Malloch-Brown began to widen the audience. It proposed:

The kind of communications that allows an organization to be effective in its substantive work as well as its constituency-building can be characterized as strategic communications [...] Strategic communications is more than the sum of its parts, which include public information, press relations, and constituency-building. Above all, it is an intimate link in policy-making. The vision of the Organization's role and priorities that drives the communications effort must proceed from the top policy-making level and pervade the Organization comprehensively.³

In hindsight, this was a radical step forward. The term strategic communications (StratCom) had already emerged during the presidency of John F. Kennedy in 1962. By which time Vietnam was already a familiar location on Washington's geopolitical map. The short-lived development of counter-insurgency (COIN) to fight 'small wars' was to be practised by Special Forces 'too unconventional to be called conventional'.⁴ Underlying COIN's 'hearts and minds' approach were already conceptual foundations for what would evolve into the interdisciplinary nature of strategic communications as we might understand it today. Green Berets of 1962 heard their president pronounce:

You will need to know and understand not only the foreign policy of the United States but the foreign policy of all countries scattered around the world who 20 years ago were the most distant names to us. You will need to give orders in different tongues and read maps by different systems. You will be involved in

3 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

4 John F. Kennedy, Address to West Point Class of '62, 6 June 1962.

economic judgments which most economists would hesitate to make.⁵

What was already apparent was that to pursue its aims successfully, the US military had to undergo institutional reorganisation to cope with the escalating demands of war. H.R. McMaster, who would later become National Security Advisor to President Donald Trump, explored the radical changes sought by the new president that would change the institutional culture and organisation in Washington's military decision-making.⁶ 'Flexible response' recognised a need to shift not only from ground to air superiority but to nuclear balance between the US and USSR. And it was played out in the context of institutional struggle between the 'new frontiersmen' supported by the White House and its 'whizz kids' in the Pentagon, and the 'old guard' Joint Chiefs of Staff who had dominated decision-making until then.

Political-military interdisciplinarity may have already been present in spirit and ambition. But to appreciate what strategic communications meant more widely in the armed forces in the 1960s, it bears quoting at length from the US Army Information Digest of 1965:⁷

Strategic Communications embraces the long-haul, point-to-point, fixed station and transportable communications facilities owned and operated by the Army or leased from commercial carriers. Generally, these strategic communications are the Army-operated portions of the Defense Communications System which are available to all military users.

Clearly, an operational system or quick-reaction tool, not a policy-level discipline. Nor indeed a 'hearts and minds' approach gazing over the distant horizon.

5 Ibid

6 H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (HarperPerennial, 1997).

7 Richard J. Meyer, *Army Information Digest*, 1965, p. 1. My thanks to Ben Heap for sourcing this publication.

The Strategic Communications Command (STRATCOM), one of the Army's newest major commands, is maintained at wartime readiness around the clock. From its headquarters nerve center, the Command Telecommunications Status Office, global operational direction extends to STRATCOM units in Viet Nam and the Dominican Republic and to all other theaters where STRATCOM subcommands operate designated strategic communications.

A far cry from a moral or visionary way of viewing strategic communications. McMaster, however, captured the breadth of John F. Kennedy's paradigm that already aligned with the more visionary ambition the term came to embrace by the early twenty-first century:

His grand ambition, the Great Society would provide medical care for the old, educational assistance for the young, lower taxes for big business, a higher minimum wage for workers, subsidies for farmers, job training for the unskilled, food for the hungry, housing for the homeless, income redistribution for the poor, legal protection for African-Americans, and reduced quotas for immigrants.⁸

Following scarring Western failures and frictions, particularly in the kinetic arena (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya), building on earlier humanitarian disasters (in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia) and more recent aggressions by authoritarian great powers (in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine), and, lest we forget, the challenge of authoritarian Islamic fundamentalists (in Syria, Iraq), a crisis of self-confidence in liberal democracies has laid the ground for a renewed appeal to reassert the export model of liberal values. A near-collapse of global capitalism in 2008–9 and a COVID pandemic from 2019 that swept the world proved only that the poor

8 McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 179.

suffered most and that intergovernmental collaboration often flowed only where it benefited politically and economically privileged elites. To summon afresh the values of international institutions which had underpinned the global order since World War II was to believe that previous generations had lacked the requisite insight into and sensitivity towards people who spoke a different language and were distanced by cultures Western communicators had simply failed to address.

The idea of soft power, more the fare of public intellectuals than academic scholars, caught on quickly in policy circles.⁹ It was easily grasped: if you could persuade through attraction rather than repel by applying force or hard power, it was then surely only a matter of finding the right means and ends to achieve desired strategic outcomes. Potentially through judicious blending of soft and hard, resulting in the application of smart power. Soon soft power, hard power, strategic communications, public diplomacy—terms that would characterise the world of security and foreign policy rather than economics or aid and development—took root in public discourse. Each would be differently nuanced by the historic landlords of these intellectual estates. But with the explosion in digital media infrastructures and low-cost handsets across consumer markets early this century, any simplistic notion of what it meant to spread ideas would be complicated by our lives in a complex, non-linear, and no longer linear world. With the notion of non-linearity and continual feedback loops came dynamic unpredictability. Unforeseen events and unintended consequences could reshape a world of billions of voices into which institutional communicators were attempting to project their own ambitions.

Conceptual research undertaken by theoreticians and writers of doctrine has breathed life into a nascent field that had been largely co-opted by practitioners understandably keen to get on with communicating strategically—only for them to be reminded that communicating strategically is what every human being does without a second thought. But projecting strategic communications is altogether different and

9 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power* (Public Affairs, 2005).

requires signing up to a certain list of prerequisites. In effect this multistoried house of wood that could sway from side to side in a crosswind demanded reverse engineering; new theoretical foundations had to be excavated, inserted, and pinned under a superstructure that continued to grow daily.

Those prerequisites would include favouring long-term over short-term change by striving to anchor enduring conversations in the public space; identifying one or more audiences and bridging into them in a multilateral conversation; pursuing a clear and refined idea or proposition in order to create an effect that would lead to changing the thinking or behaviour of the other party; drawing on all available talents and assets of the communicating agent or its sponsor in a holistic fashion; and recognising that all these attempts to influence others take place in a dynamic, highly contested environment where nobody has an automatic right to be heard, never mind accepted. Put more broadly, strategic communications was a ‘holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’.¹⁰

So far so good. The same might be argued variously by other types of influence, albeit not without resistance to their individual pleas: public relations (image management and damage limitation), commercial marketing and advertising (bringing a product to market and attracting consumers to it to the detriment of its competitors), corporate branding (the essential quality of an organisation), and the much misunderstood and highly contested propaganda (from untruth-telling on an industrial scale to the assertion that all human life is a form of propaganda). The last is all too often treated as the measure by which all other forms of influence should be weighed; unwisely, probably. After all, should the starting point for writing a history of the automobile be a horse and carriage or a 1950s Corvette?

10 *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE, 2019), p. 46.

What has continued to haunt strategic communications is the accusation of old wine in new bottles. My own typology runs like this. *Instrumentalists* recognise in it the familiar use of techniques, tricks, and tactics—for them, it's about how to do it and through which outlets; *functionalists* identify refined organisational processes to deliver those tactical campaigns—here, it means how does it fit into other communications types and departments that already exist in an institution when strategic communications is introduced as a separate budget stream or team; and *essentialists* demand to know what at heart strategic communications is and why it is, rather than what it does, or how it does it—consequently, what differentiates it from other forms of political and geopolitical communications, and why do we even need it. A different 'way of seeing' comes in the shape of a *normative* faction with its ambition to achieve long-term, 'positive' change (a problematical concept in itself). But this represents change rooted in a set of ethics.

Which goes to the heart of what is strategic communications: a value-free and more effective way of delivering 'messages' or an attempt to convey an idea by constructing a conversation rooted in a particular way of seeing the world? Inevitably, the latter leads to accusations of preaching an ideology. And that in turn prompts the question: if strategic communications defines itself by its underlying value system, then whose values or which system?

Furthermore, the tendency in political communications to talk of 'messages' conflates uncritically a number of ideas. Communication between people is fundamentally about the exchange of meanings that derive from divergent contexts, with different intentions and varying degrees of receptivity. Messages are the preserve of short-term campaigns: meanings attach to discourses that shape competing interests in discursive theatres and retain an eye to the long term.

Following years of heated bureaucratic wrangling, strategic communications has come to differentiate itself via a value system. But only in certain quarters. Often begrudgingly, and not without controversy, this

would become the distinct marker according to two documents—NATO’s AJP-10 and the Terminology Working Group’s Report 3, both produced by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, in Riga, in early 2023. By anchoring strategic communications in a belief system that sought to protect and encourage the fundamental freedoms of individuals—freedom of speech, of worship, from want, and from oppression¹¹—this would respect the conceptual bridge between today and the Washington Treaty that created the new NATO in 1949 while enshrining the same responsibility to protect individual citizens of its member states.

At this point, I would insert a paradigm of the ethical tensions that pull and push the four key dimensions delineating the field. Imagine two axes that intersect forming a compass. The vertical reads Authority and Legitimacy; the horizontal reads Persuasion and Coercion. Each axis is symbiotic, meaning that authority cannot exist without legitimacy. Authority entails holding the power to govern, however attained; legitimacy confers the moral right to govern on behalf of the governed. The one defines itself against the other; they are inextricably linked. Similarly with persuasion and coercion. Persuasion changes people or consolidates the status quo through attraction and consensus; coercion uses force of different degrees to change or conserve the status quo. And each of these dimensions acts and reacts in conjunction with its neighbours. Overall, what we are looking at is a space for negotiating a social contract. And strategic communications becomes an hour-by-hour calibration of these tensions while engaged in a moral conversation.¹²

To highlight the dilemma of this position, see how the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz captures the push-and-pull between coercion and persuasion when grappling with the thorny tension between exerting political freedom and economic freedom:

11 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, The Four Freedoms, State of the Nation speech, January 1941.

12 Neville Bolt (ed.), *Understanding Strategic Communications*, Terminology Working Group No. 3 (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

We uncover a host of conundrums, including the key insight that mild coercion—forcing someone to do something that he of his own volition would not do—can, in some instances, enhance everyone’s freedom, even the freedom of those being coerced.¹³

So much of the drive from states towards adopting strategic communications’ conceptual frameworks and praxis derives from a technologically determinist reading of societies. Here, states first struggle internally to integrate cross-government communications via processes and technologies, and externally to project a persuasive single voice to increasingly fragmented and siloed audiences with access to the internet, mobile telephony, and artificial intelligence. At the same time the return to great power geopolitics has seen a reassertion of irredentist territorial ambitions. Against a backdrop of a decline in democratic states since the highpoint in the 1980s,¹⁴ a new convergence of authoritarian and totalitarian states grew committed to replace the rules-based order that had dominated geopolitics since 1945 and which they held to be an American hegemonic construct.

These concerns have come to apply a state security lens to this emergent field, unfortunately less focused on other debates energising and dividing the world’s attention. How to speak about human security questions such as mass migration, viral pandemics, and climate change? Indeed, even economic transformation has taken a back seat to communications ranged around conflict and war. And yet it is these very concerns that require ambition, vision, and long-term commitment from a generation of political leaders more intent on solving immediate priorities that have coloured strategic communications commentaries. Whether conceptual thinking has been overshadowed by servicing transactional politics, and whether this is due to a loss of self-confidence, absence of vision, or dearth of inspired leadership in the West, the politics nonetheless risks

13 Joseph Stiglitz, *The Road to Freedom* (Allen Lane, 2024), pp. xiv–xv.

14 Democracy Index, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-polity>.

favouring the short over the long term, fixing the present at the cost of shaping the future.

From Disinformation to Foreign Interference

Everyone communicates strategically, but not everyone is a strategic communicator. Similarly, ‘not all disinformation is FIMI, and FIMI is not only disinformation’. Consequently, state-sponsored manipulations of information are to be found at the ‘crossroads of influence operations and cybersecurity’.¹⁵ The European External Action Service (EEAS) sees FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference) as ‘a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.’¹⁶

Enter disinformation and its multi-tiered manifestation, specifically the concept of FIMI. Disinformation and misinformation—deliberate dissemination of false information intended to subvert, and the unwitting spreading of the same—are viewed as threats to societal stability on a scale once unimaginable. In March 2018 Sergei Skripal, a former Russian double agent, and his daughter, Yulia, were poisoned when they came into contact with the Novichok nerve agent, smeared on the front door handle of their house in Salisbury, England. Accusations of Russian involvement and video evidence showing two military intelligence (GRU) agents were, however, not simply rebutted by Moscow. Rather, over fifty explanations of how the incident might have happened emanated from or were attributed to the Russian government—from the mildly feasible, which highlighted the proximity of the UK government’s chemical warfare research laboratory at Porton Down, to the even less

15 EU Disinfo Lab, *FIMI: Towards a European Redefinition of Foreign Interference*, April 2023, p. 4.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

convincing rumour that the British prime minister Theresa May might have perpetrated the deed herself.

From the absurd to the ridiculous, understandings around disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation¹⁷ accompanied attempts in the middle of the last decade to subvert the political status quo by flooding the public space with uncertainty via a host of stories to explain a single event. The BBC summed up the dilemma facing both journalists and politicians over one high-profile event: ‘No victim has come forward. There’s no investigation. And physical evidence? That doesn’t exist either.’ But a number of platforms—4chan, Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter—would soon be promulgating what rapidly became known as Pizzagate,¹⁸ to the detriment of Democrat presidential candidate and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Russia’s Internet Research Agency would frequently prove to be the originator of such stories. But the picture was yet to grow even more complex and problematic. The EEAS’s Strategic Communications research team, under the direction of Lutz Güllner, has faced the dilemma of a phenomenon which has both morphed organically into something more diffuse but nevertheless appears invested in all forms of state projection. Hence it extends beyond dualistic readings of truth versus untruth which have characterised Russian campaigns—a blend of daily opportunism mixed with a dash of forward planning. China’s emergence with a change of policy direction since the advent of Xi Jinping as president in 2013 has prompted a regionally (perhaps globally) hegemonic assertion of its sovereign claims. And these have conjoined with an ambition to draw Russia, Iran, North Korea, and BRICS countries and the Global South into becoming the foundation stone of an alternative order to the current rules-based international order of states.

17 Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap* (Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2018), pp. 28–33.

18 ‘The Saga of “Pizzagate”’, BBC Trending, 2 December 2016, www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38156985; Rolling Stone, ‘Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal’, 16 November 2017, www.rollingstone.com/feature/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/.

The World Economic Forum in 2024 published a threat analysis that saw disinformation and misinformation as the primary cause for concern over the next two years. Consequent societal polarisation polled as a consistent threat over the next decade, creating opportunities for foreign and domestic malign exploitation. Extreme weather conditions are the nearest competitor for people's attention.¹⁹

How FIMI has come to supplant conversations around more generic disinformation in informed circles lies in a more sophisticated attribution of the origin of malign influence. If disinformation is simply a condition of human nature—we all tell white lies as well as enormous howlers—and certain states wish to exploit that for their own national interest, well, perhaps it was ever thus. However, it nonetheless draws us quickly into the difficulty of pinning down *what is truth* wherever evidence is not apparent. Equally, *whose truth* is it anyway speaks to contemporary indulgence of moral equivalence. And *how to prove intent* is always a tough nut to crack. Rebuttal and deniable plausibility too are well-worn additions to the mix.

By contrast, FIMI describes a more serious tendency in the convergence of contemporary developments. FIMI would shape and even hollow out discursive integrity in an information ecology. So it doesn't so much invade the public space, understood as arenas of fair debate, as redraw its boundaries. Conceptually that means that economics, ecology, technology, and politics all become spaces for contest and control, but also spaces of denial and censorship and self-censorship. We might call this a holistic approach. Alternatively, we could view this as totalitarian. Knowledge and free argument are not simply denied; they are prohibited, closed down. Rather, knowledge is commodified and delegated to for-hire private enterprises, happy to distort for financial gain. And in pursuit of which, it becomes malleable and free of critical objectivity. Unfortunately, perhaps, Western communicators inherently play by a set of rules that conforms to democratic norms of free speech and evidenced argument. What happens when the competitor plays by an entirely different, anything-goes set of

19 *The Global Risks Report 2024*, 19th edn (World Economic Forum, 2024).

rules? Practitioners of strategic communications will recognise ‘using words and images, actions and inactions’ as the working capital of the field. But the creation of ‘non-space’ is less an instrumentalist concept and better appreciated through a lens of systems thinking.

How did we not see it coming? Perhaps our lens of analysis was outmoded or even excessively triumphalist following the Cold War. Perhaps this transformation arises from advances not just in public access to digital technologies but with the appearance of technologies that jump a generation at breakneck speed, and the effects of which even hi-tech corporations and governments, never mind consumers, all struggle to predict beyond tomorrow. And perhaps Western self-absorption is struggling to evaluate whether its own glass is half-full or half-empty—whether democracy is actually in trouble, faced with the rise of authoritarian tendencies across the world, or whether democrats are questioning their governance models with a desire to re-energise them for the challenging century ahead.

A constant trope is that human intervention can transform value-neutral technologies into weapons of disruption. Information, according to the EEAS, is only the bullet; we need to focus on the weapon, or the machine that delivers the communication. Subversion of the political and economic status quo of societies is a prediction waiting to come true: we are already witnessing the beginnings. At the same time, the use of disinformation campaigns has appeared on a massive scale, pursued consistently in recent years by Russia’s desire to create a first-stage effect and subvert targeted societies by creating uncertainty through the release of multiple stories into the public space, subsequently prompting secondary- and tertiary-stage disruption. And through which confusion consumers should struggle to interpret events, rather than be presented with definitive accounts of evidenced truth or rebuttals of a single, alternative truth.

To appreciate FIMI in its full dimension is to understand the changing nature of warfare in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Some claim to have witnessed a ‘transformation in military affairs’,²⁰ others discern ‘new and old wars’,²¹ and still others speak of ‘no peace, no war’.²² These ways of conceptualising strategic affairs need to be weighed against more recent discussions around hybrid war²³ and grey zone²⁴ and cognitive warfare.²⁵ Each has its promoters and detractors. But what they all point to is a proliferation of activities that undermine the historical reading of bureaucratic and organised combat that emerged from the Napoleonic model over two hundred years ago. Not only does language now prepare the terrain for kinetic intervention but it becomes the battleground in itself. The same words—democracy, freedom, civil society—are redefined to mean different things in different cultural contexts. Which constitutes more than two conversation partners talking past each other. Rather the modelling of alternative frames of reference leads to a head-to-head confrontation between discourses and value systems.

If Western strategic communications is to promote values of universal individualism, and fundamental freedoms safeguarding an individual’s rights, then how should we answer Katja Drinhausen’s concern? Her team’s *Decoding China Dictionary* compares the Western with the Chinese lexicon.²⁶ She asks: ‘Did you know that China’s Socialist Core Values include democracy and freedom?’ Which then raises the question ‘What is *Document No. 9* and why does it reject universal values?’ The language of political philosophy is being repurposed—cynically, one might say, and as part of a greater assault on a West that is struggling to find a metaphor to capture the true extent of this new form of engagement. At the end of the last century, academic Mary Kaldor had warned: ‘The new wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goal, methods of warfare and how they are financed. The goals of the new

20 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (Free Press, 2009).

21 Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars* (Stanford University Press, 2001).

22 Paul Richards, *No Peace, No War* (James Currey & Ohio University Press, 2005).

23 Hybrid CoE, www.hybridcoe.fi/. Ofer Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicisation*, paperback edn (London: Hurst, 2022).

24 Michael Green et al., *Deterrence Theory and Gray Zone Strategies* (CSIS, 2017).

25 Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, ‘Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA’s New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations’, *China Brief* 19 N° 16 (2019).

26 <https://decodingchina.eu/freedom-of-speech/>.

wars are identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars.²⁷ Meanwhile anthropologist Paul Richards argued:

In contrast to the vertically organized hierarchical units that were typical of ‘old wars’, the units that fight these wars include a disparate range of different types of groups such as paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups and also regular armies including breakaway units of regular armies. In organizational terms, they are highly decentralised and they operate through a mixture of confrontation and cooperation even when on opposing sides.²⁸

For any strategic communications community his words contained a veiled warning:

The Durkheimian tradition in anthropology, by contrast, makes us aware people hold ideas about morality and the ultimate good that reflect the way they are organised in society, and transcending this functional loop is no easy task. It is illusory to imagine that beyond the Cold War people simply ‘wake up’ to the idea that ‘Western’ values—open markets, and rights defined in individual terms—are best. Imposing such values through force of arms, or aid conditionalities, is liable to reinforce the very solidarities they seek to replace.

My point here is not to suggest that strategic communications is the preserve of warfare—unlike some who are reluctant to cut the cord with Thucydides. Nothing so simplistic. Rather, it should be understood that separation between war and peace, declarations and

27 Kaldor, *New & Old Wars*, p. 6.

28 Richards, *No Peace, No War*, p. 19.

treaties, accompanied an earlier period of state bureaucratic development. Hierarchical command and control came to choreograph war within rules-based performance in the modern period. Increasingly, the brief interlude of professional armies respecting the principle of non-belligerent, civilian safety had already come to an end a century ago. ‘No peace, no war’—war without beginning or end—and ‘sobels’, soldiers who serve the state by day, but switch to become rebels by night,²⁹ were concepts that characterised conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s; now they are prevalent throughout the world in some shape or form.

Building Bridges

Is this the Age of Disinformation or the Age of Strategic Communications? How much clear blue water flows between the two concepts? There are three clear points of connection here.

First, FIMI favours viewing the world through the lens of threat and vulnerability, and is currently locked in a reactive mode. Overwhelmed by the sheer breadth of techniques employed by authoritarian governments to destabilise the political status quo in democratic societies, FIMI finds itself caught between sustained attacks from malign actors and the frequent reluctance of Western risk-averse politicians to speak out against these actors even where domestic publics are endangered. Located in an operational world yet relying on detailed evidence gathering to expose this activity, resistance to FIMI seeks to shape policy inside a complex bureaucracy such as that of the European Union or Commission. The tendency is to want to counter, repeatedly.

While strategic communications may be called upon to serve the same demands in a world of threats, it derives its special character and strength from being pre-emptive and proactive, attempting to set its own agendas, and describe alternative rules to those prescribed by an aggressor. A desire

29 Paul Richards, ‘War and Peace in Sierra Leone’, *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 25 N° 2 (2001): 41–50.

to ‘see over the horizon’ or promote ‘blue sky thinking’ exposes strategic communications to the risk of stumbling over the obstacles closer to the ground, and consequently undermining the sincerity of its ambitions. Hence there is a tension between short-termism and long-termism, between reaction and pre-emption.

Second, both fields see instability and complexity as the theatre where information and communications are not limited to media distribution outlets. Instead, they are woven into all aspects of the body politic and conduct of social life. The environment which communicators attempt to influence is non-linear, dynamic, and contested. Popular notions of linear passing-on of knowledge one-to-one is heavily nuanced by theories of cognitive psychology. But it’s the spatial dimension which is most revealing. Systematic, deliberate, but also opportunistic use of social media platforms connected to all forms of legacy media, pressure exerted on diasporas as well as university populations to deny free speech, encouraging academic self-censorship, and even engaging in surveillance, together with the hollowing out of language (when does democracy become undemocratic; when is transparency no longer transparent?), require a new metaphor through which to make sense of this seeming confusion. An organism, ecology, or system come to mind, but still fail to grasp the entirety of the proposition.

And third, both fields see themselves as a blend of conceptual thinking and praxis. Both share an emphasis on values. For FIMI, the foundation stone remains the democratic principles enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (2016). European Union agencies, and the work of their analysts and policymakers, project values aligned with its preamble, ‘drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law’.³⁰ The treaty draws on a trajectory of inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which seeks the

30 Consolidated version of the Treaty of the European Union, 7 June 2016, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/oj.

‘advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people’.³¹ A growing consensus inside NATO—among military and civilian thinkers—places a similar accent on the alliance’s founding Washington Treaty (1949). Its umbilical cord is to Article 51 of the UN Charter and the inherent right of independent states to individual and collective defence,³² while NATO’s preamble aims ‘to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law’.³³ And that commitment is reinforced by NATO’s recent strategic communications Allied Joint Doctrine, AJP-10, which reiterates the fundamental value-based system that guides NATO’s pronouncements and actions.³⁴

Consequently, clear overlaps suggest that each field is not exclusive of the other. The world is a complicated and complex place, replete with deceptive paradoxes. If we are to make sense of the turbulence of the twenty-first century, it will require both a systematic and organic way of reimagining what we mean by communications. An obsession with ‘messaging’ seems quaintly anachronistic when faced with a continuum that spans war and peace, and need have no beginning nor end; the inside-outside and virtual-actual of sovereign borders; and the seamless confluence of geopolitics, geoeconomics, and geocology. The risk of not integrating FIMI more closely into strategic communications is that a failure to find successful counter-disinformation measures leads to an undermining of the long-term planning on which strategic communications depends. And any break in the continuum of campaigns must inevitably undermine long-term ambitions, since strategic communications success relies on coherence, continuity, and consistency. Yet nation states are built on knowing what they wish to be, not simply what they don’t wish to be.

31 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly, 10 December 1948, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

32 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

33 Ibid.

34 AJP-10, Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications, March 2023, NATO Standardization Office.

All this raises the question whether we are experiencing the interregnum of which the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci once wrote: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’³⁵ If the new is actually being born but we are failing to decipher its shape, then a closer working relationship between reactive FIMI and pre-emptive strategic communications is more than a nice-to-have; it’s a must-have.

Many of these themes are addressed throughout this issue of *Defence Strategic Communications*. Professor Chiyuki Aoi develops a new theory around the competition for discourse dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Her analysis of discursive theatres shows how geopolitical influence is being shaped to embrace multinational support. Through cartographic imaginaries, she applies spatial lenses to creating and contesting discourses.

What does it mean to be cool? And what can jazz teach us about strategic communications? Natalya Kovaleva tells a story of Cold War geopolitical communications through the innovative music of jazz legends Miles David, John Coltrane, and Bill Evans. Mark Laity also visits the Cold War and the years that followed to assess the first seventy-five years of NATO’s history—a time that has also witnessed the emergence of strategic communications as both a field of scholarship and praxis.

Paul Bell waves farewell to Georgia after four years, reflecting on the country and its people once again locked in protest against government lawmakers amid a crackdown on the opposition. Is Georgia on the road to a revolutionary moment or forever parked at the crossroads, he wonders. Mitch Ilbury assesses the prognosis of leading geoeconomists and considers whether the global economic system is broken. What has come to be called ‘permacrisis’ is beginning to echo dark developments of the early twentieth century, according to one leading observer. At the heart of this historical moment rages a struggle between democracy and capitalism. And James Farwell considers what it means to be a leader

35 *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

and effective communicator, recalling a hundred years of larger-than-life autocrats and democrats. Propaganda may once have captured how to win over populations, but is the term really able to capture the complex developments in information dissemination and communications we are encountering today?

Dr Neville Bolt
Editor-in-Chief
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The Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, and Strategic Communications: Construction of 'the Indo-Pacific'

Chiyuki Aoi

Keywords—*Indo-Pacific, cartography, geography, space, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), strategic autonomy, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Abstract

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the geopolitical centre of gravity in global security affairs and as a geopolitical space that is being both contested and (re)defined is one of the most significant events in international affairs of this century. This essay analyses the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space—a cartographical (map-making) exercise conducted by the key agencies of this region. This essay explores aspects of cartography as 'geopolitics in action', while the space constructed as the Indo-Pacific through such exercises is three-dimensional—cartographical/political, discursive/conceptual, and physical.

The present age may be the age of space instead. We are in an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered. We exist at a moment when the world is experiencing, I believe, something less like a great life that would develop through time than like a network that connects points and weaves its skin.

Michel Foucault, *Different Spaces*¹

One of the most significant events in international affairs of this century is the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the geopolitical centre of gravity in global security affairs and as a geopolitical space that is being both contested and (re)defined. In this evolution, what used to be ‘the Asia-Pacific’, the product of twentieth-century regionalism, has transformed into ‘the Indo-Pacific’, a global, values-based, and networked space representing the key geopolitical dynamics of the twenty-first century.

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space could be described as a cartographical (map-making) exercise conducted by the key agencies of this region.² Here, ‘maps’ denote the strategy or projection of power; cartography is, in essence, ‘geopolitics in action’, while the space constructed as the Indo-Pacific through such exercises is three-dimensional. It is, first, a political space, to which actors attach various ‘meanings’. Second, it is a discursive space, as it is through discourses that space is constructed/reconstructed to acquire value or meaning. Third, it is a geographical and territorial space, which is contested, and which thus renders the space political. The first is a cartographical definition of space; the second is a discursive/conceptual definition; and the third is a physical definition.

1 Michel Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 2, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Penguin Classics, 2020, Kindle version), p. 174.

2 On the Indo-Pacific and cartography, Chiyuki Aoi, ‘Unmapping the Indo-Pacific: A Strategic Communications Perspective’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 12 (Spring 2023).

When this transition of space from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is viewed from a strategic communications lens, we can see that the key strategic agencies in this evolution are the middle powers, driven into action by the increasing animosity and rivalry between the G2 as the United States and China. The middle powers, through discursive practices and spontaneous exercises of connectivity between states, but ones essentially based on values, have transformed the meaning attached to the region. Asia-Pacific as an epithet was defined as a hierarchical order under US hegemony. Formal, regional organisations emerged in the same space, most notably ASEAN. The discourse theatres of Asia-Pacific were both the hegemonic system of alliances and its regional institutions. While the system projected discourses onto the liberal international order (LIO), the institutions projected discourses around sovereignty and stability. By contrast, the Indo-Pacific is a political construct: a map still in the making, which denotes the overlap of political, discursive or conceptual, and geographical or territorial plans. Here, horizontally connected networks represent particular discourses on the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’, the ‘rules-based order’, and ‘like-mindedness’. The latter discourses are countered by those who argue for value pluralism and strategic autonomy.

Cartography—creating maps and hence capturing space in three dimensions: cartographical, discursive, and physical—can be argued to be *strategic communications in action*. Strategic communications is the ‘long-term shifting and shaping of significant discourses in societies’, as practised in this case by Indo-Pacific agencies.³ Shifts in discourses and the very discourse theatres that give rise to those discourses have driven the evolution of maps, or the mapped space from Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. Discourse theatres, including hubs of power, or patterned structures which distribute power—namely, hegemony or multipolar structures—are where discourses first arise. Discourse theatres may also be formal institutions or agreements between or groupings of nation

3 Neville Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4–5. Bolt gives the essentialist definition of strategic communications as such.

states; indeed, they may be alliances, international institutions founded upon particular norms, and ‘minilateral’ linkages.

Discourses not only shape and attach meaning to discursive/conceptual space. But through that attached meaning, they manage to create cartographical/political space, which will ultimately influence the delineation of physical space as well. How we speak about space ultimately leads to how we perceive that space on a map and eventually on the ground. This is because discursive space is best understood to comprise multiple topias—or heterotopia, to borrow Michel Foucault’s terminology.⁴ Discourse always gives rise to the ‘other’. It contrasts or counters pronouncements based upon differing sets of values. It renders space contested and political. Space is characterised by both connectivity and dysconnectivity.

By clarifying the conceptual setting, it allows us to explore the features of space and the politics surrounding space. Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific are paramount examples. Each setting informs the relationship between strategic communications, political discourses, geopolitics, and, more broadly, the politics of space. The ensuing discussion on the specifics of Asia-Pacific, followed by those of the Indo-Pacific, focuses on discourse theatres and the discourses they spawn. It also illuminates the idea of *strategic communications in play* or *geopolitics in action* in the construction of a new geopolitical space called the Indo-Pacific. Finally, these characteristics are linked conceptually to both cartography (political, discursive, or physical) and strategic communications. They focus on the quality of the latter as geopolitics in action, which, in turn, necessitates a conception of spatial power.

4 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias’, *Diacritics* 16 N° 1 (Spring 1986): 22–27. For its application, see Neville Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 13 (Autumn 2023).

Politics of Space: Implications for Geopolitics

The shifting balance of power caused by the rise of China provoked a ‘spatial politics’ arising from Indo-Pacific states. Spatial politics deriving from action and reaction to tectonic shifts in world politics brought about by China’s rise is noteworthy. Rather than focus solely on hard balancing vis-à-vis China, concerned actors first resorted to a *cartographical* approach to strategy, constructing a new conceptual space called the Indo-Pacific. Covering geostrategically critical areas, especially the South China Sea, the newly crafted space was invested with and subsequently came to project a certain meaning.⁵ The space was not shaped by conceptions of Cold War-style containment, or through lenses such as ‘spheres of influence’. Rather, it would come to be seen as a value-defined, cognitive or imagined space in which the most important values would be freedom of maritime transit through and the rule of law throughout the oceans of the region. More controversial were the ideas of democracy and fundamental freedoms. Nevertheless, these began to coalesce—to ‘glue’ together ‘like-minded’ countries, including those of the West, to realise collective interests in the region. Thus emerged the contested space of the Indo-Pacific, as multiple concerned agencies sought to imbue it with different meanings.⁶

The same dynamic produced a cross-regional discourse on what might be called ‘de-regionalisation’. Since the outset of the Cold War, regionalisation of security was a matter of fact. Security alliances in Europe (centring on NATO) and Asia (US-led bilateral alliances) were treated as separate,

5 For an earlier exploration of the relevance of cartography to both strategy and to strategic communications, see Aoi, ‘Unmapping the Indo-Pacific’.

6 The Indo-Pacific lacks an appropriate single metaphor to characterise it. In a way, Indo-Pacific itself is a metaphor denoting this new geopolitical space.

even if each comprised part of US strategy.⁷ That separation came to be seen as no longer capable of ensuring global security. What emerged was a connection between major hubs and centres across Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. The form this network took reflects incentives to deal with uncertainties and risks—less so a commitment to a formal cross-regional alliance structure opposed to certain potential adversaries. The sum of these parts has had the effect of replacing regionalism with networked cross-regionalism or globalism.

The creation of this new networked space is one notable feature of twenty-first-century Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Another is the link between strategic communications and the creation of an imagined space and its consequent cartography, where strategic communications would serve as a conduit for projecting the geopolitics of the new century.

Links between strategic communications and the creation of space have already been explored theoretically by scholars and practitioners of strategic communications who investigated the role of space in urban planning and architecture. They draw on a tradition emanating from the Chicago School of Social Constructivism⁸ or works aligned with it.

The French Marxist philosopher Henry Lefebvre pioneered the discussion of the ‘production of space’ from a sociological perspective. He argued for the need to have a knowledge of space, not as a natural or material void (into which one could place people or things, i.e. a view of space

7 Barry Buzan, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). It should be noted that there were attempts to create multilateral security alignments in Asia, especially in the early phase of the Cold War. Those attempts were often of a cross-regional character, such as the short-lived SEATO, based upon the view that events in one place affected events elsewhere. However, in the end, bilateral alliances largely prevailed in the Asia-Pacific as the primary defence architecture over multilateral form. Note the strict definition of multilateralism, which focuses on diffuse reciprocity and the indivisibility of peace, both high points for self-interested states to reach. John G. Ruggie, ‘Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution’, in *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). The bilateralism in Asian security architecture is often contrasted with the North Atlantic region. See Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, ‘Why is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism’, *International Organization* 56 No 3 (Summer 2002): 575–607; Mary N. Hampton, ‘NATO, Germany and the United States: Creating Positive Identity in Trans-Atlantia’, *Security Studies* 8 No 2–3 (1998): 235–69.

8 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

as ‘a container’) but as one historically defined, formed through the social, economic, and political experiences of human agency. Hence, Lefebvre perceived space not only as a physical or material condition but as a triad of the physical (nature), the mental (logical and formal abstractions), and the social.⁹

The triad was formed between spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representations. Spatial practice meant that space could be produced and reproduced. And particular locations would be attributed special sets of understandings characteristic of each social formation. This would be the way we all perceive the space around us that structures our everyday lives, ensuring societal cohesion and continuity (a ‘guaranteed level of competence and specific level of performance’).¹⁰

Representation of space for Lefebvre meant conceived space. Or, as described by him, the ‘space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers’.¹¹ That is, space as viewed by those who plan or build it, including by making maps and plans. The way space is built reflects the way in which power reproduces dominant discourses through surveillance, delineation, and control.¹² Hence, space becomes inseparable from ideology. Any subsequent representation is inevitably ideological if it contributes to reproducing the relations of production.¹³

Representational spaces and spaces of representations are spaces as ‘directly *lived* through [their] associated images and symbols, and hence the space[s] of “inhabitants” and “users”’.¹⁴ This is ‘the dominated—and hence passively experienced’ space which inhabitants try to ‘change and appropriate’ through their imagination. It ‘overlays physical space,

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1974; 1991), p. 11. Citations refer to the 1991 edition.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

12 Andrzej Zieleniec, ‘Lefebvre’s Politics of Space: Planning the Urban as Oeuvre’, *Urban Planning* 3 № 3 (2018): 5–15, at 6.

13 Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of Relations of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973; 1976), p. 29. Citation refers to 1976 edition.

14 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 39. Italics in the original.

making symbolic use of its objects'.¹⁵ Representational spaces refer to 'more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs'.¹⁶

Lefebvre argued, moreover, that space perceived in this way is always political. As an expression of modernity, politics had been historically perceived as outside or anathema to the rationality assumed to exist in planning and scientific processes of decision-making governing building spaces. However, in contrast, Lefebvre saw space as political: space was not a 'scientific object removed from ideology or politics'. Space had, furthermore, 'always been political and strategic'.¹⁷ In other words, space is 'shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process'. Space is 'literally filled with ideologies'.¹⁸ Lefebvre proposed that 'There is an ideology of spaces,' because space 'is a social product'.¹⁹

Such a view of space—as not merely physical but constructive/constructed, politicised, and social—is not incompatible with a conception of space applied to international politics.

In international politics, in both theory and practice, the territory or territoriality of the state—that is, physical space—is assumed. The prevalent interpretation is one of 'territory', where territory is not only a given material or physical condition (hence an 'empty space'), but also an object of political control, be it in the context of a balance of power or sphere of influence (i.e. ideology). For realists, strong sovereign control over a territory is a measure of power—stability, wealth, and morale included. Hence, territorial space must have a political quality. On the other hand, a constructivist reading of state/territory indicates that territorial space is both political and social. Sovereignty is an intersubjective condition, and territory is endowed with certain social meaning: sphere of responsibilities, legitimacy, and identities. International politics consequently

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Henri Lefebvre, 'Reflections on the Politics of Space', trans. Michael J. Enders, *Antipode* 8 N° 2 (1976): 30–37, at 31.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

entails a constructive practice that gives meaning to a given space—be it a source of power and stability, or a sphere of authority versus legitimacy, rights, duties, and responsibilities. Here, the power (of space) stems from social constructions.

Which arrives at the subject of geopolitics. An insightful conception of space is found in early twentieth-century geopolitical thought developed by Halford Mackinder.²⁰ His theory treats the *political* impact of geographical terrain. Geography, in his view, denotes unchangeable physical features, but those that are endowed with the power to define the strategy of those who reside in them. Geography creates power. Physical terrain—mountains, rivers, deserts, linked to the ideas and characters of those who occupy them—produces discourses and strategies, some profound enough to vie with European civilisations. Although Mackinder did not use the term geopolitics, his association of geography (which he categorised into land-based and maritime-based) with power was groundbreaking, and had a lasting impact on modern strategic thinking.

Turning back to philosophy, Michel Foucault, the versatile post-structuralist French philosopher, also profoundly focused on the link between space and power, and examined the way state power created space for the surveillance and structuration of social life—the idea of the panopticon.²¹ His view introduced a spatial dimension to power, as opposed to power as a material possession (of force or wealth) or as transactional ability (exchange).²² Space was political, as well as constructive: space, if built for a purpose, would enable deep-reaching surveillance and restrict/shape the movement and lives of those who are living in or constrained by the space. His view of space was one of a structure imposing delineation, connection, and disconnection upon an individual's life and work. It shaped their views of self and of society and state. Hence, space was

20 H.J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History (1904)', *Geographical Journal* 170 N° 4 (December 2004): 298–321; Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Origami Books, 2020, Kindle version).

21 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Penguin Modern Classics, 2020).

22 These are modernist conceptions of power. David Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

constructive of power (understood as control), as well as constituted by power.

Foucault further developed the idea of multiplicity of space: namely, dystopia and heterotopia as conceptual opposites of utopia. His notion of heterotopias denotes the idea of differentiated and disconnected yet juxtaposed spaces. Accordingly, ‘we do not live within a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.’²³

The Foucauldian idea of ‘surveillance’ as spatial power may not be considered a ‘normal’ condition to be found in any international political sphere usually characterised as the coexistence of independent states. The notion of surveillance may be more aptly applied to domestic systems at various levels (especially strong forms of it might be found in authoritarian states) or to particular situations of occupation by foreign powers.

However, the condition of ‘disconnected yet juxtaposed’ space is highly applicable to international politics. This aligns with the particular feature of international politics (often characterised in the jargon as ‘anarchy’) where sovereign states are endowed with the highest authority to decide matters of their own affairs without external interference. The relativist world view is akin to world politics, where value pluralism—a form of heterotopia—is a constant.²⁴

More recently, the notion of space was influential in Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt’s work on irregular warfare and revolutions. Their book *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* features two distinct imagined maps or cartography, contrasting the ‘state map’ and the ‘network map’ as denoting two different views of space.²⁵ Space for them implies strategy, as maps are viewed as laid-out plans. The state

23 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, 23.

24 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th edn (New York: M. Hills, 1978).

25 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

map and network map, as presented by Michelsen and Bolt, are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they do coexist in a system, but are conceptually distinct. They represent disconnected world views. These cartographical strategies juxtapose different discourses.

The intellectual trends about ‘space’ outlined above may point to the emerging trends of critical geopolitics. The latter discipline is concerned not only with physical space but with the meaning that physical space disseminates. These socially contextualised views of space and their relationship to power are a helpful guide to understanding the critical transition from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. To reiterate: space in this analysis is a triad—cartographical (political), discursive (conceptual), and physical (geographical/territorial).

From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Transformation of the Space

The triad of spatial conceptions comprising the cartographical, discursive, and physical is highly illuminating about the transition from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. So is the view of space as composed of a set meaning, or competing meanings. In a space, the physical domain (itself a source of power, hence political) is overlaid with discourses that would define its meaning and thereby become the venue of cartographical competition. An analysis of discourse theatres and discourses will illuminate this process in the context of both Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. The evaluation brings to the surface the competition over the meaning of the given physical space (whose boundary is contested), shaping cartographical (political) space.

Asia-Pacific: Discourse Theatres and Discourses

Asia-Pacific was a regional construct spawned by international relations in the wake of World War II. The defining feature of the post-war era

was American hegemony, with the United States holding one third of the world's wealth, and its influence dominating the post-war Asia-Pacific. From that era of American hegemony emerged the LIO, supported not only by US power and wealth but also by domestic political alignments that accepted American leadership in upholding the post-war order based upon liberal values.²⁶

The newly emerged Asia-Pacific space retained the scars of the defeated Japanese Empire, which had accepted unconditional surrender to the Allied powers. The vacuum created by a departing Japanese Imperial Army throughout Asia was quickly filled by newly independent states, often unstable, divided, and with highly ambitious leaders, or contested sovereignty. These included South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK), North Korea (Democratic Republic of Korea, DPRK), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Also present in this space was the strong and growing threat of communism. In 1949 mainland China fell under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, which established a stronghold of communist ideology that inspired many political movements globally, including occupied states in Asia-Pacific that were struggling to gain political control and independence. The main discourse theatres of Asia-Pacific emerged from this triad of political conditions: American hegemony, the threat or allure of communism, and the demise of the Japanese Empire. And each theatre disseminated its distinct discourse.

American Hegemony and Emerging Discourses on the LIO

The main discourse theatre of Asia-Pacific was American hegemony itself. And the resulting US-led 'hub-and-spoke' alliances, the region's primary defence architecture, comprised distinct discourse theatres in their own

26 John Ruggie, 'International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order', *International Organization* 36 N° 2 (Spring 1982).

right.²⁷ The spokes were America's much weaker allies and included Japan, the Philippines, Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), the ROK, and Thailand. They shared an interest in containing communism, either externally or internally instigated. The hub-and-spoke structure formed hierarchical relations²⁸ dominated by the United States, while the spokes were not mutually connected in a way to create formal security relations. In this sense, the alliance structure was very different from that of the Europe/North Atlantic area where collective defence was organised among multiple alliance members.²⁹

The defining discourse of Asia-Pacific to emerge from these discourse theatres revolved around themes of American hegemony and the LIO. Today this discourse survives, although its specific outcome is always subject to some fluctuation. The discourse, which follows in the tradition of the Atlantic Charter (1941) through to the United Nations Charter (1945) and Bretton Woods institutions, covered overlapping issue areas including security, international norms (of fundamental freedoms), and economy. The central thrust of that discourse was the assertion that peace, fundamental freedoms, and prosperity were linked and inseparable. The link between peace, human rights, and development is a prominent feature of the United Nations Charter, for example, and this line of discourse treats each as part of the same connected platform.³⁰

When applied to Asia-Pacific, the security tenets of the LIO discourse merged with the hub-and-spoke alliance system, and thus comprised the following arguments:

27 The hub-and-spoke image is attributed to Secretary John Foster Dulles. Victor Cha, "'Powerplay': Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia", *International Security* 34 N° 3 (Winter 2009–2010): 158–96, at 158.

28 Regarding the argument that the liberal international order of the post-war era was hierarchical, see John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011, Kindle version).

29 There is no 'attack on one is attack on all' provision in the Asia-Pacific to this day (except in the Oceanian context).

30 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992).

- a. American allies in Asia-Pacific are part of the American global strategy of containment³¹
- b. the LIO thus established serves the security and fundamental freedom of American allies in the Asia-Pacific region³² and
- c. prosperity is achieved through open and free economic transactions supported by the liberal economic order.³³

In terms of security alliances, the Asia-Pacific region was embedded in the global American-led strategy of containment of the USSR. Although there was no NATO-like collective defence system established there, it was expected that out of those bilateral alliances would emerge a common sense of security and shared interests, and the alliance was understood to be constructive. John Foster Dulles, in his *Foreign Affairs* article of 1952, wrote:

The North Atlantic Treaty reflected a sense of common destiny as between the peoples of the West, which grew out of a community of race, religion and political institutions, and it had been tested in two world wars before it was formalized. The security treaties which we have now made with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Japan reflect the fact that the historical events of the recent past have developed a sense of common destiny between our nation and each of those others.

In terms of economy, the LIO proved beneficial to the Asia-Pacific nations. Japan achieved its 'miraculous' growth in the late 1950s and 1960s to

31 On the US narrative explaining the rationale of incorporating its new allies in Asia in the US-led Western block, see John Foster Dulles, 'Security in the Pacific', *Foreign Affairs* 30 N° 2 (January 1952): 175–87, at 184.

32 Ibid.

33 David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization* 75 (Spring 2021): 225–57; Ruggie, 'International Regimes'.

become the world's second largest economy in 1968. The rapid growth was experienced later as well by the so-called 'tiger' nations, namely Taiwan, Singapore, and the ROK. All these countries benefited from access to the open US/international market. Eventually, China (and Russia, for that matter) benefited from the LIO, as it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO).³⁴

Integral to the LIO in the economic domain was the discourse on liberal principles: openness, fairness, and reciprocity (such as free-trade rules). These principles were stressed in order to make the movement of people and goods freer, allowing conditions for economic growth and, so it was also hoped, stability and democracy. These were not only narrated by American and Western leaders but also enshrined in international institutions, most notably the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the WTO. The need to endorse the benefits of the same principles in a regional setting prompted Asia-Pacific states to create regional versions of free-trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

The 'Other' Discourses: Emerging Inconsistencies in the LIO

The LIO covered multiple issue areas or domains. While security and economic prosperity were actively pursued, certain areas of international principles, such as human rights, did not enjoy united support in Asia-Pacific. The discourse surrounding American hegemony and the LIO, therefore, failed to disseminate evenly. Nor were its effects even.

Witness the 'other' discourses on American hegemony—namely, the limits of power. One aspect of this was the fear on the part of the stronger ally, the United States, of becoming overextended. As Cha argued, the fear of entanglement (or overextension) led the United States to pursue a double-edged alliance policy, that is, using the alliance to deter Soviet expansion while trying to control adventurism on the part of regional

34 Lake et al., 'Challenges to the Liberal Order'.

allies that might involve Americans in escalating regional conflict.³⁵ In the eyes of the weaker allies, alliance management then had come to entail a sensitive balancing act of trying to ensure American presence in the Asia-Pacific region (fear of abandonment) while discouraging its overinvolvement. Discourses on alliance management thus came to exhibit tensions with the need to project commitment to the alliance for extended deterrence, and to spread liberal values to nurture a common perception of security.

Another aspect of the limits of power was the US/Western failure to realise visions for the region's economic or political development in the context of continuing decolonisation and the deepening Cold War in Asia. Even as the preponderant power,³⁶ influencing local political or social development was difficult for the United States. The discourses that developed, most notably around the controversial intervention in Indochina in the aftermath of the French withdrawal, revolved around the inherent tension between 'the domino-effect' narrative and the limits of American control and the fundamental reluctance of the United States to commit to long-term 'nation-building'. The 'domino-effect' narrative exemplified the Cold War logic of containing regional conflict that might result in the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence.³⁷ Discourses also formed around the issue of moral justification for American involvement in remote Third World conflicts—the discourse of modernisation and democratisation.³⁸ Yet public perceptions that emerged doubting the utility of costly, long-term American engagement in the region cast a negative light on the logic of supporting democratisation in the context of Third World conflicts.

Such discourses of doubt stood in tension with the US-led LIO narrative, although earlier successes in rehabilitating Germany and Japan

35 Cha, 'Powerplay'.

36 Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford University Press, 1993).

37 'Transcript of President Eisenhower's Press Conference, with Comments on Indo-China', *New York Times*, 8 April 1954.

38 On the influence of modernisation theory, see Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

remained intact. Eventually, some of the Asia-Pacific experiments in internally driven democratisation succeeded in countries such as the ROK, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

*The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),
Sovereignty, and ASEAN Centrality*

Asian states (often small states) and institutions also composed their own discourse theatres, producing their discursive practices based upon specific strategic visions and prerogatives. These comprised the essential part of the 'other', or alternatives to Western-led discourses, often those formed in relation to the great powers in the region, namely, the US, the USSR or China, in order to stave off interference in smaller states' internal affairs.

The most significant of the 'other' discourse theatres that formed in the context of Cold War Asia-Pacific was ASEAN. Created in 1967, it was soon to become the pre-eminent regional institution. The founding members of ASEAN were Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. ASEAN emerged in the aftermath of *Konfrontasi*, Indonesia's instigated attack challenging the sovereignty of newly independent Malaysia and Singapore. ASEAN served three interconnected purposes: to alleviate intra-ASEAN tensions, to forestall external actors' influence in the region, and to promote the socio-economic development of its member states as a means to alleviating the threat of communist insurgency.³⁹ In 1984 Brunei joined, and by the late 1990s the bloc incorporated the socialist/communist countries in the region, namely, Vietnam (in 1995), Laos (1997), and Cambodia (1999). After much dispute Myanmar, under long-term military dictatorship, was also allowed to join in 1997.

Given its history, ASEAN as a main discourse theatre disseminated the discourses on sovereignty—the principle of sovereign equality and banning interference not only from outside the region but also by fellow

39 Shaun Narine, 'The English School and ASEAN', *Pacific Review* 19 N° 2 (June 2006): 199–218.

members in each other's affairs.⁴⁰ Other principles followed this respect for sovereignty, namely: pacific settlement of conflict, non-involvement of ASEAN in bilateral disputes of member countries, and mutual respect and quiet diplomacy to resolve sensitive domestic or transnational issues.⁴¹

Further, 'ASEAN centrality' is a prominent discourse coming out of ASEAN. It denotes the central position of ASEAN in regional diplomacy and institutions—that is, 'ASEAN's place at the centre of the region's diplomatic architecture'⁴²—such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and others. It was an idea that gradually emerged through meetings, and the 2007 ASEAN Charter declared ASEAN centrality to be the objective and principle of ASEAN. ASEAN was to remain at the centre of regional security diplomacy, through its ability to 'advance priorities of member states internationally'.⁴³

For some, therefore, ASEAN centrality refers to a 'diplomatic culture',⁴⁴ and ASEAN should be allowed a central position in international relations in the pivotal region of Asia-Pacific. ASEAN centrality 'constitutes fundamental norms and values that guide member states in shaping an international society and creating order'.⁴⁵ It refers to a mode of diplomacy where 'every ASEAN state consults with each other, particularly on a matter which may cause irritating bilateral impact'.⁴⁶

The discourse on ASEAN centrality is thus linked to the idea of the 'ASEAN way', meaning a particular diplomatic style where decisions are taken on the basis of frequent mutual consultations and consensus, supported by mutual respect for sovereignty and assertion

40 Bangkok Declaration of 1967.

41 The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 1976.

42 Aaron Connelly, 'The Often-Overlooked Meaning of "ASEAN Centrality"', *IJSS Online Analysis* (2022), available at www.ijss.org/ja-JP/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/06/the-often-overlooked-meaning-of-asean-centrality [accessed 5 April 2024].

43 Connelly, 'ASEAN Centrality'.

44 I.G.W. Wicaksana and M.F. Karim, 'How Regional Organization Survives', *Contemporary Politics* 29 N° 5 (2023): 666.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

of non-interference towards the outside.⁴⁷ In a trend that will only strengthen in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's diplomatic style amounts to a version of *strategic autonomy*.

Further, the ASEAN bloc was ideologically associated with the G77 or non-aligned group in the UN General Assembly (even if most original members had alliance or defence arrangements with the West). Hence a range of narratives outlining 'non-aligned-ness' emanated from the bloc, for example, speaking out against Western hypocrisy (double standards on human rights) and selectiveness in applying liberal values in international relations.

As ASEAN led the way as an institution in the 1990s, a strong sense of regionalism—'the Asia-Pacific' and even pan-Asianism ('the ASEAN way') emerged. The new institutions of the 1990s tended to incorporate China (as well as Russia and the United States). The logic was still that ASEAN was to be at the 'centre', often chairing meetings and helping to define agendas.

The Indo-Pacific: Discourse Theatres and Discourses

While the Asia-Pacific discursive space was founded upon American hegemony, giving rise to discourses related to the LIO, the major change in the region is the relative waning of that foundation triggered by China's rise. Although the consequence of a continuing power transition is still unclear, the shift in the balance of power—affected by India's rise as well—prompted the rise of new discourse theatres, and in turn affected its discourses. These shifts occurring at the same time interacted with foreign policy trends in the region that preceded China's rise. They include the realisation that expanding democratic values would bring about stability and carry strategic significance in what would become the 'Indo-Pacific' space.

47 Hiro Katsumata, 'The Reconstruction of Diplomatic Norms in Southeast Asia: The Case for Strict Adherence to the "ASEAN Way"', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25 N° 1 (April 2003).

India–Japan–Australia–US Axis and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

The most notable of the Indo-Pacific discourse theatres are the new linkages that developed bilaterally or minilaterally between and among India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Traditionally a non-aligned country, India was reluctant to form any military alliances or indeed other alignment with great powers. However, in 2007 India and Japan agreed to strengthen their relations and collaborate to promote freedom, democracy, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Following the late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's speech in the Indian parliament 'Confluence of the Two Seas',⁴⁸ the idea of the Indo-Pacific was promoted as a metaphor for strengthened diplomatic collaboration between the two nations, on the basis of their common identity and shared values (democracy). The Indo-Pacific, according to the vision of its architect, Abe, was to be the 'seas of freedom and prosperity', supported by the 'largest democracy in the world' and another 'democracy that is equally representing Asia'. Renewed India–Japan relations became a discourse theatre that gave rise to long-term discourses on the Indo-Pacific—later to turn into the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.

Four democratic countries in this region, namely, India, Australia, Japan, and the US, played an important role in this process of defining the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific'. Here, an important factor is India's rise. This has been driven by its economic growth. But that has resulted in an appreciation that India's ever-growing trade (and reliance abroad for its energy and raw materials) meant its national interest lay in maritime capabilities to secure the Indian Ocean.⁴⁹ In 2015 India's prime minister Narendra Modi devised a vision in which he declared that India would achieve the position of leading power in the Indian Ocean. That vision

48 Shinzo Abe, 'Confluence of the Two Seas', speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007, available at www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html [accessed 2 April 2024].

49 Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival* 60 N° 3 (June–July 2018): 181–94.

was to be ‘rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home’.⁵⁰

Australia, too, declared the Indo-Pacific to be its zone of strategic interest in the 2013 Australian Defence White Paper, becoming the first country to do so.⁵¹ Australia then pursued its own policy to project power into the Indo-Pacific region, aiming to strengthen its alliance with the United States in order to assist it in prolonging US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. Australia also sought to deepen bilateral relations with both Japan and India to promote the joint focus on the FOIP.⁵²

Canberra finds the FOIP compatible with its middle power identity, as well as its status as a junior alliance partner of the United States.⁵³ Its middle power identity is also compatible with its support for a rules-based international order. Canberra defines *freedom* as the ability of all states in the region to make sovereign economic and strategic decisions free from interference by powerful states, an idea reminiscent of the European idea of strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. I shall return to this topic later. Australia also pledged to promote the rules-based order, as a way to protect the sovereignty of smaller states, including Australia itself. Australia tends to be more vocal in supporting liberal institutions, universal values, and human rights.⁵⁴

The United States was one of the earliest supporters of the concept of the Indo-Pacific and of the FOIP. During the Obama administration, then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton featured the Indo-Pacific in

50 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, ‘Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius’, 12 March 2015, www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/Prime_Ministers_Remarks_at_the_Commissioning_of_Offshore_Patrol_Vessel_OPV_Barracuda_in_Mauritius_March_12_2015 [accessed 11 May 2024].

51 Australia, Department of Defence, Defence White Paper, 2013. Rory Medcalf, ‘In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia’s New Strategic Map’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68 N° 4 (2014): 470–83.

52 Lavina Lee, ‘Australia and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Strategy for the Defence of a “Rules-Based Order”’, in *The Indo-Pacific Theatre: Strategic Visions and Frameworks*, S. Roy-Chaudhury (ed.), (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2022, Kindle version).

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

her speeches in 2010 to denote closer relations with Japan and India, as well as Australia. In the Obama administration's 'rebalance' to Asia, America's allies in Asia, including Australia and Japan, were considered important building blocks. President Obama addressed both the Indian and the Australian parliaments in 2011. In each case he stressed the importance of both countries as US partners in achieving economic growth, peace, and stability.⁵⁵ Especially in his address to Australia, Obama underlined the commitment to the US as a 'Pacific nation' that had made 'a deliberate and strategic decision' to 'play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future'.⁵⁶

The US focus on the Indo-Pacific became sharper from the outset of the Trump administration, which published for the first time an Indo-Pacific strategy.⁵⁷ Trump's strategy in the region centred on its clear focus on a rising China, expressed through economic and military practices and US alliance relations. The Trump administration's foreign policy more generally revealed some controversial elements, particularly the push for greater burden-sharing in defence expenditure on the part of allies: a demand which often accompanied the threat of US withdrawal from these arrangements. Trump failed, moreover, to promote free trade in regions where it was needed. His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade agreement meant that Indo-Pacific nations (especially Japan under Abe) were obliged to collaborate to fill the gap left by the United States by negotiating for the CPTPP. They would now have to support the free-trade regime, until the US ultimately made a decision to rejoin. Trump's sustained rhetoric on 'Indo-Pacific strategy' disseminated the message that the Indo-Pacific is now fully embraced by the United States as a geostrategic concept.

55 White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Remarks by the President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, India', 8 November 2010, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/remarks-president-joint-session-indian-parliament-new-delhi-india> [accessed 11 May 2024]; White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament', 17 November 2011, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament> [accessed 11 May 2024].

56 White House, 'Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament'.

57 US Department of State, A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision, 4 November 2019.

The Biden administration has continued to stress the strategic relevance of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Whereas Trump's strategy was sharply focused on China and the maintenance of US supremacy in the region, Biden's stance has been to make US Indo-Pacific strategy compatible with that of Japan, India, Australia, the ROK, Oceania, the United Kingdom, and the EU. Hence, more multilateralist in approach. His stated objective is to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, a goal shared with Japan, and to build connections within and beyond the region, drive regional prosperity, bolster security, and build regional resilience in the face of transnational threats.⁵⁸ The strategy recognises that 'Indo-Pacific nations are helping to define the very nature of the international order'. The United States pledges to collaborate with Indo-Pacific countries to shape that free and open space.

The developing association among these four countries (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) around 2010 became the platform on which the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) was reactivated and became another significant discourse theatre playing host to the Indo-Pacific discourse.

The Quad was formed following the collective experience of forming a Core Group in the humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) mission in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami triggered by an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. In May 2007 senior diplomatic officials of these four countries—Australia, India, Japan, and the US—met for a dialogue for the first time. However, changes in their domestic political situations brought a halt to the process.

After a hiatus lasting until 2017, the Quad was revived when regular meetings at the level of senior officials restarted. Partly behind the revival were efforts by then Japanese prime minister Abe, having been returned for a second time to the premiership in 2012 following his sudden departure from office in 2008. His idea of a democratic security diamond—made

58 The White House, Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, February 2022.

up of the US, India, Japan, and Australia⁵⁹—revived the dynamism among them for security cooperation. In 2019 biannual meetings at foreign-minister level began, followed by the summit at the level of heads of state in 2021. The Quad focuses on practical cooperation in a broad range of ‘traditional and non-traditional’ security issues, ranging from maritime security, counterterrorism, cyber security, to HADR.

The Quad’s foremost contribution is that it has managed to tie India to the Indo-Pacific construct. India, as observed, has traditionally maintained a non-aligned policy, and represents a leadership figure in a wide-ranging group of ‘Global South’ or G77 countries. Currently, India is pragmatically linked to many minilaterals (somewhat annulling the concept of being non-aligned). Yet it has also chosen to remain in the Quad for pragmatic reasons relating to forging relations with major powers beyond the Indian Ocean region.

More recently, the Quad has initiated a series of practically oriented working groups. Often referred to as Quad Plus, they are clustered around various topics such as emerging technologies, COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution, and climate change. The Quad hub has thus further expanded to include issues of mutual concern, creating more points of connectivity.

These overlapping discourse theatres made up of the four democratic states Japan, India, Australia, and the United States produce consistent discourses on the FOIP, as well as around values and like-mindedness (further discussed below) to form discourse complexes.

While many ‘own’ the idea of the Indo-Pacific, the FOIP is a Japanese-initiated discourse. After Abe’s return as prime minister in 2012, he swiftly moved to upgrade Japan’s grand strategy, including focusing on global diplomacy and further framing the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, it was his approach to ‘cartography’ that defined Japan’s foreign

59 Shinzo Abe, ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’, *Project Syndicate* (27 December 2012), www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe [accessed 3 April 2024].

and security policy—‘diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map’.⁶⁰ In 2016, on the occasion of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Kenya, Abe announced his strategy for the FOIP, outlining the aim of Japan’s assistance: to strengthen the rule of law and, through providing connectivity projects and security cooperation, to promote a rules-based international order.

The story that Abe offered to promote the FOIP was clearly an ‘identity narrative’ stressing the foundational value that Japan’s foreign policy pursued.⁶¹ Japan told stories of itself as a nation that had overcome past militarism and rebuilt its country from the ashes of war to establish itself as a mature democracy.⁶² Stories of the past were linked to its future-oriented mantra of a ‘proactive contribution to peace’, which in itself was an identity narrative that was enshrined in its first National Security Strategy adopted in 2013 by the Abe administration. Japan was to pursue the goal of promoting the FOIP by engaging proactively with partners not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in Europe, based upon a ‘peace-oriented posture’ in global diplomacy. Japan’s policy would uphold the rule of law in the maritime domain, most notably the South China Sea, establishing connectivity and quality infrastructure assistance on land, especially in Southeast Asia.

The FOIP combines a focus on maritime security with Official Development Assistance (ODA). Japan’s ODA began in the 1950s as war reparations and had a focus on large-scale infrastructure development. The immediate predecessor to the concept of the FOIP was the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, an idea launched by the first Abe administration in 2006. This was Japan’s first, short-lived yet comprehensive assistance package with both economic and security components. This initiative sought to bring stability and prosperity to broad areas stretching from

60 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Prime Minister Abe’s Visit to Europe’, 9 May 2014, www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page22e_000373.html.

61 Chiyuki Aoi, ‘The Significance of Strategic Communications: Implications for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific’, *Policy Briefs* N° 2021/31, Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2870/264978>.

62 Abe, ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’.

northern and eastern Europe to central Asia to Oceania, and in Japan's vicinity in the Asia-Pacific region.



Figure 1. Japan's map of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Source: Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf [accessed 2 April 2024].

The FOIP (Figure 1) focus on 'free and open' was embedded in a broader reliance on values. For example, the newly emerging links between India and Japan, the US and Australia, Australia and Japan/India was justified in terms of common democratic values.⁶³ (The US–Japan Alliance had rested on common values from its outset in the early days of the Cold War.) For these nations democracy, fundamental freedoms, and prosperity became an underlying meaning attached to the Indo-Pacific that was to be supported by a dynamic collaboration between and among the Indo-Pacific nations. *Free and Open* Indo-Pacific is the key story that exemplifies a fundamentally values-based definition of the new geopolitical space.

63 Ibid.; White House, 'Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament'.

*Security Minilaterals, European Strategic Presence,
and Discourses of Like-Mindedness*

Turning to alliances, the waning of US relative power and, to an extent, leadership in the Indo-Pacific (depending upon the US domestic political situation) has given rise to a different set of discourse theatres and discourses. Hub-and-spoke US alliances still exist in the region, with some being strengthened (most notably, US–Japan, US–ROK, and US–Australia alliances), while some stand on shakier ground (subject again to domestic political situations of the countries concerned).

A notable development in the hub-and-spoke alliance system in the Indo-Pacific is the emerging collaborative ties among the spokes. Defence cooperation between Australia and Japan, and Japan and the ROK (a relation prone to disputes over historical issues), is evolving consistently with long-term US intentions. Australia was the first country with which Japan made an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement aside from the United States (entry into force, 31 January 2013), a trend followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, France, India, and Germany. Australia and Japan also concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement to facilitate joint training and other cooperative activities on 6 January 2022. More recently the ROK, Japan, and the United States announced the groundbreaking Camp David Agreement, which ensures more institutionalised dialogues among the three countries by establishing multilayered heads-of-state and ministerial meetings. It also promotes practical-level cooperation on issues such as joint training, anti-ballistic missiles cooperation, cyber defence vis-à-vis North Korea (DPRK), counter-disinformation, and sharing information.⁶⁴ These trilateral collaborative ties now developing in the region comprise new discourse theatres.

Furthermore, the concept of the Indo-Pacific served as a driver for promoting the European presence in the Indo-Pacific, which collectively grew into another theatre of discourse, supplementing Quad as a theatre. Critically there emerged a European dimension to the notion of the

64 US Mission Japan, 'Fact Sheet: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David', 18 August 2023, <https://jp.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-trilateral-summit-at-camp-david>.

Indo-Pacific after a number of European nations each published its Indo-Pacific strategy. France, with some 1.5 million French citizens residing in island territories in the Indo-Pacific alongside an exclusive economic zone of more than 11 million square kilometres, declared itself to be an Indo-Pacific nation. In other words, a resident power.⁶⁵

The United Kingdom, with its long tradition of naval power, was also an early supporter of the Indo-Pacific story as well as Japan's FOIP concept. Engagement with Indo-Pacific nations had for several years formed the backbone of the UK defence effort in this region,⁶⁶ even before the 2021 Integrated Review endorsed the new geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific within the UK defence concept and announced a 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁷ The renaming and elevation of the head of Asia-Pacific policy at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office to director general for the Indo-Pacific is indicative of the emphasis the nation places on the region. Equally the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh document reaffirmed the UK's commitment to the Indo-Pacific, with the understanding that the previous Integrated Review's pronouncement of the 'tilt' to the region had been achieved. The Refresh promised a shift from the idea to a long-term implementation of that commitment, while noting that the UK's 'overriding priority' remained the Euro-Atlantic.⁶⁸

Germany, which had long been reluctant to endorse the FOIP notion in favour of maintaining economic ties with Beijing, published its own Indo-Pacific vision. The Netherlands followed suit.⁶⁹ The EU too published its own 'strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' in April 2021.⁷⁰ Collectively they endorsed the discourse on the Indo-Pacific

65 République Française, Ministère des Armées, *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, 2019, p. 7.

66 UK Government, 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review' (Cm 9161, 2015).

67 UK Government, 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy' (CP 403, March 2021).

68 UK Government, 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World' (CP 811, March 2023), p. 20.

69 Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together* (2020); The Netherlands, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia* (2020).

70 Council of the European Union, *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 April 2021.

as a geopolitical and strategic centre of gravity. This loose network of European countries and institutions, now aligned with the strategic discourse on the Indo-Pacific, comprise another discourse theatre.

The European partners' common reference point when collaborating on the Indo-Pacific was the terminology of 'like-mindedness'. The word is not defined, but it often refers to shared values, implied to mean liberal democratic values. 'Like-minded partners' refer to those countries that are not formal allies but who endorse the same goal of maintaining or promoting the 'rules-based order', while allowing for some scope in the actual approach taken to address specific issues.

The essence of 'like-mindedness' language is applied 'strategic ambiguity'. The term 'like-mindedness' is vague enough to allow room for individual action, yet with the strong connotation of being in a collaborative relationship. It thus helps bring nations together into minilateral groupings, evoking some sense of common identity.

The term like-mindedness suits Indo-Pacific spatial politics where associations and groupings tend to spread in horizontal network forms.⁷¹ The language of like-mindedness is invoked as a conduit to efforts to shape the global strategic environment. The UK, for example, in its 2023 Integrated Review Refresh declared that working with like-minded partners as well as others would enable the security and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic area and, crucially, also connect to Britain's 'wider neighbourhood on the periphery of our continent and a free and open Indo-Pacific'.⁷² Furthermore, the same document claims, 'the growing coalescence amongst our like-minded allies and partners is also translating into a new network of "Atlantic-Pacific" partnerships'. Repeating Japan's mantra regarding the Ukraine war, the document emphasises the point that the 'security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific [is] inextricably linked'.⁷³ There is further cross-referencing to all major global and regional groupings—G7, non-G7 countries such as Australia, the ROK,

71 Aoi, 'Unmapping the Indo-Pacific'.

72 UK Government, 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023', p. 3.

73 Ibid.

India, AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the US), the GCAP (Global Combat Air Programme; see below), NATO, and the Five Eyes (the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand)—to explain how the geographical area of the Atlantic-Indo-Pacific has become crowded with connections. Growing discourses on like-mindedness bind these entities together.

Among the like-minded minilaterals, AUKUS, created in 2021, is unique in the Indo-Pacific with its primarily security-based rationale, rather than justifying its aims through a set of values. The English-speaking countries of the AUKUS grouping share intelligence through the Five Eyes arrangement and have a history of conducting military operations in coalitions. The abrupt cancellation of Australia's acquisition of conventional French-built submarines was followed by the announcement of a three-party collaboration to equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines in stages over several years. The AUKUS narrative on this change is also pronounced among other Indo-Pacific groupings as oriented towards technical-security arrangements. It has become a technical-security story and its aims are set largely in terms of a military balance, underlined by technological advancements shared among those participants that enhance deterrence.⁷⁴ Further, AUKUS was presented as a security grouping with medium-term goals, including collaboration in broader areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber security, and quantum technologies.

The AUKUS grouping further ensures the presence of the UK in the Indo-Pacific as a strategic actor on a permanent basis, triggering the view that this is a more 'realist' turn of like-minded justifications for the European presence in the region.⁷⁵ Such a development contributes to

74 US Department of State, 'AUKUS: A Commitment to the Future', 27 November 2023, www.state.gov/aukus-a-commitment-to-the-future [accessed on 6 April 2024].

75 Alessio Patalano, 'AUKUS as a Realpolitik Minilateral Framework and Its Significance for Indo-Pacific Security', in *China's Increasingly Assertive Maritime Expansion in the Midst of the Great Power Competition*, Hideshi Tokuchi (ed.), RIPS International Security Webinar, February 2020, available at www.rips.or.jp/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RIPS-Webinar_Summary-Paper-2022.pdf [accessed 6 April 2024].

the diversification of Indo-Pacific discourses, spontaneously emerging and layering ambiguity onto the nature of the Indo-Pacific construct.⁷⁶

The UK, Italy, and Japan doubled down on similar discourses of security (and ambiguity by implication) when they formed the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) to jointly develop a next-generation fighter jet. An international organisation was established among them in December 2023 to manage the programme.⁷⁷ The decision was again justified on a predominantly technical-security rationale: to strengthen defence capabilities through defence/technological collaboration and enhance deterrence in order to promote and protect the rules-based free and open international order.⁷⁸ The programme is expected also to deliver broader economic and industrial benefits to the three countries involved, as well as enhanced interoperability across the alliances and partnerships in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific areas. The establishment of the international organisation was meant to make this collaboration a long-term generational project. This is yet another discourse theatre, and a set of discourses was seeded in the dynamic Indo-Pacific space.

Asia-Pacific	Indo-Pacific
Regionalism	Global
Pan-Asianism	De-Regionalisation
Organizations/Institutions	Spontaneity
Hierarchy	Horizontal Networks
Disconnected	Connected
Set political objectives	Ambiguity
Sovereign independence	Like-mindedness

Bilateralism
Regionalism
Minilaterals
Multilateralism

Figure 2. Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific principles

76 On the role of strategic ambiguity in strategic communications, see 'Strategic Communications', special issue, *Defence Strategic Communications* 12 (Spring 2023).

77 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Announcement of Joint Development of Next-Generation Fighter Aircraft by the Leaders of Japan, Italy and the United Kingdom', 9 December 2022, www.mofa.go.jp/ftp/nsp/page6e_000318.html [accessed 6 April 2024].

78 'Joint Leaders' Statement', www.mofa.go.jp/files/100432107.pdf [accessed 6 April 2024].

ASEAN and ASEAN Centrality as Strategic Autonomy

As a general rule, dominant discourses give rise to reaction by the ‘other’. The dominant discourse in the Indo-Pacific is the (re)assertion of the self-identity of democracies, and of concomitant liberal values through the narratives of the *Free and Open* Indo-Pacific. Asserting this discourse has triggered considerable backlash from the ‘other’, namely, middle-ground countries (or Global South nations) in the Indo-Pacific.

One of the prominent ‘other’ discourse theatres is ASEAN, which, as noted, became a source of non-Western discourses during the Cold War. In that period and the 1990s, ASEAN as a block pursued its original purpose of safeguarding the principles of sovereign independence and non-interference, while expanding its membership and striving to play a central role in international institutions in Asia-Pacific in consonance with the tradition of ASEAN centrality.

In response to the rise of Indo-Pacific discourse involving Western ‘like-minded’ countries after the turn of the twenty-first century, ASEAN responded by publishing ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ (2019).⁷⁹ This document essentially applies the same principles the regional organisation had always relied on, that is, the principles of sovereign equality and ASEAN centrality—hence reproducing the same discourses in the altered international context. Noting that Southeast Asia lies in the centre of the dynamic regions of ‘the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions’, the ‘Outlook’ document envisages ‘ASEAN Centrality to be the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), as platforms for dialogue and implementation of the Indo-Pacific cooperation’. It endorses its own map or view of the ‘Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a

79 ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, available at https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf [accessed 3 April 2024].

central and strategic role'.⁸⁰ The objective is broad and all-encompassing, including promoting cooperation, peace and stability, and prosperity in the region, but it stresses also the enhancement of 'ASEAN's Community building process and further strengthening the existing ASEAN-led priority areas of cooperation, including maritime cooperation, [and] connectivity' among others. ASEAN's 'Outlook' aims at the 'further strengthening and optimization of ASEAN-led mechanisms', mainly Asia-Pacific institutions that ASEAN fostered and led in the earlier Asia-Pacific construct.

The effect that the 'Outlook' intends to impart, in response to the rise of Indo-Pacific discourses featuring the language of values and 'like-mindedness', is the reassertion of ASEAN's strategic autonomy. In response to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical space increasingly inhabited by external, including European, actors, ASEAN resorted to reviving its strategic autonomy by deploying again the notion of ASEAN centrality. The 'Outlook' hence repeats a consistent discourse on the role of ASEAN as a central actor in the region.

Europe, too, has stressed strategic autonomy in recent years in relation to the Indo-Pacific. As noted above, European nations and institutions recognised the geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific in their respective strategies, declaring their intention to become strategic actors in the shaping of the future order in the region.

A dividing line has emerged, notably, from the flurry of declarations on the 'Indo-Pacific' by a number of both internal and external actors, which have to do with the notion of 'strategic autonomy'. Viewing the essential feature of the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific as the G2 rivalry between the United States and China, and responding to the particular leadership at the time in the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump, these documents published especially by France, Germany, and the European Union stress that Europe refuses to be in a situation of being deprived of the ability to make independent decisions.

80 Ibid.

They pledge to strive to create a space in which multilateralism and a multipolar order—taken here to mean a space for autonomous decision-making—is allowed to develop. For example, the French Indo-Pacific vision warns of the ‘structuring effect of the China–US competition’ and the decline of multilateralism and the ‘shrinking of the geostrategic space’, and argues that France needs to ‘reaffirm’ its strategic autonomy, as well as the importance of alliances and multilateralism.⁸¹ Strategic autonomy is suited to extending France’s traditional diplomatic position of being a ‘balancing power’ into the Indo-Pacific context, although its efficacy may be questionable in the increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific environment.⁸² Likewise, the German document stresses that, in light of the growing fear among regional actors regarding ‘the formation of new blocs, accompanied by pressure to decide in favour of one side’, there is the accompanying need for regional structures to ‘protect themselves against hegemony and preserve their decision-making autonomy’. Both France and Germany pledged to support and work with ASEAN, in support of ASEAN centrality.⁸³

Although the sceptical tone of European discourses where G2 rivalry was concerned somewhat receded once the Biden administration began, these discourses on strategic autonomy do reflect the longer and more foundational European tradition of strategic autonomy and present some contrast with the more status-quo oriented FOIP narratives, which try to retain the US-led liberal order. Hence, the FOIP is not a position of equidistance or neutrality. This distinguishes the FOIP from ASEAN centrality or the European, albeit nuanced, vision of neutrality favouring a ‘multilateral’, ‘multipolar’ domain.

In 2022–2023, global events that politicised relations between Western democracies and the Global South were prominently featured in discourses

81 République Française, Ministère des Armées, France’s *Defence Strategy*, pp. 5, 12.

82 Celine Pajon, ‘France in the Indo-Pacific: From a Balancing Power to a Constructive Stakeholder’, Roundtable, in ‘One Region, Multiple Strategies How Countries Are Approaching the Indo-Pacific’, special issue, *Asia Policy* 18 N° 3 (2023), www.nbr.org/publication/one-region-multiple-strategies-how-countries-are-approaching-the-indo-pacific.

83 Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Guidelines*, p. 24. See also the Netherlands, *Indo-Pacific*, and Council of the European Union, *EU Strategy*.

on the Indo-Pacific, namely, the war in Ukraine in the aftermath of Russian aggression in February 2022 (which ASEAN calls the ‘Russo-Ukrainian War’) and most recently the war in Gaza.⁸⁴

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was met with renewed Western unity, and elicited a prominent development where Western Indo-Pacific nations, most pronouncedly Japan and the ROK, sided completely with Ukraine, in line with the position of Europe and the United States. Japan especially led the April 2023 G7 summit to unite in support of Ukraine. The G7 position was clear: that Russia was responsible for blatantly violating international law in its aggression against Ukraine.⁸⁵ Although Europe was initially sceptical, the mantra of Indo-Pacific democracies (adopted from Japan) that ‘Ukraine may be the East Asia of tomorrow’⁸⁶ struck a surprisingly resonant chord with Europeans, forming a cross-regionally held narrative regarding what was at stake in Ukraine.

However, discourses of the ‘other’ have arisen in the Indo-Pacific, where even Russia’s blatant breach of the foundations of international law in its invasion of Ukraine failed to sway some countries into abandoning their neutrality vis-à-vis Russia and the West.

Witness the anti-Western discourse on the Ukraine issue, questioning the ‘double standards’ of Western nations, which has spread in the Indo-Pacific. Doubts ranged across questions about previous cases of US unilateral use of force (for example, against Baghdad), while Russia is condemned for its ‘aggression’ in Ukraine;⁸⁷ further, the alleged self-contradiction within the G7 for promoting a nuclear-weapon-free world and denouncing Russia’s irresponsible nuclear rhetoric against Ukraine,

84 Kementerian Koinfo, ‘ASEAN Centrality, What Does It Mean?’, 28 April 2023, available at <https://asean2023.id/en/news/asean-centrality-what-does-it-mean> [accessed 3 April 2024].

85 ‘G7 Hiroshima Leaders’ Communiqué’, 20 May 2023, available at www.mofa.go.jp/files/100506878.pdf [accessed 12 May 2024].

86 Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, ‘Message from Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on the G7 Hiroshima Summit’, 31 March 2023, available at https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00018.html [accessed 4 April 2024].

87 Walter Sim, ‘G-7 Shunning the Use of “Global South” to Avoid Giving the Term Legitimacy’, *Straits Times*, 19 May 2023.

and threats to deploy atomic weapons to Belarus, while keeping extended deterrence under the US nuclear umbrella.⁸⁸

The G20 summit held in September 2023 in India famously failed to denounce Russia for its invasion of Ukraine,⁸⁹ prompting Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's statements on the West's failure to 'Ukrainize' the summit.⁹⁰ Generally, the event highlighted the geopolitical tensions surrounding the war in Ukraine and difficulties encountered in fostering any semblance of consensus among G20 members—and all despite India having come under scrutiny from the West for its reluctance to criticise Russia directly for its aggression in Ukraine in various G20 ministerial meetings.⁹¹

Yet, some analysts have noted that the failure of the G20 to attach blame to Russia and to focus on Ukraine in fact helped the summit, as most countries of the Global South were more worried about economic difficulties.⁹² Indeed, economic issues became the primary focus of the 2023 G20, with emphasis on global growth, sustainable development goals, and food security, reflecting the G20 leaders' efforts to address immediate challenges facing the Global South.⁹³ With regard to the Ukraine war, criticisms expressed by the Global South vis-à-vis the West's stance in the war in Ukraine are indicative of the general notion that non-Western countries largely view the conflict as a European or Western issue not directly related to themselves.⁹⁴ The US and its allies' insistence that Russia's aggression is an affront to the international order is therefore seen as another attempt by the West to impose its values on the countries of the Global South, many of which would prefer to portray themselves as neutral in the conflict.

88 Walter Sim, 'Zelensky on Charm Offensive in Bid to Win Weapons, Support, New Friends', *Straits Times*, 22 May 2023.

89 Nirmal Ghosh, 'Without President Xi, G-20 Offers US a Chance to Show It Backs PM Modi as a World Leader', *Straits Times*, 8 September 2023; 'G-20 Summit Offers Partial Success', *Straits Times*, 8 September 2023; Nirmala Ganapathy, 'Western States Defensive as Russia Thanks India for G-20 Declaration', *Straits Times*, 12 September 2023.

90 'West failed to "Ukrainize" G20—Lavrov', RT, 10 September 2023, available at www.rt.com/russia/582700-west-failed-ukrainize-g20-lavrov [accessed 11 May 2024].

91 Ganapathy, 'Western States Defensive'.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

Geopolitics, Cartography, and Strategic Communications

Informed by the triad concepts of cartographical/political space, conceptual/discursive space, and geographical/physical space, the review of discourse theatres and discourses provided above reveals distinct features in Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific contexts, respectively. In both, discourses comprise and define conceptual space overlaying physical (geographical) space. Finally, from a cartographic perspective, the Indo-Pacific especially is a highly contested political space.

The boundaries of physical space in the Indo-Pacific are vague or ambiguous. They are contentious where territorial disputes endure. The contentious nature of the physical space indicates that it is neither neutral nor a given, but political, and subject to interpretation. Perceptions differ from one agency to another.

But what has made the Indo-Pacific distinct from a historical perspective is its evolving meaning. This is the domain of discourses, and by now a consensus has emerged that the future of global security and prosperity will depend critically on this region. Whereas Western nations have an interest in shaping this region according to their values and preferences, the nations of Southeast Asia or the broader group of developing nations (the Global South) resist such Western attempts but try to maintain their central position. Hence the prominent presence of the discourse on ASEAN centrality.

How each of the agencies will seek to shape this region becomes an exercise in cartography or the cartographic imaginary. Here maps do not necessarily mean maps of physical terrain; they are maps that emanate from mental imagining of boundaries while attaching accompanying meanings to them. By contesting discourses, agencies assert or demand that others recognise a particular way of seeing that cartographical space. As the picture of a CIA map of the 'nine-dash line' indicates (Figure 3),



Figure 3. Map of the South China Sea with nine-dash-line claimed by China
Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 1988, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-dash_line#/media/File:9_dotted_line.png [accessed 3 April 2024].

all maps are contested and fluid. Witness the Chinese way of seeing the same South China Sea on a map from 1947 (Figure 4).

Critically, the Indo-Pacific is foremost a map of values. Attached meanings are discussed overwhelmingly in terms of values. The Indo-Pacific has

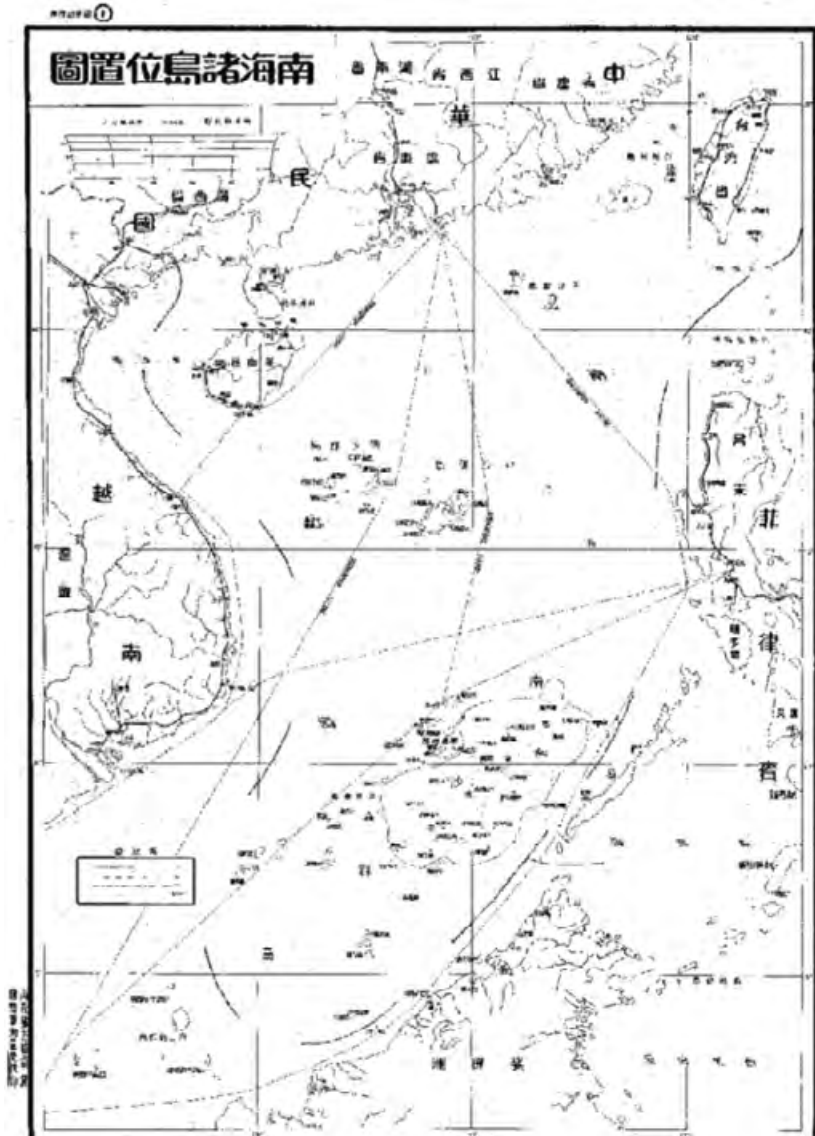


Figure 4. Copy of the location map of the South China Sea Islands in 1947 (1:4,000,000)
Source: Fei Xia et al., 'Spatial Demarcation Principles of the Dotted Line in the South China Sea', *Acta Geographica Sinica* 71 N° 6 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.11821/dlxb201606002> [accessed 9 April 2024].

become a conceptual battleground for competing values over the future order in the region and beyond, and about how it may yet be structured.

The above analysis of discourse theatres and discourses indicated that they are the driving force and integral elements of geopolitics in action, and of strategic communications in practice. Through such discourses the strategic actors in/involved in the region attempt to affect the outcome in terms of spatial control as discourses attempt to shape people's perceptions or behaviour. The discursive space investigated here includes both the discourse theatres and the discourses themselves. Such spaces arise spontaneously, yet they are strategic uses of narratives, actions, and symbols. It is also the case that dominant discourses would normally trigger 'alternatives' or the 'other' discourses.

I noted the cartography of China as captured by the CIA (Figure 3). Yet, the analysis here intentionally does not examine the Chinese discourse, preferring rather to shed light on the spatial responses of Indo-Pacific nations to China's rise.

The points made here focus on identifying the relationship between space and strategic communications. The latter is rooted in a set of values and those are arguably democratic values, centring on the notion of individual freedoms.⁹⁵ It may be argued that only democratic nations are able to engage in strategic communications because only democratic systems can maintain, under checks and balances, the correspondence of discourses/narratives/words with reality (including their own actions) and with effects (how their discourses fare in producing the desired effect). Non-democracies (especially authoritarian systems) do not need to ensure honest evaluation of their narratives' relation to their own actions or effects. If they are revisionist authoritarian powers,

95 This interpretation is in line with debates among practitioners, as explained in NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Understanding Strategic Communications*, Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga, May 2023). NATO's AJP-10, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications* (March 2023), defines strategic communications principles, one of which is that all activities will be 'founded on NATO's values' (p. 25). Further, it states that 'All activities of NATO forces, both inside and outside of missions and operations, shall remain coherent with the Alliance's narrative, aims, objectives and values' (p. 69).

they need rather to justify new, expanding maps (such as the nine-dash space), instead of ensuring narratives' adherence to the desired impact on reality. Only democracies need to resort to law and mutual recognition of such adherence; non-democratic systems do not need to do so. It is this adherence to democratic values that ensures the coherence of communications and reality/effects, a necessary foundation of constructive functions of strategic communications, which is at the same time sustainable. It is the integrity among narrative, effects, and reality that makes strategic communications creative.

Here one of the results indicated by the above analysis is that the language of 'strategic autonomy'—while it can perfectly be disseminated abroad as 'public diplomacy'—normally does not have the 'creative' or constructive function embedded in strategic communications. Values that persuade others are universal values—be they regarding fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, or the criteria of sovereignty. Strategic autonomy is a self-regarding, self-contained narrative that serves its own purpose and its own identity—not a universal character—even if it may be rooted in some sort of values. Strategic autonomy asserts, but does not engage or persuade. Liberal and democratic values may be resisted and countered, but only those values persuade, as they comprise universally defined values, which require consistent engagement with others to be sustained.

Finally, the analysis above demonstrates the utility of the theory of the power of space. Space is a triad comprising the cartographic, conceptual, and physical/geographical. It is endowed with different meanings but has the ability to construct the perceptions, strategies, and behaviour of those who live within it or use it. Here can be found the link between space and strategic communications. The power of space or spatial power to construct and shape—while itself subject to constant definition and redefinition—is precisely strategic communications in play. Strategic communications embodies cartography.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is an example of the theoretical and practical connections between space, cartography, and strategic communications, where all three play an essential role interacting with one another. The foremost conclusion to be drawn is that space is endowed with power—spatial power—which is a socially created and constructive quality. The constructive function of space overlaps with strategic communications.

And this confluence underlines the significance of cartography in geopolitical strategies. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific is a prime example, where concerned agencies all understand that the way this region is to be ‘defined’—with sets of values, identities, rules, and norms—will determine the future. The Indo-Pacific is a construct, born of cartography and strategic communications in practice.

Lost Our Cool: Can Jazz Teach Us to Be Cool?

A Review Essay by Natalya Kovaleva

3 Shades of Blue: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, and the Lost Empire of Cool
James Kaplan. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2024.

Keywords—*cool, jazz, strategic communications, strategic communication, Cold War, jazz diplomacy*

About the Author

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Coolness isn't just a style; it's a state of mind—an elusive fusion of authenticity, audacity, and innovation. It is also the holy grail that communicators chase relentlessly, yearning to blend originality with resonance. Yet, a perplexing paradox persists: the elusive notion of cool seems to slip through their fingers like sand. Amid the chase for attention and relevance one wonders: why can't strategic communicators get what they want? Put simply, why can't they be cool?

Nineteen fifty-nine was a big year in jazz. Miles Davis's legendary sextet recorded the experimental and spontaneous *Kind of Blue*, creating the best-selling jazz record ever made. The Dave Brubeck Quartet's groundbreaking album *Time Out* challenged traditional approaches to rhythm through inventive experimentation with time signatures. It also

gave us the masterpiece that is ‘Take Five’—perhaps the most celebrated jazz single in history. The same year *Mingus Ah Um* by bassist Charles Mingus captured the heart and soul of jazz in its audacious musical tapestry, which goes to the root of the American genre. The album evokes the blues, the cries of gospel, and the rich polyphony of New Orleans, blending the old with new, emerging jazz forms. The fourth monumental LP released in 1959, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* by Ornette Coleman, abandoned the use of set chord structures and pushed the boundaries of jazz so far out that it changed the face of the genre forever.

Some would later say that jazz died soon after reaching its apogee in 1959. I like to think that it was (yet again) reborn, reinvented—by men whose creative genius was humbly rewarded in mid-century America.

James Kaplan’s compelling book *3 Shades of Blue* tells the stories of three giants of jazz—trumpeter Miles Davis, saxophonist John Coltrane, and pianist Bill Evans—and of the timeless album that unites them. In 1959 the three came together on a late winter afternoon in Columbia Records’ Thirtieth Street studio in Manhattan to record *Kind of Blue*.¹ To Kaplan, the album is the pinnacle of American jazz. It is the event that sits ‘at the hinge between jazz’s 1950s glories’ and what he gloomily describes as its eventual ‘slide into esotericism’. Passionately and eloquently, Kaplan traces the life stories of Davis, Coltrane, and Evans before, during, and after the recording of the seminal album. Relying on a wealth of published material and original interviews, including with the key protagonist of the book, the late Miles Davis, Kaplan immerses the reader in the world of smoke-filled New York jazz clubs, musicians’ painful battles with discrimination and substance abuse, and the inexhaustible creative energy of the American jazz scene in the twentieth century.

For all its elegance and brilliant storytelling, Kaplan’s book does not tell us anything we do not already know. Extensive biographies have been dedicated to Davis, Evans, and Coltrane, and at least three books have

1 Along with Cannonball Adderley, Paul Chambers, Jimmy Cobb, and Wynton Kelly.

been published on the making of *Kind of Blue*.² Kaplan's ambition, as we learn in the last few pages of the book, was to tell the 'big story of the devolution of jazz' from popular entertainment to 'an art music, a niche music'. To trace its presumed journey from popularity to obscurity. Yet do the stories he tells—of metamorphosis of the genre and some of the key personalities who shaped it—really depict a *devolution* of jazz? Is this why he calls it 'The Lost Empire of Cool' in the book's title?

Kaplan's ambitious title promises a big idea. It teases the reader with an enigmatic notion of an 'empire of cool'. But what does he mean by it? And why did jazz lose its 'cool'? We never get to learn. Speaking of Miles Davis's emergence from his heroin addiction in the mid 1950s, Kaplan writes:

as he emerged from his bleak period, seeming cool became increasingly important to him, and to his growing fan base. More and more, he appeared to embody the concept that was gaining a powerful niche position in popular culture, even though nobody quite seemed to agree on, or even really understand, what exactly *cool* was.³

The idiom is certainly ambiguous. But it deserves a deeper examination. To this day, our sense of cool influences the music we listen to, the clothes we buy, the social media accounts we follow, and even the public figures we respect. Yet, cool as a cultural phenomenon is only a few decades old. It was first invoked in the 1930s by jazz tenor saxophonist Lester Young, both as a slang term describing a state of mind ('I'm cool' meaning 'I'm calm' or 'I'm keeping it together') and as a fluid, laid-back way of playing jazz (as opposed to high-energy 'hot' jazz).⁴ In the span of his

2 Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000); Richard Williams, *The Blue Moment: Miles Davis's Kind of Blue and the Remaking of Modern Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011); and Eric Nisenson, *Miles Davis and His Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin's; Maidenhead: Melia, 2000).

3 James Kaplan, 3 *Shades of Blue*, p. 165.

4 To hear the difference between hot and cool jazz, listen to 'All of Me' by [Louis Armstrong](#) (hot) and by [Billie Holiday and Lester Young](#) (cool).

short life, Young became the embodiment of ‘cool’, influencing countless young musicians, bohemians, and beat generation authors, including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. His humour, trademark pork-pie hat, and hip slang were, perhaps, as influential as his musical genius. Before too long, the pull of cool would become evident in the film, literature, fashion, and even foreign policy of post-World War II America.

What Does It Mean to Be Cool?

‘Keep cool’, ‘play it cool’, ‘cool it!’—the modern connotation of the word was at first understood only in context. Only those in the know really knew what it meant. The ambiguity of ‘cool’ was part of its enigmatic appeal. It had an aura of authenticity, nonconformity, composure, personal authority, and style.⁵

Importantly, the term is intrinsically linked to the African American experience. Shaped by the conditions of strict racial segregation of most US life, cool became more than just a word or an idea. It signified an alternative way of being. A way of displaying dignity and composure in the face of adversity. Tracing its history to slavery, when overt opposition to exploitation was fatally dangerous, cool became a form of silent, dignified rejection of racism. Or, in the words of the psychologist Dr Richard Majors, ‘a complex system of coping mechanisms, a technique for black survival in America.’⁶ Cool therefore allowed a public way of covert resistance marked by emotional detachment, composure, and irony.

Some aesthetically link this almost performative projection of stoicism to the West African conception of ‘mystical coolness’, especially to the Yoruban notion of *itutu*, which is linked to silence, peace, and order.⁷

5 Joel Dinerstein, ‘The Origins of “Cool” in Post-WWII America’, *National WWII Museum*, 22 September 2021, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/origins-of-cool-in-post-wwii-america.

6 Quoted in Lewis MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant Garde* (New York: Free Press, 2012), p. 20.

7 Robert Farris Thompson, ‘An Aesthetic of the Cool’, *African Arts* 7 N° 1 (1973): 41–91.

In 1973 the Yale historian Robert Farris Thompson identified thirty-five West African languages with established concepts of cool. For the Gola people, for instance, it describes the ‘ability to be nonchalant at the right moment ... to reveal no emotion in situations where excitement and sentimentality are acceptable—[...] to act as though one’s mind is in another world’.⁸ Thompson views this ‘mask’ of coolness as a profoundly artistic aesthetic attitude fit for times of pleasure as well as stress, especially when it comes to expressive performance and dance.

Others have looked to the stoic philosophers and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* when trying to elucidate the philosophical and aesthetic inspiration behind the notion of cool.⁹ The jazz historian Ted Gioia, however, rejects both Greek philosophy and the West African etymology, claiming that cool is more than just a matter of attitude or behaviour. To Gioia, ‘coolness, even more so than beauty, is inevitably in the eye of the beholder’.¹⁰ It is ultimately determined by how one is perceived by others: one can only be cool if others ‘buy in’. In his interpretation Gioia turns to the Renaissance courtier Baldassare Castiglione and his concept of *sprezzatura* coined in 1528. Defined as the art of nonchalance, *sprezzatura* is meant to ‘conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it’.¹¹

Yet, the term ‘cool’ grew out of very specific socio-historical conditions, which makes it hard to divorce it from the African American experience. During the Second World War, African Americans understood the bitter irony of fighting in segregated regiments against an enemy that endorsed white supremacy while they faced racial discrimination at home. Violent experiences of segregation in the US Army of jazzmen such as Lester Young and John Coltrane, habitual police brutality towards musicians, and African American performers’ cabaret licences being commonly cancelled by police were just a few manifestations of everyday

8 Ibid., 41.

9 Nick Southgate, ‘Coolhunting with Aristotle’, *International Journal of Market Research* 45 N° 2 (2003): 1–21.

10 Ted Gioia, *The Birth (and Death) of the Cool* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2019), p. 48.

11 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 49.

discrimination. Being ‘cool’ in the face of racism, to writer Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), was ‘to be calm, even unimpressed, by what horror the world might daily propose’, and the biggest daily struggle concerned ‘the deadeningly predictable mind of white America.’¹² In a dehumanising system, being ‘cool’ became a way of resistance and survival. It gave a sense of control over one’s emotions and was directed inward as well as outward, creating a distinct musical culture.

Until bebop, jazz was commonly known as ‘hot music’ due to its syncopated rhythms, fast improvisation, and ability to move audiences to dance. The genre’s association with popular entertainment, its commercialisation in favour of white band leaders, and the enduring racial stereotypes linked to minstrelsy led to a profound shift in the genre in the 1940s. The bebop rebellion led by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and others transformed both the music and the mainstream assumptions about jazz in post-war America. From the 1940s the ‘cool’ revisionists refused to be mere entertainers. Instead, they exhibited composure (read, *cool*) on stage, at times even turning their backs on audiences and refusing to call the tunes. The highly improvisational music they played was meant to be listened (rather than danced) to.

Zoot suits, horn-rimmed glasses, goatees, and hep talk became key elements of the hip, iconic style.¹³ Everything about bebop (and later, cool jazz¹⁴) was speaking difference, individuality. This shift placed increasing value on an individual voice—a distinct *sound*—that communicated identity and authenticity that could not be copied by another musician. Cool also created a form of in-group solidarity among African American musicians, who managed to carve out a space—socially, musically, and aesthetically—to affirm their identity and culture in conditions

12 Quoted in Joel Dinerstein, *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 60.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

14 Cool jazz emerged as a style in the late 1940s, largely as a response to bebop. Characterised by slower tempos and lower energy than bebop, its proponents shared many of the aesthetic values with the boppers. These included disregard for conformity, commitment to contemporary musical trends, and propensity for innovation.

of adversity. As the scholar of cool Joel Dinerstein puts it, being cool became an ‘alternative success system’ directly opposed to the social norms of 1940s–1960s America.¹⁵

Perhaps the most celebrated symbol of cool jazz aesthetic is Lester Young’s successor Miles Davis. Musically, Davis was prolific with his innovation and yearning to push the boundaries of the genre. From his signature smooth, warm-toned sounds of muted trumpet in the 1940s, to his groundbreaking nonet recordings inspired by contemporary classical works in the 1950s and his experimentation with electronic sounds and fusion in the 1970s, Davis never stood still. Eager to explore—and demonstrate—his creative complexity and excellence, he sought to redefine what it meant to be a black musician in America. A lover of fast cars, expensive suits, and beautiful women, Davis was keen to project an image of affluence and individuality while challenging mainstream culture, the norms of the music industry, and the very meaning of jazz.

Yet cool was not confined to jazz circles alone. From its humble origins in busy urban jazz clubs, cool found its way into beat generation literature, influenced a host of New York School artists, and echoed a sense of existential freedom conceived by the French existentialist philosophers Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.¹⁶ Cool’s overt rejection of the established order linked it with deviance and personal protest, charging it with a rebellious quality at a time when the civil rights movement was on the rise in the United States. Amid this mushrooming of cool through artistic cross-pollination and sociopolitical change, the Cold War was also gathering momentum. And soon enough cool would be broadcast to far corners of the world by the Voice of America (VOA) in the hope of winning over sympathies for the American way of life in the ideological battle with the Soviet Union.

15 Dinerstein, *Origins of Cool*, p. 7.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 232.

Cool For Export?

In 1954 US president Dwight D. Eisenhower urged Congress to pass ‘emergency’ legislation allocating \$5 million to expand America’s international cultural exchange activities. This need to boost the American image abroad arose at a unique historical juncture. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the new Soviet government began to rapidly expand international cultural, trade, and tourist exchanges to promote the global respectability of Soviet life and culture. In the same year the USSR tested its first hydrogen and tactical nuclear weapons, narrowing American strategic advantage in the arms race and amplifying the importance of non-military modes of combat. Critical media coverage of civil rights clashes trumpeted by Soviet propaganda also made it increasingly important to repair America’s image in the eyes of global audiences, particularly of those in dozens of newly non-aligned nations emerging from the shackles of colonialism in the mid-century.

Aimed at countering the ‘communist cultural offensive’, the emergency legislation paved the way for the Cultural Presentations Programme, which would be administered by the State Department until the late 1970s. To the US Information Agency director Theodore Streibert, the programme ‘intended to influence public attitudes abroad toward a truer conception of American society and its achievements. [...] [The] main purpose of all this is psychological and in the field of propaganda’.¹⁷

Even though the programme included a wide array of the arts, jazz swiftly became its ideological heartbeat. US officials celebrated it as an authentic modernist art form epitomising the American spirit and cultural triumph. Critics viewed it as a powerful metaphor for American democracy and the American way of life. From 1956, tours by Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and other ‘jazz ambassadors’ reached large audiences in regions of American geostrategic and political importance. The pioneer of jazz diplomacy, renowned bebop trumpeter

17 Presentation of the Bill on Cultural Presentations Program, 84th Congress, 03/1956, Statement of USIA Director Theodore C. Streibert, p. 2.

Dizzy Gillespie, knew what would stick when he declared: ‘the weapon that we will use is the *cool* one’.¹⁸

The rise of ‘cool’ and the prolific creativity of American jazz musicians in the 1950s shifted popular perceptions of the genre within the United States. No longer seen as mere entertainment, jazz was becoming an art music, a distinctly American modernist achievement. Its structured yet fluid form and the centrality of spontaneity and improvisation to jazz performance made it an antithesis of Soviet socialist realism in the eyes of the critics. To the VOA presenter Willis Conover, jazz embodied

a cross between total discipline and total anarchy. The musicians agree on tempo, key and chord structure but beyond this everyone is free to express himself. This is jazz. And this is America. That’s what gives this music validity. It’s a musical reflection of the way things happen in America. We’re not apt to recognize this over here, but people in other countries can feel this element of freedom. They love jazz because they love freedom.¹⁹

Such a reading of jazz—coupled with its politicised export—presents more than a few paradoxes. It turns a music created as a response to the hardships of the African American experience into a unique symbol for the entire nation state, all at a time when the African American struggle for freedom was at the epicentre of American and international politics. The emphasis on the presumably shared and realised ideals of free American society clashed with the brutal reality of inequality and the civil rights struggle within that society.²⁰ This contradiction was not lost on musicians and fans. And in some instances the musicians’ overt criticism of the official Washington hypocrisy confirmed the very

18 *The Jazz Ambassadors*, PBS, 2018, www.pbs.org/wnet/jazz-ambassadors.

19 John S. Wilson, ‘Who Is Conover? Only We Ask’, *New York Times*, 13 September 1959.

20 Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 6.

freedom of expression the State Department sought to convey through jazz diplomacy.

Regardless of whether the goals of the State Department were realised, the jazz tours enthralled audiences as they travelled the world. In Greece, Dizzy Gillespie famously won over a seething audience of students who had stoned the local US Information Service headquarters in protest at American support for Greece's right-wing government the day before. 'They loved us so much that when we finished playing they tossed their jackets into the air and carried me on their shoulders through the streets of the city,' he remembered. The next day, local headlines read: 'Students Drop Rocks and Roll with Dizzy'.²¹

In the Soviet Union and its satellites, jazz diplomacy faced numerous roadblocks. From difficult negotiations of the tour itineraries to mandatory auditions of the repertoire by Soviet authorities and a heavy police presence at concerts, American jazz was not welcomed by Soviet officialdom. On the rare occasions when the possibility of a jazz tour was on the negotiating table, the Soviets requested a big jazz orchestra with a smartly dressed conductor atop the stage and a programme of arranged music agreed in advance: an orderly, scripted, and civilised performance with no surprises and no modernist 'dodecacophony'.²² In other words, only *uncool* jazz was permitted to enter the USSR.

At the same time, countless young Soviet jazz fans were tuning in to the VOA's *Jazz Hour* broadcast each night to hear the latest jazz recordings. American jazz records and copies of *Down Beat* magazine circulated on the black market and changed hands until they were virtually unusable. Soviet audiences were so knowledgeable about the hottest jazz trends that when Benny Goodman came to the USSR in 1962 they deemed him passé. Instead, local jazz fans approached young and hip musicians from Goodman's band and organised underground jam sessions to hear the best in action and share the stage. What was censored by Soviet

21 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 34.

22 Atonal music in the official Soviet vernacular.

bureaucrats—innovation, difference, individuality—came through in personal exchanges. Cool translated easily, as it had no rigid criteria and only required one to have an authentic voice within a highly communicative creative medium.

Ultimately, a lot of the time those who were denied freedom in America were speaking to (and playing for) those whose freedoms and voices were denied elsewhere. Perhaps jazz was associated with freedom not because of the clever design of American political communications, but because jazz ambassadors related so deeply to global struggles for freedom—be they in Africa, Asia, or Eastern Europe. Or maybe it had nothing to do with politics, and State Department officials were foolish to believe that playing jazz around the world would give the US a competitive advantage in the Cold War.

The effects of jazz diplomacy appear to be as elusive as the notion of cool itself. Could it be that it was this very ambiguity, the rebellious unruliness of improvisation, that made jazz so appealing? I myself grappled with the very same question when I first got into jazz as a teenager living in Novosibirsk, a Siberian capital with a lively jazz scene. Ella Fitzgerald's energetic yet sophisticated scat solo on her 1947 hit 'Oh Lady, Be Good!' captivated me at fourteen as an example of both incredible musical excellence and creative freedom. I quickly discovered local jazz clubs and befriended musicians. Soon missing a live jazz gig became an almost unbearable thought—improvising musicians would create something unique and beautiful, a piece of art never to be heard again. Missing it was not an option. Jazz pulled me in with its musical complexity, evanescent beauty, and audacious, boundless creativity. Those around me believed it to be intricate, highly intellectual, and profoundly American. But was it cool?

* * *

Many, including Kaplan, argue that jazz lost its cool a long time ago—that it became so niche it had lost its place in popular culture and, by extension, in the popular imagination where audiences navigate their desires. To some degree the broader notion of cool and its associations with personal rebellion, creative freedom, and modernity has been stripped of its sociopolitical tensions and artistic risks. The idea that took shape in response to very specific conditions in mid-century America gradually outgrew its origins and transformed everything it touched, from fashion, hairstyles, and cars to music, language, and behaviours. By the end of the century, cool stretched so far beyond the creative realm it became an attribute of merchandise. We started to measure it at the cash register as corporations from Nike to Apple urged us to buy the next cool thing.

Still, I wouldn't be quick to declare the death of cool. To an extent, the set of beliefs, values, and attitudes invested in cool in the mid-century has stood the test of time. The individuality and personal inflection of jazz improvisation later echoed in freestyle rap and hip-hop, and in the subculture language, mannerisms, and projections of affluence through the fashion and lifestyle associated with hip-hop culture.

In many ways cool has been more about the medium than the message. It offers possibilities for creative expression, difference, and authenticity. Commercially, we are often drawn in by the elusive appeal of cool rather than the material products at hand. Musically, cool lives on through its promise of innovation, its public declaration of defiance and individuality, its constant negotiation of modernity. Some say we overused cool so much we now live in a post-cool society that has moved beyond hip trends and 'the increasingly consumption-oriented precepts of cool'.²³ But isn't our recent investment in sustainability and conscious consumerism anything but another reframing of what it means to be cool?

Almost a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, as global economic inequalities and geopolitical tensions are rising to boiling point, younger generations are reframing the meaning of cool in these

23 Gioia, *Birth (and Death) of the Cool*, p. 5.

new sociopolitical realities. The rejection of fast fashion and excessive consumerism is giving way to thrifting, sustainable living, and support for local independent retailers. Disillusionment with economic uncertainty and generational economic inequality on the part of millennials and Gen Z workers are moving some to quit taxing corporate jobs in big banks and consulting firms in favour of less stressful but more fulfilling roles promising greater work–life balance. Increasingly, young listeners and musicians embrace genre-less music, refusing to be defined by labels and placing importance on the creative potential of the music itself.²⁴

Across various spheres of life, we are starting to push against established norms—be it materialism, the hustle culture, or the musical mainstream. Our rejection of the grip of large corporations is, in a way, an attempt to take back control and a form of continued pursuit of authenticity. We are carving out new strategies for individuality and fostering new ways of enduring harsh economic realities.

In geopolitics we try to keep our cool in the face of multifaceted challenges from climate change to armed conflicts and economic turbulence. Institutionally we need cool to exercise calm but firm resistance against adversaries and present a collected united front at a time when tensions are running high. With the political landscape often mired in controversy, populism, or short-termism, there is a palpable longing for leaders who embody integrity, strength, individuality, and cool-headed governance. Perhaps now is the time for cool to enter our politics and inject a sense of authenticity, originality, and alluring ambiguity into our political life.

24 '2023 Wrapped: The Top Songs, Artists, Podcasts, and Listening Trends of 2023 Revealed', *Spotify*, 29 November 2023, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2023-11-29/top-songs-artists-podcasts-albums-trends-2023>.

The Once and Future NATO: Managing a Sea of Troubles

A Review Essay by Mark Laity

Deterring Armageddon: A Biography of NATO. The 'Astonishingly Fine History' of the World's Most Successful Military Alliance.
Peter Apps. Wildfire, 2024.

NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance.
Sten Rynning. Yale University Press, 2024.

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About the Author

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It is a curious feature that for an organisation billed as the most powerful in the world there have actually not been that many books on it. Plenty on the Cold War, of course, but NATO has tended to have a walk-on role compared with the major powers. It may be the fact that NATO has succeeded—there has been no major war in Europe since 1945—has played its part. What did not happen—rather like the dog that didn't bark in the night—is not obviously the stuff of drama.

That said, given NATO's recent history, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and so on, it offers plenty of meat, and now, as NATO celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary, we have Russia's second invasion of Ukraine,

destabilising Europe and with global implications. Yet, given the context, there has been comparatively little attention—imagine what the EU would have received.

And history matters for, as followers of narrative know, we are all trying to go from an old story to a new story, and so must understand that old story. To quote the great historian E.H. Carr, ‘History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past.’ Putin and his acolytes certainly understand this, with the emphasis they are placing on reframing Russia and the Soviet Union’s history to suit the current aggression against Ukraine and Russia’s supposed place in the world. Key to that is the Kremlin’s characterisation of NATO as some form of existential threat, based on an imaginative and self-interested interpretation of events since World War II.

It is therefore a pity and a loss that NATO’s seventy-fifth has received less focus than it needed, not just from academic interest, but to help interpret what is happening now and chart a future. As the saying goes, history may not repeat itself, but it rhymes, and any analysis of NATO’s seventy-five years reveals recurring rhythms that should both hearten and warn.

At least we have two new books on the Alliance’s history, and we are fortunate both are well researched and informative. Peter Apps’s *Deterring Armageddon: A Biography of NATO* and Sten Rynning’s *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World’s Most Powerful Alliance* have big boots to fill in coming after Stanley Sloan, whose NATO histories have set the benchmark, along with those of the late Lawrence S. Kaplan. They both do a good job.

The two authors would count as critical friends of the Alliance and have produced interesting and readable histories. In many respects they have different styles and approaches, while ultimately coming to similar conclusions.

Apps, a Reuters correspondent,¹ has produced a pacey narrative that provides a comprehensive historical overview of NATO and its activities on the ground. Conversely, Rynning's book is more of a political history, authoritatively laying out the debates and discussions within the corridors of power. Indeed, Rynning states the book focuses on the 'pol' of 'pol/mil', not the 'mil', so the military side of the NATO equation is very much secondary.

One thing that immediately stands out from Rynning's book is the excellent introduction, in which his 'Why is NATO important', 'What is NATO', and 'How to think about NATO' are excellent encapsulations of the nature of the Alliance and what makes it so special.

Both authors look at the past very much in the context of a worrying present—Apps more obviously so, with his book opening on 'The Shock of Ukraine'. They thus bring us up to date, Apps especially so. The risk in writing about the past with such urgent hindsight is that it can too easily fail to accept how the world looked to those making decisions at the time. When it comes to NATO, it would be very easy to overlook how radical, how revolutionary, the Alliance was, and to take its achievement, the fact it was even created, for granted.

Both recognise this and work hard to avoid hindsight and to capture the drama of those early days, and Apps in particular describes it well. It was a time for and of strong personalities, with big visions, and Western Europe and North America were fortunate in a whole gallery of them coming together at the right time. The durability of NATO tends to give an impression of inevitability, but the reality, as the authors make clear, was anything but, and the future of Europe was very much in play.

The recently liberated nations of Western Europe were traumatised, exhausted, and poverty-stricken. Politics and political parties were in transition, and the well-organised Soviet-directed communist parties

1 I am a former colleague of Peter Apps, having worked with him when I was a British Army reservist, and have been interviewed for his book.

had real prospects for power. Even the never-occupied victor, Britain, was impoverished and worn out, its great power status irretrievably diminished.

Meanwhile, the United States, incomparably more powerful and vigorous, had still paid enough of a price for many to feel that it had done enough, and it was time to get on with their lives and for Europe to get its own act together.

So, that the cards would fall the way they did was not inevitable. Isolationism had been strong in the US before the Second World War and been strengthened by the end of the First World War. George Washington's warning in his 1796 Farewell Address that 'it is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world', then pithily summarised by Thomas Jefferson as avoiding 'entangling alliances', had been an enduring staple of US foreign policy.

That the US changed and adopted a very permanent alliance in NATO was in part due to recognising that, now it was a superpower, there was no choice but to go global. But the shape of that entanglement was its choice and could have been much more bilateral and temporary.

It is a reminder that what is happening today in the US is not completely untethered from its past. Trump's rambles and rants are peculiarly his own, but he and his cohorts are still tapping into a strain of American thinking, however perverse its characterisation.

In that sense, how the cards fell is not just a dramatic story in its own right, but valuable for understanding today and instructive for our future. NATO's creation was not inevitable, and we should not assume its survival is either. It was made by harnessing and directing the power of the tide, not just going with the flow. As both Apps and Rynning describe, it was a fragile plant requiring constant care and attention. It still does.

In that sense our admiration for NATO's founding fathers should encompass recognising this mix of innovation, imagination, vision,

determination, and political acumen—a challenging combination of qualities.

For a historian and believer in individualism, there is little more disheartening than the advocates of historical determinism, largely the followers of Marxism and communism, who argue that events in history are determined by various prior forces and, therefore, essentially inevitable. It is surely one of the inherent failings of communism that its bedrock theories reject the role of individuals and human agency. Ultimately is there anything more misery-making than the idea that you have no control?

The creation of NATO is testimony to the fact what we can make a difference. The smoke-filled (and they were, then!) rooms, corridor conversations, summits, telegrams, and phone calls may not seem the stuff of inspiration, but I would suggest they are—just when it mattered, there assembled a cast of characters who were not heroes in the conventional sense but who rose to the challenge of creating something remarkable that ensured the security and freedom of a continent and democracy.

When it comes to individuals in the initial drive to create NATO what also comes over well is the role of key advisors and officials. While Britain's Bevin, the US's Acheson and Vandenberg, Canada's Pearson, and so on get their deserved plaudits, and were the public face of creating NATO, the influence and initiatives of key officials get equally well-deserved recognition here.

In particular the State Department's John Hickerson and Theodore Achilles were driving forces for recognising the need for something like NATO, formulating the proposal, and then managing the process, adapting and steering it along what was often a very rocky road.

It is a reminder of the critical role that many civil servants, whether national or NATO's international staff, have played in the Alliance, and it is perhaps a weakness in the books that after those early days there is

little focus on some of their successors. Within NATO itself they have provided the institutional memory, advice, and guidance to the passing gallery of politicians who have run NATO over the decades.

I do not consider the staffers' influence has been improper—they advise, not decide—but the standard of that advice has been considerable, and indeed some, perhaps most, of the initiatives that have steered NATO have come from below, not above.

For instance, those interested in StratCom will know the drive to incorporate it into NATO was initiated by mid-level staffers—the demand signal did not come from above until much later in its evolution. Ultimately, of course, the leadership had to support and approve it, but would it have ever got to that point without the staff who put it on the leadership's radar and made it a worthwhile goal to take up their time?

This clearly cannot compare with the role of the civil servants who were present at the dawn of NATO, but it is indicative of the importance of that coterie of international civil servants whose belief in the Alliance and its core purpose has been total and dedicated. This is a still relatively uncharted part of the NATO history, but it is good to see the role of Achilles, Hickerson, and other staffers get some of the attention it deserves.

Of course, all of those early innovators had the benefit of a clarity in the international situation that is lacking in today's complex security environment. By the late 1940s the threat from the Soviet Union was clear to anyone not wearing blinkers or very rose-tinted spectacles. As a traumatised, prostrate Europe tried to rebuild itself and even the unoccupied winners, especially Britain, rushed to demobilise, Stalin maintained much of his army and very obviously exerted a baleful and deepening control over the areas he occupied.

So, the threat was clear enough, made even more so by its very physical nature. Tanks on your border are obvious; today's more malevolent influence through information confrontation, political warfare, rather

less so. Much of the recent questioning about NATO and its purpose has been centred on both recognising and defining a more inchoate threat, and therefore on the need to respond and NATO's role as a political/military instrument with its focus on hard military power.

Back in the 1940s the Soviets by their actions made it easier—the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia, and most importantly the blockade of Berlin the same year that led to the Berlin Airlift. It is a feature of the Cold War and its aftermath that at various points when the value of NATO might have been questioned, then the Soviet Union, and now Russia, reminded us. Whether it is Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Georgia, or now Ukraine, the malign actions of the Soviet Union/Russia not only show why NATO exists but also should frame the continuing discussion about the NATO/Russia relationship.

Indeed, these actions remind us of how so many of the core fundamentals have not changed, as well as the one that certainly has. NATO's first secretary general, Lord Ismay, is said to have pithily summed up its role, saying, 'The purpose of the NATO alliance is to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.'

Keeping the Russians out is dealt with at length, but, perhaps understandably given these are NATO histories, the Russian side of the equation is skated over. However understandable though, not taking into account the equivalent debate within Russia and its actions is a bit like talking about just one team in a football match.

That the Russians did not like NATO is obvious enough, but the level of their concern, whether they really saw it as a threat or just an obstacle to their ambitions, is less clear. We know what they said, but experience should have taught us that in the Russian system what is said is often performative rather than truthful—intended to achieve an effect in pursuit of an objective. Therefore what they declare cannot automatically be taken at face value, as the truth or otherwise is so often irrelevant to

the purpose of the statement. As with the boy who cried wolf, whether to take them seriously or not is something of an art form.

This matters, as we spent most of the Cold War pretty much guessing what the Soviets were up to. Then, as Apps's book title puts it, the stakes were quite literally about 'Deterring Armageddon', and now after a brief interregnum the shutters have come down again, and understanding the Kremlin is once more closed off to normal discourse or analysis.

That issue—working out what the Soviets/Russians are really up to—is a thread running through, and complicating, much of NATO's decision-making. One common element has often been the desire of nations to believe what they say, put the best gloss on it, and accordingly downplay any threat.

This is of course often convenient because it avoids uncomfortable issues like levels of defence spending. Beyond that, for some, relations with Russia were additionally overlaid by the desire not to 'provoke' it. This was especially so for Germany, haunted by the spectre of history and its war guilt.

Within NATO's corridors it has always been taken as read that in any debate on Russia the Germans would be the handbrake and the most cautious about doing anything the Russians might not like. The Russians have of course played on this.

While keeping the Russians out is very much NATO's continuing core mission, the story of Germany within NATO is now very different, with keeping the Germans down consigned to history. The issue now has usually been to get Germany to do more. It is a value of history books to challenge certainties and attitudes that come from forgetting that where we are is often very different from where we were. For NATO's founders and leaderships in the early decades, the military threat of Russia was newer and less obvious than the threat of Germany.

Only unified into a single country in 1871, Germany had then precipitated two world wars. Little wonder that ensuring it did not rise once more was the initial priority. It is a remarkable testimony to that era's leadership, scarred by the war, that within a few years they recognised the need to bring Germany into NATO, and that there was a new generation of German political leaders who had the vision and strength to drive such fundamental change.

If keeping the Germans down is yesterday's problem, then keeping the Americans in remains the eternal issue, and highlights many of the recurring themes of NATO's history.

As mentioned above, the constancy of America's support over the last seventy-five years should not be taken for granted for the next seventy-five, as historically its foreign policy instincts have been to avoid entanglement. Nevertheless, the country's direction of travel has so far been driven by an enlightened self-interest that links it to an Atlanticist mindset within its foreign policy elite.

Without America actually turning its back on Europe, that prioritisation is shifting. As with the isolationist thread, there has always been a Pacific thread as well. Just as isolationism was a real factor to be overcome in the US supporting Britain in 1940, then that Pacific instinct was still in play in 1941 after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. However, Hitler solved FDR's potential problem of declaring war on Germany by declaring war on the US first. Even after that there was a debate about Japan first or Germany first for the US's main military effort.

What Trump has done has starkly reveal potential and actual fault lines, as well as much worsen them. But, if we ignore the verbiage, he reflects a point of frustration shared by far more NATO-friendly presidents, which is Europe not fairly sharing the burden of defence.

This is well detailed in both histories. For instance, Apps quotes President Kennedy asking, 'Why should we have in Europe supplies adequate

to fight for 90 days when the European forces around our troops have only enough supplies to fight for two or three?’ (p. 177). Indeed. And of course this resonates strongly now, as the fighting in Ukraine reminds us that major war burns up munitions at an astounding rate.

Such frustration was reflected also by Nixon and Kissinger in the 1970s, and in the 1980s NATO-critical friends like Senator Sam Nunn, justifying a motion to scale back US forces in Europe, described it as ‘not a petition for divorce [but] a petition for the Alliance to carry out its vows’ (pp. 246–47).

Trump’s demand for Europe to ‘pay its dues’ may reflect a basic misunderstanding that NATO nations’ spending pledges are not some form of membership fee, but that does not change the fact that until recently the bulk of NATO nations were happy to live in some kind of self-deluding dreamland where defence could be had on the cheap, the US would continue to carry a disproportionate share of the load, and they could kid themselves that Putin’s Russia was not the major problem that common sense told us it was becoming.

The cost of credible defence has always been intrinsically linked to perceptions of threat. Much of the complex debate and sometimes arcane disputes within NATO, while superficially about a variety of issues, has usually boiled down to this.

This includes nuclear weapons. While couched in moral terms, and undoubtedly they are the ultimate deterrent, NATO’s attachment to them was in large part because we needed them more as we would not pay the cost of a conventional deterrent against the massive Soviet army.

Much of this can be encapsulated in the dual-track decision of the eighties on deploying intermediate range nuclear forces, which is extensively covered in both books in the descriptions of the anguished internal debate which nearly split the Alliance. What they both highlight is the desire of the Europeans to see the Pershing and Cruise missiles deployed as a

ground-based counter to the Russian SS-21s. They feared that without them on European soil there would be a delinkage on the ladder of escalation to US strategic nukes, which would thereby threaten the credibility of NATO's nuclear umbrella and deterrent.

I remember as a young journalist having fiery debates with workmates, some of whom spent their weekends at the Greenham Common protests. They were morally outraged at the notion of nuclear weapons but also against spending money on conventional weapons, completing the argument with the comfortable and dubious rationalisation that the Soviet Union was not a threat.

However, what also marked much of the emotion around the public debate was the strong strain of anti-Americanism in the public protests, with Ronald Reagan as a favourite hate figure. With some notable exceptions, European leaders did their best to keep their heads down—they may have wanted nuclear weapons, but they were uncomfortable about saying so. It is an irony that the leaders of an Alliance based on deterrence, which inherently includes nuclear weapons, preferred not to talk about them, and still do not like to do so—the uncomfortable fact that dare not speak its name.

This unwillingness has often played into the hands of the Russians, who sometimes seem unable to stop talking about these weapons—fully aware of the scare factor this arouses. We are seeing this now in Ukraine, as Russia attempts to suppress Western backing for Ukraine by giving dark warnings of nuclear war if the support continues. The pulling of emotional triggers is so much easier when NATO's nations have been so shy of talking about the issue in a rational way, and are thus less able to call this out for the bluff it is.

The political warfare that the Soviet Union and now Russia has continually mounted against NATO is, I would suggest, one of the significant omissions in both of the histories under discussion. Until the end of the Cold War it was a shadow war, and a war of perceptions.

The Soviets sought to undermine the Alliance by targeting both governments and electorates, and how NATO was viewed by their populations has framed much of the internal debate.

NATO as an institution was well aware of this, and created the NATO Information Service in 1950. Its history and relationship with PsyOps and intelligence deserve attention, as well as in its later guises, most recently the Public Diplomacy Division. This is not special pleading by a communicator but highlighting that NATO's power, and so an essential component in its success, has lain in its ability to communicate its credibility and capability.

Never was that communication, both as an institution and by members, more necessary than once the Berlin Wall had come down. Having helped 'win' the Cold War, what was it for? This has broken down into two streams of activity: enlargement and expanding its mission. An organisation intended for 'Deterring Armageddon' ended up finally using its military power with a much less defined role as peacekeeper and counter-insurgent.

Both Apps and Rynning cast a sceptical eye on much of the expanded missions, and, given the distinctly mixed outcomes, that is understandable, especially with regard to ISAF and Afghanistan. It is important in this context to remember the tenor of the times. Mistakenly or not, Russia was out of the equation, and the mood was 'out of area, or out of business'. September 11 also changed the equation when it came to defining threat. This was a new world. Then Secretary General George Robertson perhaps gets less than his due for grasping that nettle and leading the way on the declaration of Article 5.

While nations took their peace dividend—and kept taking it—NATO became an easy option for dealing with the post-Cold War problems. ISAF was a prime example. It is easy to look back and see it as a mistake, but the reality was that NATO had little choice in getting involved. I was there, and after the first three ISAF rotations no nation could or

would step up. It was NATO or nothing—there would have been no ISAF at all. I think this reality is not given enough account. There was also the factor that there was no consensus to get NATO involved in Iraq, so this was something we could do.

The initial NATO-led ISAF was slated to be Kabul only, but it was Germany that wanted a NATO flag in its area in the north, and so it went on. What the nations wanted was what they got as the area of operations expanded. What did not happen was either providing the forces needed (that peace dividend) or a recognition of Afghanistan's descent into a full-blown counter-insurgency.

As someone who did three tours based in Kabul it was frankly infuriating to have nations pretending this was a peacekeeping mission when it was quite clearly a counter-insurgency. The result was we did not up our game early on when it might have made the difference. The outcome, NATO's failure, cannot be disputed, but I am sceptical as to how much we should point the finger at the institution rather than the nations.

Similar factors also played their part in other NATO engagements. Libya in particular was a case of the Alliance being backed into the mission. Libya also reveals the limitations of Rynning's book, which emphasises the political while largely sidestepping the military. The UK and French actions and US equivocation meant the NATO military campaign basically had to be improvised from a standing start, with combat already under way. This is a less than ideal way to run a war.

The war's aftermath, with all the attendant consequences, was also NATO nations responsibility, not NATO's. I believe it was driven by a desire not to repeat the experience of ISAF. Having got our hands caught in the mangle there, we were determined to take a more hands-off approach, which of course has sadly not turned out too well either.

The picture in the Balkans is much more mixed. It is hard to argue that peace and stability in the Balkans is not a core security interest

for Europe. It nevertheless took NATO a while to reorientate itself to using its military institutions to play their part. In so doing they have brought peace and a fair degree of stability to the former Yugoslavia. The continuing fragility in the region shows the limits of military power on its own, but the region is an awful lot better than it would otherwise be.

In this context, it is a real omission on the part of Sten Rynning to entirely ignore NATO's mission in what is now North Macedonia. Not only is it the bookend on the cycle of Balkan conflicts, having learned the lesson of what went before, but it was also massively successful, preventing a major civil war and setting in place the pathway to that country's eventual membership of the Alliance.

As mentioned above, the other core aspect of NATO's post-Cold War identity has been enlargement. Not only has it changed NATO's identity, but it has raised questions about its purpose and whether this played a part in Putin and Russia's descent into their current darkness.

This boils down to whether NATO enlargement was 'provocative' to a new Russia that would otherwise be living in peace and harmony. I think much of the debate here about the discussions within NATO is interesting, but we are also in danger of dancing on the head of a pin over the details.

Russia's neighbours would say you need to go back beyond the diplomacy around the end of the Warsaw Pact and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and look at how it previously acted. Given that history, why on earth should we assume the good faith of the Russians and that they will set aside their previous grand strategy of dominating their neighbours? Putin himself has acknowledged as much, having stated in his famous Munich speech of 2007 that Russia was not going to change a thousand years of foreign policy tradition.

I would also suggest that the debate around what the then US secretary of state James Baker might or might not have said to Gorbachev is far

less relevant than Putin and Co would like us to think. His supposed statement that NATO's jurisdiction would move 'not one inch' was not just ambiguous about whether he meant East Germany or more widely, but was never written down, proven, or signed off; nor did he have the authority to say anything like that on behalf of the US, let alone NATO.

Yet Putin claims this was some kind of binding contract, building a narrative of betrayal and broken promises on it, while analysts have spent huge effort dissecting it. What nonsense. Does anyone imagine what the Russians would have said if the situation had been reversed? They would have laughed in our face, demanded the proof, said where is the contract, and then moved on. After all, with their invasion of Ukraine they are breaching several agreements and formal commitments they have signed. What is happening in Ukraine is not a consequence of NATO enlargement but of Russia reverting to type.

The debate and decision-making around enlargement and the nature of the engagement in Afghanistan and elsewhere reflect a routine fact of NATO's existence—the number of times the key nations, especially of course the US, ignore NATO in critical decisions. For an institution sometimes credited with almost mythical powers, it is the core reality.

In all of these events and throughout its history, the critical factor is that NATO is an intergovernmental body, not a supranational body like the EU. It has no armies, it has a very small civil service and budget, and it decides everything by consensus. This is its strength and its weakness. Decisions, once made, stick, but getting there is often painful. NATO's history shows that the Alliance has produced enormous synergy through combined will and capability, but in the end it cannot rise above that collective will.

But really this should be no surprise—what other body can commit its members to war, to defend other nations, and perhaps lead to Armageddon? And now after the long interregnum of relative European

security the spectre that drove NATO's formation is back. The issue is how to respond, and the answer is far from clear.

America's Atlanticist era is at the least diminished, and under Donald Trump could be extinguished to be replaced by isolationist nativism. Beyond Europe the rise of China is now an acknowledged threat, but what to do about it is both undecided and disputed. Technology has now put sophisticated, accurate, and cheap weaponry within the reach of minor powers and terrorists. We are also now in the information era, where the tools of persuasion and disinformation have the means to polarise society and disrupt unified decision-making.

What is NATO's role? Could/should its ships be in the South China Sea to help defend the maritime chokepoints essential to Europe? How should it build on its burgeoning relationship with like-minded allies such as Australia and Japan? How should the Alliance, as a political/military body, balance the two?

Apps prefers to avoid strong conclusions, but Rynning argues for what he calls 'classic NATO', saying 'its future must resemble its past'. He makes a good case, but the world has changed so much that the definition of deterrence and defence will need a degree of flexibility. In the new security environment how do we best defend and deter? Tanks on the border was so much simpler!

What is clear, though, is that one area of necessary change is Europe stepping up to the plate to reduce its dependence on the US. The shock of Ukraine has seen steps in that direction, but surely they are still far too slow. The course of that war has also re-emphasised some classic lessons, such as the need for the ability to ramp up arms production and build up stocks. The brutal fact is that NATO's peace dividend more resembled a fire sale, and our inability to resupply Ukraine tells its own story.

The scales should also have fallen from our eyes about Russia: proper deterrence, not another version of detente or some new reset, is every bit

as valid now as it was in 1949. Nations also going it alone is impractical: there is no alternative to multinational defence achieved through burden-sharing, common standards, training, and interoperability. One of the less-recognised benefits of NATO is that, even when the NATO flag is not flying, it is NATO common standards that allow coalitions of the willing to work effectively together.

The brief time when Great Power rivalry was dimmed by a so-called Rules-Based International Order (R BIO), where small nations could do as they wished, is over. Great Power rivalries have been seemingly ever-present in our history, whereas the rules-based era started with the UN charter of 1945 and, in Europe at least, had its brief flowering with the end of the Cold War. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, the historian Thucydides said in the Melian Dialogue that ‘right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’. NATO nations by banding together made even the weaker equals in power. NATO histories and the narratives within them remind us of these enduring truths.

For Strategic Communicators, then, there is a vital role here. We are in a battle of narratives where our adversaries are using information confrontation, disinformation, and alternative narratives to promote a different vision of our future. This clash is happening here and now, and it is in our field of endeavour. It is up to us to help demonstrate NATO’s continuing relevance, the hard choices that lie ahead, but also the inspiration that should drive us.

It is a common saying in the foreign policy community that if we did not have NATO then we would have to invent it. I take the point, but the more sober reality is that if we did not already have NATO then it would now be impossible to reinvent it. Given the way the world currently looks, that should scare us all. We should all be very relieved that a fortunate combination of people and circumstances created something that was far from inevitable but has been indispensable. The lesson is surely that we must ensure that we do what needs to be done to secure its future.

Georgia: Approaching a Crossroads? Or Permanently Parked at One?

A Review Essay by Paul Bell

The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World
Armen Sarkissian. C. Hurst & Co., 2023.

Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, small state, Georgian Dream, European Union, elective autocracy, protest, dilemma*

About the Author

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This is a meditation on the mind of a small state, Georgia.

It begins next door, with Georgia's equally small neighbour, Armenia, whose president until 2022 was Armen Sarkissian, author of *The Small States Club*, the book which has prompted this essay.

Georgia and Armenia share a 219-kilometre border and several distinctive features. They are similar in population size—Armenia a bit shy of three million, Georgia at three and a half—and both have large diasporas. They are among the earliest Christian countries. Each has its own unique

alphabet. Both of its peoples have learned how to survive despite being brutalised and occupied by neighbouring powers. And each might be farther along the path of national development had it the ability to make different choices.

Sarkissian's book is his manifesto for a platform on which small *smart* states might 'share [the] experiences, strategies and insights that have propelled them to success'. He identifies the ingredients of that success through a series of national development portraits—Botswana, Estonia, Ireland, Israel, Qatar, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates—and concludes that 'the success of Small States hinges on a carefully orchestrated symphony of elements. A strong national identity, strong leadership, a clear mission, an articulated vision, balanced power structures, democratic values, transparency, honesty and pragmatic approaches collectively contribute to their success.'¹

His final portrait is of his own country. He poignantly describes Armenia's history, that of his family, and his career as a computer scientist, ambassador, prime minister, and ultimately the president who midwifes Armenia's 'velvet revolution' in 2018. But unlike the other states he has portrayed—often with considerable interpretative generosity in respect of their adherence to democratic values—here his disappointment is palpable. 'Instead of turning Armenia into a transparent and incorruptible oasis of high-tech innovation, open trade, judicial independence, the rule of law, entrepreneurship and business development, where locally incorporated companies could own assets and engage in global business ventures, Armenia became a small and insular oligarchic state.'²

A small and insular oligarchic state. Sarkissian might as well have been describing Armenia's next-door neighbour; the similarities are uncomfortably close, and it's a judgement many Georgians might make of their own country. A poll by the International Republican Institute published in November 2023 indicated that 54 per cent of Georgians

1 *The Small States Club*, p. 239.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

believe their country is ‘headed in the wrong direction’. The question is: can they choose a better one?

Today Georgia would appear (through a Western lens) to be at a crossroads, facing a choice between a future in Europe, its long and popularly held but also elusive aspiration, or its continuation as a satellite of its protector-predator of the past 250 years, Russia. Are the parliamentary elections in October 2024 a pivotal moment of crisis at which Georgia chooses irrevocably between two very different futures: either the strengthening grip of authoritarianism, the steady drift towards elective autocracy, the yielding to Russia’s moral and economic gravity, or a push to release that grip, to modernise and liberalise its institutions and infrastructure, ready itself for the journey to accession to the European Union, and become (perhaps) a small *smart* state?

Or is there is another way of looking at it? Is this particular moment no more a crisis in Georgia’s history than any other? Does Georgia, situated at the cusp between East and West, rather than *approach* a crossroads, merely *live* at one? Has its geography, which is simultaneously its history—those immutable, irremediable facts of its existence—predetermined its eternal location *at* a crossroads? As though a primary existential truth for Georgia (for there is one other) were a permanent, insoluble dilemma? Is this simply ‘the Georgian condition’—that it must always toggle between competing risks and opportunities as it seeks to strike a balance between the pressures exerted by the different powers and interests on which its survival depends, and the preservation of its own precarious political and cultural sovereignty?

For that is Georgia’s other primary existential truth: the imperative to survive. ‘If there is an overwhelming priority or a paramount preoccupation common to all small states,’ writes Sarkissian, ‘it is survival.’³ Nothing could be truer of Georgia, for good or ill. Survival has bred in Georgians an admirable hardiness and a passionate sense of national identity, but it has also bred distrust, inwardness, a short-termism born of ever-present

3 Ibid., p. 11.

political and economic insecurity, and some habits of power and social arrangement that do not easily conduce to effective state-building or an inclusive or future-focused politico-civic consciousness. ‘Beyond civil society there seems to be significant resistance to long-term change,’ notes Monica Gill, a British doctoral student who has spent the past four years in Tbilisi studying the nature of influence in Georgia. If that is so, then it is—in a country where 80 per cent of its citizens aver their desire to join the EU, which would undoubtedly be a major act of existential change—one of those typically Georgian contradictions that cannot be properly understood without some understanding of the precariousness that has characterised Georgia’s existence for centuries. Georgia has ever lived like a lizard on a hot rock, exposed to the open sky.

The Georgians are a people of prickly sensibilities, with a pronounced sense of innate cultural superiority, and quite sure—as they crabwalk into tomorrow—that they are beyond the comprehension of presumptuous foreigners. Winston Churchill’s characterisation of the Soviet Union’s intentions in 1939 as ‘a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ might have been as aptly applied to Georgia; its national state of mind is not easy to fathom or publicly discuss. I went to see my old friend Iago Kachkachishvili, a leading Georgian sociologist and founder of the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, to talk about it.

‘Being at a crossroads,’ he said, ‘this is a permanent condition. It has been this way for centuries.’

I told him I had been reading in translation a selection of Georgian poetry. Georgians revere their poets and writers—half the streets are named after them, and most of the others after kings and heroes; there are few politicians. ‘My summary,’ I said. ‘Beautiful land, unique people, God send us a leader to save us.’ At least one worthy of a street name.

He laughed. ‘A wonderful country that is always in trouble.’ Then he told me Georgia’s foundation story, which he knew I’d probably heard a dozen times already, about how when God was dishing out land to

the peoples of the earth, the Georgians arrived late (they always smile self-knowingly as they relate this) and it was all gone, so God said, no worries, I'll give you mine.

And it continues from there. Georgian identity is wired into the foundation stories of Western culture: its mythic hero Amirani gives ancient Greece the legend of Prometheus, and Georgia features in Greek myth as the land of Colchis, Medea, and the Golden Fleece. Georgia is right there at the birth of Christianity's global evangelism when, after Christ's death, so the story goes, in the lottery for which apostle is to take the Word to which country, Mother Mary draws Georgia and sends Andrew to found its Church.⁴

'We grow up with this,' says Kachkachishvili. 'We teach it in schools: this is not an ordinary country, it is the best, chosen by God. And yet we live with a sense of disappointment, and of being victims. There is a duality, a paradoxical ambiguity, we are unique and chosen by God, but we are permanently struggling to survive. And this is because we are so wonderful that everyone wants to conquer us, to grab our land. Our strength is our weakness. Always throughout our history we have needed protection—from Russia, the Turks, the West. But this protection is rooted in a strange attitude—we are *entitled* to protection because we are so *good*. This protection does not mean that we are subordinated, we are *owed* this protection. It is a superiority/inferiority complex at one and the same time.' For Georgians, he says, their survival is vested with mystical properties; it was never a logical outcome, it was magical. 'Max Weber talked about the content of modern society as the outcome of rational activities; we don't know what that means. We believe in this magic construction and it has held back Georgia's modernisation.'

Saba Buadze, an up-and-coming young opposition member of the Tbilisi city council, seems broadly to agree: 'We have a strong sense of national identity but a lot of what defines our identity is outdated and

4 Giorgi Lomsadze, 'In Times of Trouble the Georgian Government Turns to Mother Mary', *Eurasianet*, 28 May 2019.

out of touch with modern needs.’ Needs that start with the economy, and there’s the rub.

Georgian Dream, the ruling party, says that in twelve years of power it has trebled GDP and halved poverty.⁵ The trouble is, most ordinary people don’t seem to feel it. Government data show unemployment at about 16 per cent,⁶ but Kachkachishvili says the figures don’t include the number of people who have simply given up looking for a job. And while the government says poverty in Georgia has dropped to a ‘historic low’,⁷ Kachkachishvili notes that the official poverty datum line is 380 GEL (€133) for a family of five per month—a threshold so low as to be ludicrous. He mentions Georgia’s reliance on imports of food, energy, and transportation, and laments its dearth of skilled labour—all this despite the billions spent in Georgia by Western development agencies.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia’s economy has apparently boomed, showing record growth rates, but there has been little domestic discussion about the nature of that growth or the fact that Georgia has been a beneficiary of European sanctions-busting, as suppliers, instead of trading directly with Russia, simply reroute their goods through the latter’s southern and eastern neighbours. ‘There is’, Ed Conway reported for the London *Sunday Times* in early April 2024, ‘a constant stream of lorries passing from Poti in Georgia—the main Black Sea port for much of the Caucasus—up to the Russian border.’⁸ Somebody’s making a killing.

Kachkachishvili is critical of the culture of professional silence that surrounds Georgia’s real economic performance; neither it, nor the government’s management of it, is subject to robust analysis and appraisal. ‘Our economists are conformists, they don’t want to offend the government.’ Buadze concurs: ‘No one in the private sector challenges

5 ‘PM: Georgian Economy “tripled” during Georgian Dream Rule’, [Agenda.ge](#), 1 February 2024.

6 National Statistics Office of Georgia, ‘Employment and Unemployment’, www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/683/Employment-Unemployment.

7 ‘Georgia’s Poverty Rate at ‘Historic Low of 15.6%—Gov’t Administration’, [Agenda.ge](#), 29 May 2023.

8 Ed Conway, ‘Britain Is Still Making a Killing from Putin’s War Machine’, *Sunday Times*, 6 April 2024.

the government. Big players don't, and the small players, which should be the drivers of the economy, are irrelevant.'

What it amounts to is sunshine economics—an economy whose official numbers are spun and delivered with crucially insufficient context, but that works comfortably and beyond scrutiny for the politico-business elite, while the taxis are driven by scientists, and university graduates work the cash registers in supermarkets. Small wonder, then, that for ordinary Georgians, who migrate westward in droves for jobs (emigration almost doubled in 2023),⁹ Europe is that shining city on a hill.

But is this really the point at which Georgia turns and makes that irrevocable choice? The war (need one say which?) changed everything. Suddenly the issue, once a softer-focus aspiration whose urgency had perhaps been partly diminished by the easier trade and visa regime introduced between the EU and Georgia in 2016, was presented in sharp outline by the implications of Russian aggression. The parallel NATO membership aspiration dwindled in Georgia's public mind—after all, it had done little to deter the invasion of Ukraine; Georgia was left feeling very vulnerable again and nobody talks about NATO now, not even in the opposition—but the Europe question became immediate, urgent, and raw to the touch.

Says Buadze: 'We could have been in this strategic ambiguity for years. Being pro-Western on paper but totalitarian and pro-Russian in reality. But now the war has accelerated these things. We are at a turning point. It's going to be either Europe in the coming years or Georgia is going to go back to the Russian orbit. So yes, it is either or. Not necessarily at this election, but the next political cycle is going to be about that. Now Europe has made up its mind about Georgia being part of the family, the intensity and interaction is going to increase.'

9 'In 2023, the number of emigrants totals 245 064 persons increasing by 95.6 percent compared to the previous year. The number of immigrants increased by 14.5 percent, amounting to 205 857 persons. In the same time period, 75.9 percent of immigrants and 62.2 percent of emigrants represent the working-age population (15–64 year age group).' Geostat (National Statistics Office of Georgia), *Number of Population*, 26 April 2024, www.geostat.ge/media/61879/Number-of-Population-as-of-January-1%2C-2024.pdf.

Has Georgia *really* made up its mind about Europe? ‘That’s a hard question,’ says Buadze. Because when you parse the proposition, it’s one thing to see Europe as a bulwark against Russia and a font of greater economic security; that makes sense to most Georgians, who know the Russian threat and the struggle to make ends meet. But it’s another to sign up to democracy, transparency, and judicial independence, which threatens the power of the ruling elite, or to equal rights for homosexuals and the Western democracies making judgements about your style of governance—issues which drive ultranationalists and Orthodox clerics into a frenzy and provide touch-powder grist to the government propaganda mill. Georgians are going to have to make up their minds about Europe, not about whether they want to be a part of it, but about what Europe really is, and whether they are prepared to buy into and defend the entire package that is membership of the EU.

Georgian Dream will always have been well aware that Georgians and all opposition parties other than the far right will not retreat from their ‘European perspective’. Moreover, Georgia’s governments are constitutionally mandated to pursue accession to the EU. In which case, on the assumption that accession remained a foreign policy priority for Georgian Dream, its negotiators would likely push hard for the sort of political terms that Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Poland before the resurgence of the Tusk alliance, and more recently Slovakia under Robert Fico appear to be managing. Never mind that those countries all acceded under more progressive governments; Georgian Dream will have told themselves, as do Europe’s eastern populists, that Europe would always be back, that Europe needs them more than they need it, especially since the war. Georgia, after all, is *owed* that protection. Now, however, in light of recent events, that assumption must be considered highly questionable.

Georgian Dream also knows that the values projected by the EU and by the country's liberal-democratic civil society do not resonate as strongly for Georgians beyond Tbilisi, who are more preoccupied with the quotidian struggles of rural life, but who—because of the country's embattled history—are more likely, as Monika Gill points out, to mobilise around perceived threats to their identity. So Georgian Dream, facing re-election, retreats comfortably and confidently to its now familiar populist rhetoric, railing against Euro-American interference and double standards, and posturing as the doughty defender of Georgia's sovereignty and traditional way of life.

I remember a conversation last November, over an excellent bottle of Georgian wine, with a good friend who heads the national office of a leading Western agency here. We were discussing the politics and prospects of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, then still eleven months away. The country was quiet, the bad temper brought on by the 'foreign agents' bill the previous March had faded away, the economy was meretriciously more buoyant after the 2022 price shocks, and the mood music out of Brussels seemed to suggest that candidacy status would be conceded to Georgia, despite its lack of progress in key areas where the EU wanted progress. My friend said to me: 'All GD have to do is *not* do something stupid, and they'll ease home.'

* * *

I live a stone's throw from trouble. On a perfect spring morning—the kind Tbilisians begin to promise foreigners from late February but like most things Georgian arrives when it will, in early April—I was strolling, as I do most days, down to Rustaveli, the Tbilisi boulevard where Georgians gather to protest against their governments. As I passed the parliament building, my mobile pinged news of the government's plan to reintroduce the foreign agents bill.

'Here we go again,' I thought. Only thirteen months before, the bill had had the city in uproar. In a single dramatic week in early March 2023,

the government had rammed it through parliament, then revoked it after three nights of street protest and a torrent of Western criticism at a time when the EU was reviewing Georgia's application for candidacy status. Now it was back, unchanged but for a single word in its title, and my mind's eye filled with the familiar images of Rustaveli transformed—as it has been at some point in almost every year since I first arrived in 2018—into a heaving human sea of discontent, while a barrage of amplified, harsh, and uncompromising rhetoric ricochets off the buildings along the avenue.

If re-enacted, the foreign agents bill, swinging a cudgel of bankrupting fines, will restrict the ability of civil society organisations—independent media, democracy activists, human rights groups, and the like—to receive financial support from foreign donors. Its domestic critics call it the 'Russian law' and accuse the government of trying to shut down dissent. European politicians and diplomats warn that it will undermine Georgia's path towards integration with the EU, which in only December 2023 granted the country candidacy status. And the new prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, a master of newspeak, says it's merely about ensuring 'European-style transparency'. Like other practised populists of the right, Georgian Dream deploys the shamelessly admirable skill of co-opting progressive terminology and turning it back on its adversaries.

As always, the government's language turned both ways at once, reiterating its commitment to Europe while singing 'My Way' to Georgian nationalist sentiment. The speaker of the parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, said:

We want to enter the EU peacefully [...] in a stable condition, not as a ruined country. [...] The task isn't to move forward on the path of the European Union at all costs now, is it? Our task, the goal of the Georgian people, is to move forward in the European Union in such a way that we do not harm ourselves. [...] We can't turn a blind eye to this because it is harming our country and our people.

[...] We see that there are foundations and donors in Georgia that directly fund radical groups and illegally fund parties.¹⁰

And he added, rather more menacingly, that he would switch off the microphone of MPs who dared refer to the returning bill as a ‘Russian law’.¹¹ Last year’s antics would not be tolerated this year, said Papuashvili. Twelve days later, two feet away from him, the majority leader in the parliament was punched in the face at the podium by an opposition MP, who was himself then restrained with immoderate force by other MPs.

To be fair, Georgian Dream, in power now for twelve years and seeking a fourth term in October 2024, had given fair warning later in 2023 that parliament had not seen the last of the ‘Russian law’. Once enacted, the new law will be a centrepiece of the party’s election platform, alongside another set of swingeing legislative amendments aimed at outlawing pro-LGBT demonstrations or programmes that promote LGBT rights and identity¹²—as evidence of its commitment to protecting Georgia’s sovereignty and traditional values.

In the early evening of 9 April, a sacred day in the history of Georgian resistance to Russian occupation, I walked again to Rustaveli to observe the first major public protest against the foreign agents bill, which had just passed its first reading. The protest had grown from the few hundred who had assembled behind the building the day before to perhaps ten thousand, and had migrated to the front of the building. Rustaveli was closed, police were in evidence but fewer in number and less ‘postured’ than the previous year, the weather was mild, and friends greeted each other warmly. Perhaps it was the coming of spring, as the mood was unexpectedly upbeat. Yet it was also a solemn occasion, marking the day in 1989 that Russian troops armed with shovels beat twenty-two protestors to death in the same street. The president, Salome Zurbishvili,

10 ‘Speaker Says EU Drive Should Not Come “at All Costs”’, [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/archives/589941), 3 April 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/589941>.

11 ‘The Daily Beat: 3 April’, [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/archives/589977), 4 April 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/589977>.

12 ‘GD Pushes for Anti-LGBT Constitutional Law’, [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge), 25 March 2024.

who has been bitterly at odds with the government since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, laid a large wreath and declared:

Anyone—today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow—who comes to Georgia with the Russian flag, the Russian symbol and the Russian subjugation [intention] will never prevail ... We have to know what we want: do we want what happened on April 9, [1989,] or what happened [on] April 9, 1991 [when Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union]. That is the choice for Georgia—either independence or slavery, either Europe or Russia. We know what we want.¹³

People are speaking about two presidencies in a single term—the first, before the war, when the French-born Zurabishvili seemed no more than a polished avatar of Georgian Dream; the second, from its outbreak, when she picked her side and chose Ukraine. Since then she has opposed the 2023 foreign agents bill, gone to Europe in defiance of the government to make the case for the Georgian people in Europe, and survived an attempt to impeach her. For all that, it has taken this latest crisis for opposition sentiment to begin to turn towards her. But how are Georgians to be presented with that choice in October?

At the demonstration I spoke to acquaintances I encountered among the throng. I was tapped on the elbow by a long-time stalwart of the largest opposition party, the United National Movement. She was not especially optimistic about a change in government, but she believed her party had been setting the political agenda by focusing on the government's economic mismanagement. We agreed that the foreign agent and anti-gay bills were a government strategy to distract voters from the real issues in the October election. I spoke with a European academic and long-time resident of Georgia whose balanced perspective I always seek when trying to understand political developments in Georgia. He said:

13 'Georgia Commemorates April 9 Victims Massacred by Soviet Troops', Civil.ge, 9 April 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/590921>.

‘Two thirds of young Georgians reject this bill. They will be shaming those of their parents who continue to support the government. As for the elections, don’t focus on this October, focus on next year’s municipal elections in Tbilisi. If GD lose the capital, their position will unravel within six months.’

Once again there is a sense in the air that change is possible. But whenever I have spoken to opposition political activists, the piece that is missing from their discourse is a political strategy. At a second rally some nights later, as things on Rustaveli were beginning to heat up and the police were moving in with teargas and water cannons (which they later used), I spoke to a lawyer with a senior position in one of the smaller parties. He talked about the new presence of Generation Z, in much greater numbers than before, and about how these events might prove the fulcrum on which the electorate’s political leverage might turn in favour of the opposition and the ‘European perspective’. I asked him about the prospect of that old unicorn, a united opposition—a factor whose importance you would think had redoubled in Georgian politics, given the new terms under which the October election will be fought, a 5 per cent threshold. With that threshold, only three to four parties are likely to gain seats, while the reallocation of votes for parties that do not clear it will favour the party with the largest plurality—Georgian Dream. Surely, I said, the opposition, certainly the smaller parties, have to find a way to consolidate their different bases? His eyes glazed. ‘We still have time ...’

Do they? Really? It’s a fact of Georgian politics that party leaders find it nigh on impossible to make concessions to each other in the interest of a wider objective. ‘We don’t like to share power, especially in politics,’ Kachkachishvili had said to me some weeks before. ‘Power must be absolute. That’s why we never had coalitions. It is an expression of weakness to share power. You can observe this in practically every domain, even in academia.’

‘We have hope,’ said my lawyer friend. ‘Don’t lose hope.’

But to quote that hackneyed truism, hope is not a strategy—and if you can stand another, you can't keep doing the same thing and expect a different outcome.

At the time of writing there was no way of knowing how this performative clash will play out. Will Georgian Dream's gambit be the 'something stupid' my country-director friend referred to? Or do they know *exactly* what they're doing? A Georgian correspondent for a leading American wire service told me, 'Georgia has never had a government that is quite as in touch with the majority mentality as GD.' Referring to the anti-gay law, my correspondent said, 'People don't like to be associated with radical ideas, which is why GD succeeds on issues like LGBT.'

Georgian Dream's election campaign is about projecting strength. Strength in the polls, claiming support of up to 60 per cent¹⁴—a very unlikely number. Strength in confronting the 'radical opposition' and Western governments over 'foreign interference in Georgia's affairs' and 'traditional [anti-gay] values'. Nothing so clearly marked this line that the party is drawing in the sand, or its own sense that this is indeed a preternaturally profound moment of choice for the country, than the appearance of the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgian Dream's founder and 'honorary chairman', as keynote speaker at a pro-government counter-rally on Rustaveli on 29 April.

It was the eve of the second reading of the foreign agents bill. I watched the crowds gather as they streamed in from the farther reaches of Georgia, from its villages north and west, bussed in on command, many of them civil servants required to show their solidarity with the ruling party, more men than women, 'ordinary folk', the kind of people who Georgian Dream would have the world understand are the real backbone of Georgian opinion—and an entirely different demographic from the colourful cosmopolitans and students who have bulked out the crowds at civil society/opposition rallies, who had been out in force the night before and would be back the following evening.

14 'GORBI Poll Shows if Parliamentary Elections Were Held This Week, Georgian Dream Party Would Receive 60.4% of Votes', imedi.ge, 10 April 2004.

For its own rally the ruling party had spared no expense. The avenue was lined with television screens and powerful, expensive audio systems, so that wherever you stood on Rustaveli you could see and hear the speakers on the stage in front of parliament, a platform far more sophisticated than anything the opposition's rallies can muster. Giant gantries raised television cameras and lights to treetop level above the avenue, to ensure high-quality coverage for the leading pro-government television stations. The streets were lined with aluminium barriers to ensure a smooth flow of human traffic along the pavements on either side of the avenue. Police were everywhere, but there were no water cannons behind their lines, or helmets, batons, shields, and teargas; they were here to protect this demonstration.

Ivanishvili, 'Bidzina' as he is commonly known, has presided over the nation's affairs for twelve years. Prime ministers come and go at his behest. After the last election he withdrew from public gaze and ruled from behind the arras. A Wizard of Oz but with substance, Bidzina owns Georgia's yellow brick road. In recent months, as the October elections have drawn into view, he has assumed more direct control of Georgian Dream's political machinery. And he has stood personally behind the reintroduction of the foreign agents bill; at the rally he publicly owned to it and made his intentions clear: the law would be passed, Western interference in Georgia's domestic affairs would be ended, and after the election the 'radical opposition' would be punished in a way that it has not been until now—all this at a level of populist, conspiratorial rhetoric that would make even Orbán blush.

And then he promised that Georgia would join the EU in 2030.

Only in what I think of as Imedi-land, the information bubble created by Ivanishvili's eponymous television channel, which has the largest viewership in the country and is where most older Georgians get their news, could such a promise seem remotely credible. In TikTok land, whose younger users live in a universe of ideas and values that is far more

global, that promise will have been greeted with incredulity, and even hilarity, were its implications not so tragically disingenuous.

The gauntlet is down, hard on the cobbles. Georgia's government and oligarch feel like they're going for broke. Last year's opposition victory, forcing the government to withdraw the foreign agents bill, opened the way to EU candidacy, but was still an embarrassment. Now there will be no backing down—Ivanishvili made that clear. To do so would be a disastrous show of weakness for the party and for him. But have the party's strategists and advisors really thought this all through? Are they, as this revanchist stance of theirs would seem to indicate, readying themselves to initiate a long-term reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy towards Russia and China? And where would that leave Georgia's 'progressives' and their hopes for EU accession and a more complete integration with Euro-Atlanticism?

Time and again over the past five years, Georgia has seen controversial issues generate a burst of progressive public anger against the government, only for it all to subside with no material gain for the opposition perspective. Will it be different this time? The opposition, both civil society and the political parties, would probably be best advised to avoid defining the battle over the foreign agents bill as decisive. There is still this October's election, and October 2025's local government elections—if the bill, when it becomes law, doesn't have a chilling effect on international and domestic efforts to monitor their integrity. At the very least, those I spoke to believe the issue of Europe-or-Russia will dominate the 2024–28 political cycle. But as this past month of May drew on, amid growing signs of a campaign of harassment and intimidation of protest leaders, it seemed that Georgia's politics may become more than usually volatile through the latter half of 2024. This October's election, and its outcome, appears destined to be a grimly contested affair that will test nerves and muscle on both sides.

The wild card will be the response of Western governments: what will they do? Pull back on accession talks? Tighten the country's existing access to

Europe? Such measures would effectively penalise the Georgian people, and the EU would likely be at pains to avoid them. Might members of the government be sanctioned? The US applied that tactic against senior Georgian judges last year. If the foreign agents bill becomes law, it is hard to imagine Europe will not exact *some* price from Georgian Dream, if only to save face. But if there is a price, what does that do but strengthen the gravity exerted by Russia?

Here we are again, then, back in the kind of classic dilemma that Georgia presents to itself, and represents to the West. There is no dilemma for Russia, of course. This is its pretty piece of *Russkiy mir*, its backyard, sunlit playground, entry point for goods it could not otherwise obtain, temporary harbour for those of its nationals who for safety or expedience (Tbilisi can never be sure which) have left the motherland. Russia watches this all unfold with quiet satisfaction. The day after Georgian Dream announced the return of the foreign agents bill to parliament, President Putin's spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, said: 'Now almost all countries are fighting against those who are agents of foreign states, receive money from or are under the influence of foreign states. This is, in fact, a global practice. No sovereign state wants interference from other countries in domestic politics. This is normal practice.'¹⁵ Which was pretty much how Georgian prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze responded to the tongue-lashing he had from European leaders, including Chancellor Scholz.

The question, then. Is Georgia approaching a crossroads, or does it live at one? Viewed over what the French historian Ferdinand Braudel termed *la longue durée*, the historical long run, I tend towards the latter. Certainly, Sarkissian's definition of small states is not encouraging:

15 'Peskov Called Attempts to Link the Georgian Bill on Foreign Agents with Russia Absurd', Tass, 4 April 2024 [in Russian], <https://tass.ru/politika/20443627>.

small in size and population, dismissed at birth, often (but not always) without many resources and locked into conflict or surrounded by hostile powers. Many [...] are microcosms of the problems that afflict their larger counterparts—they are beset by ethnic strife, political turmoil and economic mismanagement—but their ability to address their problems is often frustrated by difficulties peculiar to them.¹⁶

Such analyses notwithstanding, one does not dismiss a people's dream. I think of my lawyer friend as we sat together on the steps of the garden behind parliament. 'We have hope,' he said. 'Don't give up hope.' We were looking at the TikTok kids milling about in the street under the eyes of the police. We were looking at the hope.

There is at last, indeed perhaps first and last, the Georgian legend of Amirani, mythological predecessor to Prometheus. It is a foundation story that echoes down the ages of Georgian history—of a superhero with godlike powers, who fights evil then turns his power against God himself, and is punished for his presumption. Chained to a rock for eternity, Amirani is at times just at the point of breaking his bonds when they magically reconstitute. Substitute a crossroads for a peak in the Caucasus and ... dear God, can someone not bring this wonderful, benighted people a bolt cutter? Wouldn't *that* be worth a street name?

16 *The Small States Club*, p. 11.

Ideals vs Action: An Insurmountable Paradox?

A Review Essay by Mitch Ilbury

Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World

Gordon Brown, Mohammed A. El-Erian and Michael Spence, with Reid Lidow.
London: Simon & Schuster, 2023.

The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism

Martin Wolf. London: Penguin Random House, 2023.

Keywords—*freedom, permacrisis, economic reform, democracy, political economy, strategic communications, strategic communication, liberal economics*

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Our world is fractured, and our means of fixing it are in crisis.

Two books written by eminent thinkers in finance and economics deliver a worrying prognosis: the systems shaping prosperity are broken.

Neither, however, provides a realistic cure. This is not due to a lack of rigour, but because they miss a fundamental paradox between the freedom of ideals and action.

In *Permacrisis*, Gordon Brown, Mohammed A. El-Erian and Michael Spence detail how we are living through an extended period of instability and insecurity—several crises converging to stage an existential threat. Martin Wolf's *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* is also aimed at consequential convergence, specifically between the symbiotic twins of capitalism and democracy, now in a quarrel. 'Today's challenges', he writes, 'are beginning to look as significant as those of the first half of the twentieth century.' Are we heading for a similar fate?

Both books present a doctor's sombre diagnosis: a mix of unfamiliar medical terms and repeated references to 'lump'. You know enough to realise that's terrible news. But just as your breathing gets heavier and your hairs stand on edge, the doctor follows up with, 'The good news is ...'

Despite titles suggesting 'endoflifeosis', neither diagnosis in *Permacrisis* or *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* appears terminal. Nevertheless, both books batter hope with worrying signs that full recovery from 'endoflifeosis' is stacked with unfavourable odds.

The authors of *Permacrisis* try to settle patient nerves early on in their Manifesto section: 'Don't let the perma prefix fool you; there's nothing permanent about a permacrisis.' But isn't that precisely what it means, doc? Rounding out their Manifesto, the authors suggest, 'While the world is changing, what that change looks like is up to us.' In other words, we can turn things around with some medicine, healthy eating, and regular exercise.

The problem with both books is not the diagnosis or treatment plan but how we, the patients, find the motivation to eat more sprouts and go for those early morning runs. Neither politics nor economics will address this. These disciplines are concerned with the how; the why of our actions is

more fundamental. Grappling with the why is a philosophical pursuit. Exploring what we value and why, and projecting these values to attract friends and distance enemies, is the art of strategic communications.

Both books approach our political and economic problems and possible solutions assuming collective action can bring about reform. But what will compel collective action? Here lies the paradox. The freedoms that define liberal economics and democratic politics—free markets and the right to a voice in public affairs—inherently limit the capacity for decisive collective action towards a strategic end. Our agency to do what we want—enshrined in the freedoms of democracy and liberal economics—means there is no absolute force to push us in one direction.

My doctor may say I need to exercise more, but my agency to either do what the doctor says or not, to that extent, may prevent me from directing my energy towards the strategic end of getting better. It all comes down to how I perceive my freedom.

If we handed complete stewardship of our healthcare portfolio to healthcare professionals, we would be healthier. We would live longer, we would have fewer aches and pains, illnesses would be rarer, obesity would be a thing of the past, and our bodies would be more mobile, enabling us to live fuller lives. To this extent, we would be more able to do what we want.

For most of us, however, this conception of freedom doesn't sit right. The famous Primal Scream song, *Loaded*, begins with an established elderly figure asking a youngster, 'Just what is it that you want to do?' The response: 'Well, we wanna be free, we wanna be free to do what we wanna do ... And we wanna get loaded. We wanna have a good time.' It is an iconic line in '90s rock 'n' roll, combining a sense of musically driven freedom and rebellion.

The original sample of this line came from the 1960s film *Wild Angels*, starring Peter Fonda.¹ The ironically named Heavenly Blues, played by Fonda, takes issue with a preacher reciting seemingly meaningless platitudes of scripture at his best friend's funeral. An argument ensues as the frustrated Blues challenges the preacher on what becomes a discussion on the meaning of life. The preacher tells Blues, 'The Lord gives life, and man can make of that what he will.' Blues fights back and says life never left his friend alone to do what he wanted, always making him suitable, paying rent, and living within the rules set out by 'the man'.

Heavenly Blues' plans for freedom meant anarchy, and anarchy swiftly followed. Living with no rules is a common conception of freedom—being able to do what you want to do when you want to do it—unchained. But the emboldened Blues fails to see how his freedom—a life of anarchy—impacts the freedoms of others, tragically so for his close friend.

Doctors and preachers listening to Primal Scream may hang their heads in dismay; young people will bounce their heads and sing along. Who better understands freedom?

To create better societies, we need to better understand freedom. If freedom to do, vote, and buy what we want clashes with a responsibility to do what will likely be better for us in the long run, then should we put some of our freedoms in the hands of the 'doctors'? Or is the risk too high in foregoing these freedoms for potentially better ends?

There is a moment in *Wild Angels* when the preacher, standing at the altar with a cross behind him and a Nazi flag in front of him adorning the coffin of Blues' lost friend, quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah. Blues barks back, 'Hey man, don't you ever say anything on your own?' It is a halting moment that strikes at the heart of strategic communications.

The preacher is empowered through belief, living by rules shaped by divinity; Blues is empowered through disbelief, even rebellion against

1 'Peter Fonda ... loaded', *Wild Angels*, directed by Roger Corman (1966; American International Pictures). Accessed at: <https://youtu.be/zKlhb-42iyE?feature=shared>.

belief. Neither will convince the other, as they are speaking different languages of persuasion—the preacher, through the authority of God; Blues, backed by the brazenness of youth, surrounded by eggheads. Their argument cannot be settled by ‘rightness’—their points are underpinned by different values of ‘right’. Only a shift in perspective can move them to see the other’s point of view.

If strategic communications operates in a world of competing views, then the cool heads of logic and reason, as shown in *Permacrisis* and *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, will not be enough. The challenge is not the diagnosis or the treatment plan but the *motivation* to affect change. This requires seeing things from both sides.

Seeing Life from Both Sides Now

Joni Mitchell wrote her ethereal, pansophical song ‘Both Sides Now’ when she was just twenty-one years old. The song’s haunting quality comes not only in its captivating melody and the crystal clarity of her voice but also in the profound sadness in her words: how can someone so young already be so worldly? Surely, seeing both sides is a perspective reserved for wise souls in their later years.

Mitchell added poignancy to the song at the famous Newport Folk Festival in 2022. She was performing live for the first time after years of rehabilitation from a debilitating brain aneurysm; her voice was characteristically clear, but the words were deeper and more layered. In the almost sixty years between these two moments of her life, she really had seen both sides now—a perspective on life’s paradoxes reserved only for the wise.

Fifteen years after the financial crisis in 2008, which devastated confidence in globalisation and freewheeling liberal economics, Gordon Brown teamed up with two stars on speed dial to write a book that will benefit

from seeing both sides now. Just a tap away from the former chancellor and prime minister, these titans of the economic world each have their storied past of stardom.

Mohammed A. El-Erian was chair of President Obama's Global Development Council and deputy director at the International Monetary Fund. He now serves as president of Queen's College Cambridge. Michael Spence was formerly the dean of the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2001 for his work on analysing markets with asymmetric information. Together, the authors resemble a cast of economic Avengers.

Although it is close, vengeance is not the name of the game in *Permacrisis*. The only thing stopping a more forceful damnation of the unintended consequences of liberalisation and globalisation is perhaps the fact that Gordon Brown, the long-serving Chancellor of the Exchequer during the late nineties and most of the noughties, was a key figure engineering the intellectual DNA of these two era-defining approaches to growth.

Those days were heady times for liberal economists. The authors say, 'The reality is the last three decades were the abnormal part of recent history marked by rapid growth in developing economies, massive injections of productive capacity in labour, and relative global stability with the US as the world's lone superpower.'

Just as Brown took the reins as prime minister, the economic world he helped create danced dizzily off the precipice. By 2009 the sheer enormity of the financial collapse was evident everywhere as panic-stricken markets sought to get rid of the rot and distinguish fact from fiction.

The problem is: how do you cuff the culprit if the culprit is an idea? A large part of the problem was the structural search for ever higher returns, backed by the belief of the booming benefits of liberalisation and globalisation, infamously embodied in the illusion of neatly wrapped credit default swaps supporting a Jenga-layered ascent of house prices

and investments across the United States. The hollowed-out timber, precariously placed to support the allure of higher-risk returns rather than economic resilience and sustainability, proved fatal to the fairy tale of endless growth.

So, fifteen years on, have Brown, El-Erian, and Spence seen life from both sides now? Perhaps. If so, their view must balance on a tightrope. If they speak too strongly against the ideas that dominated in the early 2000s, the hypocrisy risks knifing a legacy of competence; if they talk too weakly, readers will roll their eyes, believing nothing was learned from past mistakes.

Their thinking is distilled into three principal problems. In the first move, they appear off balance from the start, as they highlight the disappearance of growth as a critical issue in today's world compared to the mid 2000s. However, just as you think they may lose their balance, starting the book with talk about all-important growth, *again*, they quickly regain their footing with comments such as, 'Growth models which have focused too narrowly on privatisation and deregulation have outlasted their use-by dates.' A clear sign of what is to come: now engineering the DNA of inclusive growth.

Today's limits to growth are different from those we saw after the global financial crisis. Then, demand was constrained, and the world had excess supply. In our post-COVID world, we are fundamentally experiencing a supply-side issue—excess demand and constrained supply.

The book is complete with stats, graphs, and technical speak, which appear to hit crescendo points in chapters one can guess are written by Gordon Brown, known for his detail-oriented intellect. Robustness is never a bad thing and to be expected from three eminent economists, but they also sprinkle their data and expertise with dashes of humour, which, in large part, work. Chapter 2 begins: 'We have a supply chain joke, but you might not get it for a while.' This draws us along the tightrope with them.

The second problem is closely connected to the first. If we are to ‘set out the importance of rethinking growth models, and doing so in a way that looks at tomorrow rather than just reapplying yesterday’s thinking’, then we need policy measures that are up to tomorrow’s tasks. ‘Public investment backed by appropriate financial risk sharing and incentives and, where appropriate, more nimble regulation’, argue the authors, ‘matter far more than any neoliberal model has ever acknowledged.’ Some rebalancing self-flagellation there.

The rope slackens in the book’s second part, and the walk becomes treacherous. ‘Instead of a bold shift to something different, policymakers have opted to continuously tinker with increasingly exhausted approaches. When we write of a permacrisis, we mean that unless an overhaul is put in place that extends to updated national economic management models, crises that are avoidable will occur and re-occur.’ This signals a demand for a decisive plan from the rest of the book that, unless delivered, will ultimately bring the authors’ argument crashing down.

Enter the final problem: the governing framework for managing globalisation and the global order. The previous two issues are, to an extent, solvable through national economic management. However, several crises require international cooperation. Pollution bleeds across national boundaries; neighbourly squabbles escalate, inviting proxy puppeteers; banking crises cross borders and spread like viruses; and the big one, climate change, threatens us all.

International cooperation requires some alignment of values to ensure contesting parties speak the same language; a perspective problem is not solvable through logic. A space for strategic communications to settle differences between the Blues and preachers of geopolitics. Here, the authors identify a paradigm shift away from what defined the 1990s and 2000s, primarily driven by three characteristics.

It is no longer a unipolar world dominated by the United States. With the rise of China, a flexing Russia, old European powerhouses consolidating

their Union, the fire-hose spending of ambitious oil-rich Gulf countries, and Africa's looming demographic dividend, it is now a multipolar world.

After the financial crisis, many disenfranchised millions lost sight of the dream and became disillusioned with neoliberalism. This was not only because of a sharp reversal of fortune but also due to embedded levels of expectation forged through unusually heady days of growth. If output per capita had continued its growth trend from the start of the century to the financial crisis, advanced economies would be 20 to 30 per cent richer today.² It is difficult to shake that memory, moulded over a decade of record growth, repeatedly rearing its ugly head in political events like an overworked anaphor.

States are more involved in shaping economies, as a version of neo-mercantilism reigns supreme. The globalisation-heavy decades have also given way to globalisation-lite, where economic interdependence does not prevent war, and national leaders take economic hits to play political power games. Domestic politics steers the car's wheel, with economics in the back seat—a reversal of the freewheeling, foot-to-the-floor driver of the previous decades.

The trouble is that the authors suggest a new kind of multilateralism is the solution, with international cooperation as the only way forward. The phrase 'global problems need global solutions' is painfully repeated multiple times in the book, with nods to a reformed WTO and United Nations, a recapitalised World Bank, more strategic leadership from the IMF, and an expanded G20, including Nigeria, Vietnam, and Singapore.

The Problem with Global Solutions

The recommendations in *Permacrisis* would make sense if, by the authors' admission, the world were driven by economics, not politics. With more selfish drivers now at the wheel, drunk on power or maddened by populism, shaped by indestructible strongman ideals, or fired up with

2 Jonathan Haskell and Stian Westlake, *Restarting the Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 23.

furious resentment at past ills, the governing road signs, traffic cops, and speed limits of international organisations exert little influence.

Remember, the saving grace of Bretton Woods multilateralism arrived after the surging nationalism of the 1930s, but only after the tragic multi-car pile-up of the Second World War.

In tragic irony, the ‘perma’ prefix permutation ultimately destabilises the authors’ tightrope balancing act; and, as with all great tragedies, the seeds of their fall are sown in the very first act. Line one reads: ‘This book is not meant to be a substitute for melatonin.’ The confidence, backed by serious credibility and met with reader expectation from these three eminent authors, is detailed more seriously a few lines later: ‘Our regular talks exploring the mounting problems did more than just worry us about the path the global economy was on. It made us realise that there is nothing preordained or inevitable about the gloomy certainty present in economic, financial and social discourse.’

However, if they were serious about the value and feasibility of meaningful change through multilateralism, they should have started closer to home. Why choose three Western neoliberal economists to write about the importance of different views coming together for the common good?

One of the key selling points of this book is the authors’ big-hitting credibility. Each could nearly guarantee a bestseller on his own. As a team they supposedly pack a mightier punch in delivering the seriousness they see in our current situation. However, this also lends weight to the criticism many will probably aim at *Permacrisis*. Surely, ‘A Plan to Fix Our Fractured World’ should engage perspectives beyond those of these three ideologically similar authors.

We’ve been here before. A February 1999 cover of *Time* magazine featured a sober image of three powerful men in dark suits looking straight at the camera, adorned with big gold words reading, ‘The Committee to

Save the World'.³ The three men were Robert Rubin, Alan Greenspan, and Lawrence Summers—all intimately involved in structuring the US economy and financial system in the lead-up to the financial crisis.

Between 1998, one year before the infamous *Time* cover, and the onset of the financial crash in 2008, the notional value of over-the-counter derivatives—financial contracts linked to an underlying asset or benchmark—jumped from \$72 billion to \$653 billion.⁴ Over a similar period (1995–2007), the total stock of global cross-border financial transactions rose from \$15 trillion (51 per cent of global GDP) to \$103 trillion (185 per cent of global GDP)⁵—numbers indicating more than one Wolf of Wall Street.

If there were such a committee today, the three authors of *Permacrisis* would be many people's top candidates. If so, they'd make you wonder if the next decade will be different from that which followed the last world-saving committee—the kind of wonder that keeps you up at night. To that extent, the authors were true to their words from line one: 'This book is not meant to be a substitute for melatonin.'

The Paradox of Politics

Martin Wolf begins *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* with a famous quote from Mark Twain, 'History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.' If that is the case, it would be helpful to trace back to first principles or identify what makes a thing a thing—what Greek philosophers called its function.

3 'The Committee to Save the World', *Time*, 15 February 1999. Accessed at: <https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19990215,00.html>.

4 Bank for International Settlements, 'Global OTC Derivatives Market', table D5.1, <https://stats.bis.org/statx/srs/table/d5.1>.

5 Susan Lund et al., *The New Dynamics of Financial Globalization*, McKinsey Global Institute, August 2017, www.mckinsey.com/industries/financial-services/our-insights/the-new-dynamics-of-financial-globalization.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle argued that exchange draws people together, connecting different skills for a varied portfolio of goods and services, extending what we could otherwise assemble on our own. However, it is not what keeps us together. He says politics plays that role, ordering society through law, which preserves community.

The ideal political setup for many worldwide, or at least the best of a bad bunch, as Churchill said, embodies freedom and accountability through democracy. The *demos* decides. However, although ancient Greece is famous for its form of democracy, several of its leading figures were not big fans. Plato, Aristotle's teacher, was one. His more conservative approach sought philosopher kings to rule over the people—a 'perfect oligarchy'; perfect if, like Plato, you were a philosopher.

However, Plato articulated prescient arguments about the risks of each form of government and its potential (read inevitable) regression. Democracy, which he places one short of the most regressive form of government—after the spiral from aristocracy to timocracy to oligarchy—risks promoting tyranny through the advocacy of a strongman to protect the masses from the wealthy. Martin Wolf describes this—ironically, given his alleged fortune—as what happened in the United States under Donald Trump.⁶ History rhyming again.

An overworn historians' trope suggests that whatever the Greeks started, the Romans perfected. But they, too, fell into this pattern of a strongman saviour. The letters 'SPQR'—Senatus Populusque Romanus, the Senate and the People of Rome—were etched all over the Roman Republic, literally carving out the principle of democratic legitimacy. However, the golden age of the Roman Republic didn't last long. When times got tough, Julius Caesar seized the politics of the day.

6 Martin Wolf, 'Donald Trump Embodies How Great Republics Meet Their End', *Financial Times*, 1 March 2016, www.ft.com/content/743d91b8-df8d-11e5-b67f-a61732c1d025; Martin Wolf, 'A Republican Tax Plan Built for Plutocrats', *Financial Times*, 21 November 2017, www.ft.com/content/e494f47e-ce1a-11e7-9ddb-291a884dd8c6.

It was not an unpopular coup; quite the opposite. Thousands thronged to the forum to support the firm hand and decisive leadership of the leader of the popular party (*populares*), supposedly favouring and protecting the plebians. Caesar's heir, Octavian, later Augustus, officially ended the Roman Republic in Caesar's name and legacy.

Although controversial in today's light, Plato's spiral theory of the regression of government highlights something profound we can apply to the reading of *Permacrisis* and *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. The frustrations of 'the people' under rule in an aristocracy or oligarchy appeal to the need for fairer representation. How can one person decide the fate of us all? However, as the system becomes fairer and more people are represented, the frustrations morph to take aim at inaction. Disillusioned with the lack of progress under democratic rule, still marred by deep economic inequities, the people seek a protector with a solid hand to rally behind, arriving back at the decisiveness and unfairness of centrally controlled rule.

Therein lies the paradox: the substantial progress sought by a republic's people is often at odds with the political system that defines it.

Each election cycle, the very act of voting in new leaders or old leaders with new manifestos is borne out of the yearning for things to get better. As the American journalist and literary critic Henry Louis Mencken snappily surmised, 'Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.'⁷ However, accountability to an electorate with disparate ideas of what 'better' means inherently limits leaders' power to effect change accordingly.

Democratic limits prevent significant power from being concentrated in the hands of a few, but diluted power in virtue of fairer representation limits the capacity for substantial change sought by those desiring fair representation. This is why governments are afforded more extraordinary

7 Henry Louis Mencken, *A Little Book in C Major* (London: John Lane, 1916).

powers during wars or pandemics—substantial decisions require significant power.

Liberal economics, which almost always partners with democracies in some form, does not escape this paradox either. As Martin Wolf posits, the two are symbiotic twins.

Think of a group of 100 people voting for a leader for their island nation state. One leader, Alice, advocates zero taxes—everyone should be able to keep the money they create through hard work. Another leader, Bob, advocates high taxes, which will allow redistribution from those who have to those who have not. If everyone voted for Alice, she could impose her law of zero taxes without any limits. If everyone voted for Bob, he could impose his tax system.

If fifty people voted for Alice and fifty voted for Bob, the balance of power would be such that both could only achieve their goals by alienating the other half of the island's population. Therefore, the extent of the leaders' accountability to the electorate is directly proportional to the limiting legitimate power they have to effect change.

Let this scenario run for a few hundred years, and as the composition of demands of the populace changes, linked to their capacity to draw benefit from the relevant tax system they support, the result is likely to be a compromise between the two extremes: taxes, but at staggered rates, which fluctuate depending on the prosperity and inequality of the island economy at the time.

In *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, Martin Wolf argues that neither capitalism nor democracy can survive without the other. 'Democracy and the market', he says, 'have something fundamental in common: the equality of status. In a democracy, everybody has the right to a voice in public affairs. In a free market, everybody can buy and sell what they own.'

In liberal democracies, decision-makers rely on public opinion congealing through information and argument. However, these means can be corrupted in the real world through disinformation, algorithms promoting extremes, and the vested interests of the powerful and populists. Politicians follow these votes, which are split across different, often opposing, views. Balancing these views through government leads to compromise that weakens the capacity and vigour for a focused and defined strategy with efficient implementation.

The core to this paradox—the freedoms afforded by liberal economics and democracy produce limits to the progress they are inherently designed to support—comes down to the challenging interplay between action and ideals. Action demands expediency—doing what can be done to get what one wants. The ends justify the means, versus ideals, which mark inviolate boundaries to action which neither expediency nor pragmatism can alter—the means are ends in themselves.

The value of each, actions and ideals, depends on one's perspective. Anton Chekov pointed to this in a short story about a nineteenth-century Russian mental asylum.

The Power of Perspective

In 'Ward No. 6', Chekhov introduces Andrey Ragin, a contemplative yet detached physician, who unexpectedly finds a conversational partner in Ivan Gromov, a fiery and disenchanted but perceptive patient whose bitterness and seeming madness stem from life's adversities.

Witnessing the dire state of the mental hospital, Ragin realises simple improvements in hygiene—especially in an era beginning to understand bacterial transmission—along with better food and some physical and psychological engagement, could greatly ease his patients' suffering.

However, Ragin's intellectualism, preoccupied with abstract concepts, leads him to neglect actual change. He could transform the asylum's conditions, but he spends his time leisurely reading, drinking vodka, and enjoying salted cucumbers.

Ragin justifies his detached intellectualism by convincing himself that he lacks stimulating company in a town filled with uninspiring people. He craves intellectual engagement, while his patients crave physical sustenance. Chekhov skilfully exposes the irony and folly in Ragin's self-declared enlightenment. The doctor is drawn into conversations with Gromov out of intellectual curiosity. Gromov challenges Ragin's detached ideals with poignant questions about real suffering. To borrow Immanuel Kant's terminology, the doctor lives in the noumenal world, and the patient lives in the phenomenal world.

Ragin's extensive dialogues with Gromov lead the townspeople to question the doctor's sanity. In a dramatic twist of fate, Ragin ends up as a patient in the asylum he once oversaw, sharing a room with Gromov. Experiencing the harsh reality of the asylum first-hand, he quickly succumbs to seizures and, ultimately, death.

'Ward No. 6' confronts the tension between theoretical pondering and practical application, and reflects on the historical class divide where the bourgeoisie engage in lofty discussions on societal organisation and economic systems, detached from the proletariat's lived experiences. Theoretical ideas often prove impractical when confronted with the real world.

Is there a sense of this detachment in today's world, where the Western ideal of democracy and the virtue of political freedom are left wanting in the face of real-world economic challenges? Thriving autocracies like the United Arab Emirates, a magnet for world-class talent, are throwing doubt on the absolute importance of political freedom.

The Middle Ground in the Middle East

In an interview with Stephen Sackur on the BBC's *Hardtalk* towards the end of 2023, the United Arab Emirates' trade minister, pushed to explain the country's geopolitical leanings, said, 'You people must separate politics and economics.' His slightly exasperated tone and Sackur's raised eyebrows highlighted how the two were talking at cross purposes.

In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe, the political flow of money must be balanced with the values that flow portrays. However, money and politics can be separated in places like the UAE. You don't need to be a political wonk to see this distinction; you just need to set foot in Dubai.

The emirate is a living contradiction. Islamic conservatism meets the glitz of indulgent capitalism. Women in full burkas browse Dior stores. The sound of mosques calling people to prayer battles the bustle and hum of rampant consumerism. Fuel-guzzling 4x4s will take you to the COP28 climate summit, past the biggest and best versions of everything you can imagine in a city that is a little over fifty years old.

But the Las Vegas look belies a canny vision. Dubai's government sits at the apex of one of its tallest towers. It's an apt metaphor. Overseeing the city state's exponential growth is a group of individuals more forward-thinking, ambitious, and focused on quality of life than any other government in the world.

Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum has set Dubai's economic goals in the stratosphere. The emirate's D33 strategic framework aims to double the economy's size in ten years.⁸ Economists laugh, but if you look at the city's achievements in just fifty years, the wise will not bet against them.

8 Government of Dubai, 'Dubai Economic Agenda D33', <https://tec.gov.ae/en/web/tec/d33>.

‘Sure,’ you may say, ‘but at what cost?’ What about those sacrosanct political freedoms, the right to vote and to voice critical opinions of government through free speech? Politically speaking, the federal government of the UAE is not accountable to its people. It does not fear being voted out at the next election because there are no democratic elections. However, democracy is not the only force compelling governments to deliver for their people.

The UAE government is driven by economic accountability, much like businesses in the private sector. Put in the right policies and governance guardrails to foster economic growth, and the majority benefits. Foreign direct investment floods in, top international talent come knocking, and skyscrapers blossom out of the dunes to house it all.

Citizens in the UAE are shareholders in this business venture, benefiting in kind through social dividends. It helps that the citizen base only makes up around 10 per cent of the total population of 10 million, with the other 90 per cent primarily made up of foreign workers.⁹ The business managers—government employees—are rewarded handsomely, earning more than double their European Union counterparts.¹⁰ That is the incentive for maintaining law and order, ensuring good service delivery, and, above all, innovating for sustainable economic growth.

In the UAE, freedom is associated with liberal economics and capitalist ideals, with the view to long-term benefits garnered through the focus and vision of a centrally controlled government unconcerned with the fluctuations of short-term election cycles. In this context, Weber’s theory of traditional legitimacy does not impede efficient bureaucracy operating on rational-legal principles.¹¹ Why do you *need* the right to vote and voice dissent if things are run well, the economy is humming, and

9 ‘Saudi Arabia, UAE Boost Spending to Shield Citizens from Inflation’, *Reuters*, 5 July 2022, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/united-arab-emirates-doubles-support-low-income-emirati-families-2022-07-04.

10 Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, ‘Government Spending’, *Our World in Data*, 2016, <https://ourworldindata.org/government-spending>.

11 Armen Sarkissian, *The Small States Club* (London: Hurst, 2023), p. 75.

opportunities abound? The results are plain to see—public trust in the UAE government is nearly double that in leading OECD democracies.¹²

The model challenges long-held beliefs about freedom, often associated with the right to vote and openly criticising those who govern. Places like the UAE are proving these beliefs are not absolute, finding a way through the paradox between ideals and actions.

The Dubai dream is not unlike the American dream, with its corresponding promise of hope. This should make us question the balance of freedom between the economically disenfranchised in a democratic capitalist state and the politically disenfranchised in an economically thriving autocracy.

Questioning this balance and the possible consequences of the answers is a more important task than the authors of *Permacrisis* and *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* suggest. But it would be unfair to expect this from economists alone. Multifaceted perspectives, from politics to philosophy to strategic communications, are required to dig deeper to the foundations of what makes our societies tick. The paradox between ideals and actions may not be insurmountable, but our motivations will have to be much clearer to tackle the ascent.

12 'Share of Population Who Trust Their Government Worldwide 2023, by Country', *Statista*, January 2024, www.statista.com/statistics/1362804/trust-government-world.

What Hitler, Trump and Putin Teach Us about Communication

A Review Essay by James P. Farwell

How to Win an Information War
Peter Pomerantsev. New York: Public Affairs, 2024.

Keywords—*propaganda, strategic communications, strategic communication*

About the Author

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British journalist Peter Pomerantsev ranks among the most interesting journalists covering Russian politics and media. His *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* splendidly described the surreal political and media dynamics of Vladimir Putin's Russia. *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (Public Affairs Press, 2019) examined the use of digital media to disrupt politics from Russia to the Philippines to the Brexit referendum. He unpacked uses of propaganda and enlightened readers about the broad, deep scope of its impact.

Pomerantsev's latest book, *How to Win an Information War*, is a little different. It's a great read and, as usual, full of an expert's insights.

¹ The views expressed here are entirely the author's. They do not represent the views of the US Government, its departments or agencies, or COCOM.

I enjoyed this one, but it's really two books, and neither answers the question posed by the title.

The first book explains how sociological propaganda cuts into entertainment and social media to integrate people into a common myth that holds a society together. The second describes how British propagandist Sefton Delmer exploited Nazi hypocrisy and lies to discredit and delegitimise the Nazis.

The Power of a Propagandist

In explaining propaganda, Pomerantsev cites Jacques Ellul. The French sociologist argued that, as a mass instrument, propaganda addresses itself to each individual, inspiring emotional responses that create both a community and the illusion of individual agency. He noted that during World War I the Kaiser's propaganda gave Germans a sense of belonging and someone to hate, someone to include and someone to exclude. Above all, it articulated a desire in people to feel superior to others and throw their support behind causes worth dying for.

Like the great guru of communication, Tony Schwartz, Pomerantsev recognises that it is difficult to change the fixed *emotional beliefs* people possess. Successful political communication requires linking your ideas to those fixed beliefs. The greatest example still of that in politics was the TV spot that Schwartz produced for President Lyndon Johnson's re-election in 1964. Entitled 'Daisy Girl', it played on the widespread fear of a nuclear war and tapped into the often unstated but deeply felt concerns of voters that LBJ's opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, had an itchy finger on the nuclear trigger.²

Jeffrey Barry and Sarah Sobieraj's brilliant book *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (Oxford University Press,

2 Tony Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973). Schwartz is among the most renowned political consultants in US history.

2016) revealed how political talk shows and hosts like the late Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity (you can add Tucker Carlson to that crew) on the right, and partisan lefties like Rachel Maddow, Joy Reid, and Alex Wagner, calibrate volatile language in political discussion to reinforce the existing, emotional, often rabid beliefs of viewers to affirm target audience biases.

These highly paid media clowns are a menace to intelligent, informed discussion of political issues. They are all smart, often amusing, seemingly knowledgeable, which renders them dangerous. And they earn over a million dollars a year to stage their performances. They pretend to be unbiased but their posture is inherently ideological. Their impact on US political discourse has made politics coarser and meaner, and they have perverted it by irresponsibly using emotions in place of reason to credit or discredit political leaders.

Politicians share heavy blame for the polarised, toxic environment that pervades US politics. But the talk show commentators share the blame too. If Elon Musk were truly committed to nourishing civilisation, he would offer such ideologues a trip to Mars. Good riddance.

Pomerantsev argues that today, across the world, propaganda is changing the very notion of what is 'human', putting any definition up for grabs as despots appeal to vague notions of a 'purer identity'. Vladimir Putin and his skilled team of communicators may be tyrants, but do not call them stupid, despite strategic blunders like Putin's in invading Ukraine. One mistake Americans make is that they often assume their enemies are not only evil but stupid people who do the wrong thing. Actually, given their perspective, they are as likely to play a smart game and do the right thing to advance their interests. They've done an excellent job rousing support at home and raising doubts in the US and Europe about funding Ukraine's defence against the Russian invasion.

Putin's approach merits discussion. His propaganda cleverly communicates images of a macho president. He rides horses shirtless in the wilderness.

He swims across wild lakes. He is a martial arts master. He loves tigers. Movie characters portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger would be hard pressed to equal the almost superhuman talents conjured up for Putin as a political action hero. Putin had no choice, because his political survival mandates rousing support from the diverse population who comprise the Russian people.

Historically, Putin has lacked Stalin's power or authority. Public sentiment and the need to balance the interests and agendas of competing power players constrain his actions. He takes special pains to avoid alienating the populations of Moscow and St Petersburg.³ Always worried about bolstering his shaky political legitimacy, he has devoted considerable propaganda efforts to creating images that enable him to identify with different segments of Russian society and to present himself as their champion. His strategy in rousing support among Russians has so far worked. Russia may have suffered staggering casualties and the loss of aircraft and warships in the Ukraine conflict, but the independent polling firm Levada reports that, as of April 2024, the president retains high approval ratings of 85 per cent at home,⁴ even though polling data also shows a majority of Russians prefer peace talks over a continuation of the war with Ukraine and weakening support for the war itself.⁵

Putin exudes a curious mixture of emotion and calculation. Unlike Hitler, Trump, or Churchill—three obviously different personalities—Putin is no orator. But whatever the merits of his arguments, which as to Ukraine

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- 3 That Putin's power is limited is a key theme of Mikhail Zygar's excellent book *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016). The former editor of the TV Rain independent television channel in Russia, Zygar details the extent to which Putin plays off the agendas and interests of competing power players, and, as noted above, presents himself to different segments of the Russian population to make himself relatable to them. Stalin would never have done that. See also Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton: Princeton Books, 2021).
 - 4 The question posed was: 'Do you approve the activities of V. Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?'
 - 5 See Vladimir Milov, 'How Strong Is Russian Public Support for the Invasion of Ukraine?', *Atlantic Council*, 9 January 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-strong-is-russian-public-support-for-the-invasion-of-ukraine-2. Milov cites Levada data in arguing that opposition to the war is greater than many in the West have believed.

are rooted in myth,⁶ he is an exceptionally skilled, articulate advocate for his point of view. You can see this easily in Oliver Stone's extensive interviews with Putin⁷ and his feature-length propaganda video *Crimea: The Way Home*.⁸

Frederick Starr,⁹ chair of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, observes that 'driving these tactics is Putin's grand vision of Russia's future as an Asian-Middle Eastern-European power that exceeds in its scope that of all his predecessors, including Peter the Great. It is a vision that derives from the Eurasian movement, so well described by Charles Clover in his study of the political activities and philosophies of Putin's government.'¹⁰ It strikes me that emotion and this hyper-inflation vision distorted Putin's objectivity and led to a Ukrainian conflict that ultimately may have fateful consequences for his own future. Putin has said the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the last century. His hubris may prove the gravest of this one.

Until Russia invaded Syria, Putin had also displayed a deft hand in information warfare, especially with the use of action to communicate. As strategic communications expert Ofer Fridman of London's Symposium Institute for Strategic Communications has pointed out, Russia's intervention in Syria may have saved Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapse, but Putin's operation was at heart a grand exercise in strategic communications. Putin made a great show of inserting naval, ground, and air assets, and trumpeted their pivotal role. Actually, the Russians

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- 6 See Mikhail Zygar, *War and Myth: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* (New York: Scribner, 2023). Zygar adroitly examines the historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and Putin's misguided interpretation of it.
 - 7 Oliver Stone, *The Full Transcripts of the Putin Interviews* (Hot Books, 2017), based on his documentary for Showtime.
 - 8 You can view it at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbGhKfWrfOQ. It was produced by Andrey Kondrashov, the director general of the Russian news agency TASS. Kondrashov is a skilled interviewer and Putin advisor, and this justification for seizing Crimea masterfully capitalises on that skill and Putin's skill in giving interviews.
 - 9 During the 1990s, Starr's work took him to St Petersburg, where he worked for a period with the city's mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. His desk stood next to another member of Sobchak's team, Vladimir Putin, whom he grew to know well. After the Ukraine invasion, which Starr has harshly criticised, Putin banned him from Russia.
 - 10 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), and telephone interview with Fred Starr, 7 April 2024.

saw limited kinetic activity, leaving the heavy fighting to Syria and its Hezbollah allies. To the extent that Russians were proactive, the former Wagner Group—thousands of whose members now answer directly to Moscow¹¹—served as the spearpoint. The Syria intervention used action, not boastful rhetoric, to bolster Russian influence in the region.

Experts on Russia like Michael Kofman argue that Putin's action against Georgia aimed to stop Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili from bringing Georgia into NATO.¹² But while many rejected Russia's explanation for acting, it's interesting that Russians characterized their motive as purely defensive and merely aimed to defend Russian citizens in South Ossetia from Georgian armed aggression.¹³

Russia has employed a range of tactics in Europe, especially in social media. But it courts influencers and political elites. Give Putin credit. He and his team have done an excellent job. They've made mistakes but have been fairly effective in causing disruption and creating disunity.

On average, two thirds of people surveyed across ten European countries consider Russia a rival to their own country.¹⁴ The sentiment is especially strong in Denmark, Estonia, Poland, and Britain.¹⁵ Sounds pretty good, but placing these numbers into a broader context reveals that Russia's narrative—Russia will win, Ukraine will lose, hence settlement is mandatory—is striking a responsive chord. A recent survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals that only one in ten think Ukraine will defeat Russia, with most seeing a 'compromise

11 Erin Banco, 'Thousands of Former Wagner Fighters Now Answering to Moscow', *Politico*, 28 April 2024, www.politico.com/news/2024/04/28/wagner-fighters-russia-africa-00154595.

12 Michael Kofman, 'The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War', *War on the Rocks*, 17 August 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-august-war-ten-years-on-a-retrospective-on-the-russo-georgian-war>.

13 Peter Roudik, *Russian Federation: Legal Aspects of War in Georgia*, Law Library of Congress, cited in Robert P. Chatham, 'Defense of Nationals Abroad: The Legitimacy of Russia's Invasion of Georgia', *Florida Journal of International Law* 23 No 1 (April 2011), <https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1569&context=fjil>.

14 Nicolas Camut and Zoya Sheftalovich, 'Vast Majority of Europeans See Russia as Adversary, Poll Finds', *Politico*, 16 March 2023, www.politico.eu/article/vast-majority-of-europeans-see-russia-as-an-adversary-poll-finds.

15 *Ibid.*

settlement' needed to end the conflict. A majority of respondents in Hungary, Greece, and Italy want allies to push Kyiv to accept a settlement.¹⁶ US hesitation—and Donald Trump's opposition—in funding weapons for Ukraine has heavily influenced views.¹⁷ People back winners, not losers. Winning the battle of who will win is essential.

But a third of Europeans appear to perceive matters differently, more than enough to create political instability or disruption, which Russia is working hard to stoke. Polling in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary shows that only a minority of voters views Russia as a threat.¹⁸ Government policies and rhetoric reflect these attitudes. Hungary has not been enthusiastic about sending arms to Ukraine. EU restrictions on Russian propaganda channels like RT and Sputnik have not limited the reach of its 'fake news', even as Russia deploys its diplomats and paid commentators to support 'fake news'.¹⁹ A third of respondents in the European Council poll in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden want the EU to limit support for Ukraine.²⁰

Prior to and in launching the invasion of Ukraine, Russia devoted significant resources, using hybrid warfare tactics, to discredit Ukraine, divide Europe, and stir up anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment. The European External Action Service (EEAS) East Stratcom Force has tracked at least 237 cases about Ukraine since February 2022 and, since its establishment in 2015, over 13,000 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation.²¹ France, Poland, and Germany claim Russia assembled a network of websites to spread pro-Russian information and undermine

16 Joshua Posaner and Giovanna Coi, 'Most Europeans Think Ukraine Will Lose the War, according to Survey', *Politico*, 21 February 2024, www.politico.eu/article/europeans-think-ukraine-lose-war-russia-survey.

17 Ibid.

18 Soňa Muzikářová, 'Why Some EU Countries in the East Are Still Pro-Russia', *Al Jazeera*, 6 February 2023, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/6/why-some-eu-countries-still-harbour-pro-russian-sentiments.

19 Ibid.

20 Posaner and Coi, 'Most Europeans'.

21 'EUvsDisinfo: The Fight against Pro-Kremlin Disinformation', *European Council, Council of the European Union*, 20 January 2023, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/library/library-blog/posts/the-fight-against-pro-kremlin-disinformation.

Western governments. Russia uses sites with local domain names to ease local spread of information that attacks democracy.²²

The Economist has reported that the French foreign-disinformation watchdog VIGINUM uncovered 193 websites it codenamed ‘Portal Kombat’ that French authorities anticipate Russia will use for massive disinformation about the war in Ukraine.²³ Putin’s goal is to create political instability. One digital interference operation spread photos of Stars of David stencilled on walls in a Paris neighbourhood to sow intercommunal tension after Hamas’s attacks on 7 October. The network has cloned French media websites to post a false message that France would soon introduce a 1.5 per cent ‘security tax’ to finance military aid to Ukraine.²⁴

Russia’s tactics transcend social media, although it has spent \$100,000 on Facebook advertising and employed over 1000 pages to spread disinformation.²⁵ European Commission representative Věra Jourová has accused Russia of using dodgy outlets pretending to be media and paying European Parliament members to interfere in the upcoming EU election.²⁶ Voice of Europe has sought to destabilise European politics, claiming that many EU lawmakers identified with far-right Eurosceptic parties have predicted the EU’s imminent collapse. It also attacks Ukraine.²⁷

Russian messaging to Europe centres on themes such as Ukraine is not grateful for Western aid and support, and Kyiv’s leaders are Nazis.²⁸ Critics

22 John Irish, ‘European Powers Warn of Spike in Russian Propaganda before EU Elections’, *Reuters*, 12 February 2014, www.reuters.com/world/europe/european-powers-warn-spike-russian-propaganda-before-eu-elections-2024-02-12.

23 ‘France Uncovers a Vast Russian Disinformation Campaign in Europe’, *Economist*, 12 February 2024, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe>.

24 Ibid.

25 University of Adelaide, Australia, research cited by Nicholas Vinocur, Pieter Haeck, and Eddy Wax, ‘Russian Influence Scandal Rocks EU’, *Politico*, 29 March 2024, www.politico.eu/article/voice-of-europe-russia-influence-scandal-election.

26 Vinocur et al., ‘Russian Influence Scandal’.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

accuse Russia of funding Marine Le Pen's political party, considered a top contender for victory in the next French elections.²⁹ Russia has capitalised on descendants of Russian migrants who became part of the French elite to stand up for Russia. Besides Le Pen, Moscow has forged links to a pro-Russian bloc that includes former French president Nicolas Sarkozy within Les Républicains. It has sought—not, so far, very successfully—to galvanise ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. It has championed the notion of French sovereignty over the European Union.³⁰

The aim has been to neutralise French support for Ukraine, weaken anti-Russian sanctions, and align France more closely to Russia. Equally, Russian narratives have stressed that NATO provoked the war in Ukraine, committed atrocities against the 'people of Donbas', and enriched 'western elites' instead of sensibly working things out with Russia.³¹ The Russians have not got far with the French leadership. French president Emmanuel Macron has called for a tougher stance against Russia.³² The question is what happens when the term-limited president leaves office in the near future.

Putin hasn't been perfect. During Macron's first campaign, Russian intelligence was the hidden hand behind 'fake news' that Macron was gay, thought to be a political disadvantage. Critics feel Macron is high-handed, but he's a tough, gutsy politician, and deftly blunted the attacks. Napoleon famously said that, in politics, absurdity is not a handicap.

- 29 Benjamin Dodman, 'Le Pen's Far Right Served as Mouthpiece for the Kremlin, Says French Parliamentary Report', *France 24*, 6 March 2023, www.france24.com/en/france/20230603-le-pen-s-far-right-served-as-mouthpiece-for-the-kremlin-says-french-parliamentary-report, and Paul Sonne, 'A Russian Bank Gave Marine Le Pen's Party a Loan: Then Weird Things Began Happening', *Washington Post*, 27 December 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html.
- 30 O. Nabozhniak, O. Tsekhanovska, A. Castagna, D. Khutkyy, and A. Melenchuk, *Revealing Russian Influence in Europe*, Institute of Innovative Governance, 2023, www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/revealing-russian-propaganda-3%5B71%5D.pdf.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 'WSJ: Macron Urges Europe to Toughen Stance against Putin, Allies Resist', *Kyiv Post*, 3 April 2024, www.kyivpost.com/post/30527; Victor Goury-Laffont, 'Hawkish Macron Refuses to Back Down on Possibility of Western Troops in Ukraine', *Politico*, 14 March 2024, www.politico.eu/article/im-right-about-not-being-specific-macron-says-doubling-down-on-strategic-ambiguity/; and Stacy Meichtry and Bojan Pancevski, 'Macron Didn't Want to Humiliate Putin: Now He Wants to Get Tough', *Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2024, www.wsj.com/world/europe/macron-france-russia-putin-b89d1177.

The wheel turns. While sceptics thought branding Macron gay might hurt him, Macron's new prime minister, Gabriel Attal, is both young (thirty-four) and gay—and viewed as a rising star.

Plus, allies such as the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, have worried that Macron is leaning too far forward, a sentiment President Biden and other leaders rejected as they made clear they would not send troops to Ukraine. Scholz's posture has seemed confusing. He refused to supply Ukraine with cruise missiles, fearing Russian retaliation. Yet he favours supplying Kyiv with just enough weaponry and equipment to survive. Polling supports him. Nearly 60 per cent of Germans oppose supplying Ukraine with Taurus missiles, up from 49 per cent in February 2024. Scholz refuses to say he wants Ukraine to prevail. Many root the chancellor's views in a deep-seated fear of Russia.³³ One can reasonably assert that Russian narratives—such as threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons or go to war against NATO—reinforce that anxiety.

Italy's prime minister Giorgia Meloni supports Ukraine, but many Italians disagree. A quarter see Russia as an ally or partner, and only 39 per cent consider it an adversary.³⁴ The Italian right remains firmly in Putin's camp.³⁵ Italian television regularly features pro-Russian commentators—officials, ideologues, and media personalities—on talk shows. In line with Russian narratives, many argue that Ukraine provoked the war. Alessandro Orsini, a professor of terrorism at Rome's Luiss University, parrots Putin's line that Zelensky is a 'war criminal', and that Italy should recognise a Russian victory. Deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini used to wear a T-shirt featuring Putin's face.³⁶

33 Matthew Karnitsching, 'Germany's Ukraine Policy Is Incoherent for a Reason', *Politico*, 7 March 2024, www.politico.eu/article/germanys-ukraine-policy-is-incoherent-for-a-reason.

34 'One-Quarter of Italians Still See Russia as Ally or Partner', *Decode39: Geopolitical Insights from Italy*, 22 February 2023, <https://decode39.com/5928/italy-russia-ally-ecfr-report>. Based on a European Council on Foreign Relations policy brief.

35 Mattia Ferraresi, 'Why Russia Is the Big Winner in Italy's Election', *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/12/meloni-italy-russia-big-winner-election>.

36 Lorenzo Tondo, 'A Success for Kremlin Propaganda: How Pro-Putin Views Permeate Italian Media', *Guardian*, 31 August 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/31/a-success-for-kremlin-propaganda-how-pro-putin-views-permeate-italian-media.

Ironically, while fostering support for Russia and showing a deft hand in spinning Russia's narratives generally, Putin's strategic communications on the war in Ukraine itself has proven amateurish. His argument that Ukraine is really part of Russia has fallen flat. Branding Ukrainians as Nazis is important, because for Russians their come-from-behind triumph during World War II against the Nazis is a seminal event central to Russian identity—but it hasn't stuck. Labelling the invasion a 'special military operation' evoked ridicule.

Russia has put no limits on lying about events inside Ukraine to demonise President Zelensky and his government. When Russia slaughtered possibly 600 civilians at the Mariupol theatre in an air strike,³⁷ Russia claimed the true victims were Russian nationalists. It claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted chemical attacks on civilians in the Donbas region.³⁸

The one Putin message that may be gaining traction among Ukrainians is 'don't trust Americans'. This one resonates better because it's rooted in fact. Donald Trump may well win back the presidency, and he has cowed 80 per cent of the Republican Party.³⁹ Indeed, the 14Trump factor could easily determine the outcome of the Ukraine conflict. The US Congress has passed \$60 billion in funding support for Ukraine and Biden seems likely to seek additional funds later this year. Whether he secures them is an open question. But while toning down opposition to that package, Trump has made clear he is sceptical of providing support to Ukraine, and if elected president seems unlikely to do so.⁴⁰

37 Lori Hinnant, Mstyslav Chernov, and Vasilisa Stepanenko, 'AP Evidence Points to 600 Dead in Mariupol Theater Airstrike', *APnews.com*, 4 May 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol-theater-c321a196fbd568899841b506afcac7a1>.

38 Iuliia Iaschenko, 'Russian Disinformation in Europe: Justifying Violence and Spreading Propaganda', *Aspenia Online*, 14 December 2023, <https://aspeniaonline.it/russian-disinformation-in-europe-justifying-violence-and-spreading-propaganda>.

39 See Aaron Blake, Hannah Dormido, and Lenny Bonner, '1 in 5 GOP Primary Voters Keep Bucking Trump: What Does It Mean?', *Washington Post*, 4 April 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/04/trump-uncommitted-protest-vote. Some believe most Republican voters will come home in November. Don't bet on it. They may not support Biden, but they may well stay home.

40 Veronika Melkozerova, 'Why Donald Trump Hates Ukraine', *Politico*, 18 April 2024, www.politico.eu/article/why-donald-trump-hates-ukraine-us-congress-kyiv-war.

Downplay news media rumblings about the return of isolationism to the Republican Party. That's a small minority. Until Trump, who openly admires Putin,⁴¹ spoke up, funding would have proceeded smoothly. There's a curious irony here. Trump may intimidate Congress from funding Ukraine. Should Putin prevail and Ukraine fall, expect Ukrainians to blame Trump for their demise. Ukrainians are tough customers and deeply proud. Do not expect them to go gently into the night as Russia subjugates their nation and jails or executes their leaders.

One cannot predict what will happen, but in whatever form their response might take, we should not be surprised if Ukrainians visit the wrath of Achilles on Trump in payback. I leave it to the reader's imagination to fill in the blanks as to how extreme that may potentially be. Trump may be no Lone Ranger in that vendetta. Ukrainians are furious at Joe Biden for slow-rolling weapons and munitions to Ukraine⁴² and refusing to countenance the notion of Ukraine achieving victory. This possibility isn't something people like to talk about, but it is a plausible dimension if Russia prevails. Needless to say, Ukrainians will absolve themselves of their own mistakes.

Is Putin another Hitler in his use of strategic communications? Pomerantsev compares Putin's actions to Hitler's. That's overstated. Indeed, Putin's narrative is that he invaded Ukraine to quash neo-Nazis. He has anchored it among Russians by likening this battle to the Motherland's heroic efforts against Germany in World War II. Putin has the personality of a technocrat. He is extremely articulate in a lawyerly

41 Chris Cillizza, 'Donald Trump Just Can't Stop Praising Vladimir Putin', *Politico*, 28 March 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/03/28/politics/trump-putin-ukraine-russia-smart.

42 Biden's approach has repeated the mistake of Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. LBJ increased American presence incrementally, allowing the communists to keep pace in increasing their own strength. Strategically it was the biggest blunder of that war. Biden's response would be that his caution is rooted in not pushing Putin so hard that Putin decides to use tactical nuclear weapons. His view of using nukes differs substantially from Western views. See Jim Sciutto, *The Return of Great Powers* (New York: Dutton, 2024). A respected CNN journalist and former diplomat, Sciutto is well connected among Biden's national security team. His book offers good insights into why they acted so cautiously. Most of the military appear to believe Biden's response to the invasion was weak and sacrificed a plausible opportunity to upend it, had Biden acted more decisively at the outset of the war to help Ukraine. As is often noted, history does not reveal its alternatives, so we'll never know which school of thought was right.

way. Instead of pounding tables, he prefers prepared statements and, especially, controlled interviews, at which he excels. He communicates messages that resonate emotionally with Russians. While he seems cold and aloof—in many ways that's his style—behind the façade one perceives a highly emotional, sometimes impulsive operation. Still, he lacks the rare personal charisma and messianic traits of Hitler or Trump that characterise political figures able to move mass audiences. Putin's success among Russian audiences attests to the power of understanding the power of smart delivery of resonant messages to target audiences.

Putin's information warfare against Ukraine lacks the deft touch he has shown elsewhere. Winning information warfare requires doing everything possible to seize the moral high ground. I have to say—doubtless this will cause some Americans to gag—that I am surprised Putin has not tried to invoke the history of the US in using force to seize territory from another country's territory. The seizure from Mexico at gunpoint of the south-western US, from Texas to California, mainly under the notion of Manifest Destiny, offers one example.⁴³ Manifest Destiny strongly echoes Putin's vision of what Russia is entitled to. The behaviour of the

43 Under President James Polk and the notion of Manifest Destiny, the US went to war to seize Texas, California, Oregon, and other territories ruled by Mexico. See Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), and National Constitution Center, 'The Mexican-American War in a Nutshell', 13 May 2024, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-mexican-american-war-in-a-nutshell>. His view prevailed but was not without controversy at home. The Mexican government and population resisted and was hostile to the seizures, which were made at gunpoint. See Matt M. Matthews, *The US Army on the Mexican Border: A Historical Perspective* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, n.d.), www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/Matthews_op22.pdf.

US in subjugating the Philippines and the use of waterboarding to deal with prisoners ranks hardly among its proudest achievements.⁴⁴

Pomerantsev cursorily compares Hitler and Trump. He perceives striking similarities. The book would be stronger had he developed that argument. Instead he mainly raises the issue and moves on. But the comparisons and contrasts are interesting. Both politicians have displayed personal zealotry and the ability to mesmerise large crowds, inspire communal identity, and arouse a sense of fresh opportunity in striking at opponents they imagine have turned them into innocent victims of all-powerful outside forces. Importantly, these skills are political, not ideological. Of course, no politician wants to be compared to Hitler. But every politician wishes they had the same ability of Hitler and Trump to unify, arouse, and motivate masses of supporters.

Let's be clear. One must distinguish between Hitler and Trump. Possessing rare political skills doesn't make them identical. Hitler was genocidal, aimed to rule the world through armed conquest, and viewed Germans as racially supreme. Trump seeks adoration, power, and wealth. Both ignite(d) hatred among target audiences towards their adversaries to advance their interests. Putin's rhetoric is anchored in his view that Russia is a victim, but respecting the facts is incidental to his

44 James Bradley, *The Imperial Cruise* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009). Bradley decimates President Theodore Roosevelt's reputation as a statesman. Roosevelt not only sanctioned American's appalling conduct towards the Philippines, but exposed his outrageous imperialism in seizing Cuba from Spain, and immoral and imbecilic green light to Japan to subjugate Korea. Roosevelt was a brilliant strategic communicator who understood how to forge a phoney positive image for himself both while president and with an eye to the future. See James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), and Bradley's book. We're still paying for the knock-on consequences. His relative Franklin Roosevelt actually managed to one-up his late cousin's blundering in allowing the 'China Lobby' to con him into avoidably cornering Japan into launching the attack on Pearl Harbor. In his later book *The China Mirage* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015), Bradley joins other historians in arguing that the US had no strategic interest in fighting a war with Japan. In a preview of what can happen when a religious coalition amasses too much power, the US was baited into that conflict by a naive but effective Southern Methodist leadership, aided by ignorant but adroit political operators like media mogul and *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce and government officials—all alumni of Harvard or Yale—Secretary of State Henry Stimson, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., and Assistant Secretary of State and later CIA Director Dean Acheson (whom film director Rob Reiner claimed to have exposed as a member of the conspiracy that assassinated John F. Kennedy). These individuals foolishly perceived China as ripe for Christianity and democracy and fell for Chiang Kai-shek's self-promotion as a great, honest, courageous visionary for their vision of a new China.

arguments—although doubtless he convinces himself that he is telling the truth as he sees it. I think he believes his own rhetoric.

Trump has warned of a bloodbath should he lose in 2024—he has tried to walk back the term, but it’s a spear once hurled that cannot be recalled—and has denounced undocumented immigrants for ‘poisoning the blood of our country’ and branded them ‘animals’, saying: ‘I don’t know if you call them “people,” in some cases.’⁴⁵ I think Trump’s rhetoric is a strategic mistake. His supporters know where he stands and he does himself an avoidable disservice by polarising the nation. But it’s his campaign.

Still, pure hatred drove Hitler and he rooted his appeal entirely in it. As a person, he was uninteresting. Orson Welles famously related sitting next to Hitler at dinner and reported a colourless bore. Did Hitler conceal deep emotions or had he learned tricks of communication? It’s been suggested that a Jewish publicist, Erik Jan Hanussen, taught Hitler how to achieve dramatic impact in his speaking. Not surprisingly, Hanussen was assassinated, on 25 March 1933, apparently by Sturmabteilung goons.

Trump is a born entertainer and showman, which is key to his popularity with his base. And whatever you think of him, he is neither antisemitic nor a warmonger. Indeed, his critics argue that he is too averse to using force for national aims. His rhetoric viciously ridicules and demonises his opponents. But his slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ is rooted in a positive message claiming he’ll make Americans prosperous and safe, behind secure borders. And through his pursuit of trade policies with China that are fair to American workers, he’ll check Chinese economic imperialism. How he might accomplish these goals, if he can do so—although not the goals themselves—lies at the core of the 2024 political debate. These goals hardly qualify as evil. The debate between Biden and Trump is over which candidate can best achieve them.

45 Quoted by Maureen Dowd, ‘Donald Trump’s Insatiable Bloodlust’, *New York Times*, 7 April 2024.

One can argue that President Biden's key vulnerabilities in the election, aside from voter concerns about his age, stem from a wide perception that the cost of living under Trump was more affordable and that Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' plan worked in cutting (Trump would say stopping) illegal immigration. Biden's chances will likely turn on convincing voters that Trump doesn't deserve the presidency, that it's Biden who has embraced tough border positions—a stance conspicuously absent for most of his term—and that people are actually better off under his leadership. The rhetoric and personal attacks are overheated. Still, democracy is a chaotic conversation. These arguments qualify as standard politics, not an epic struggle to avert Armageddon.

Describing how appeals to dark emotions can destructively motivate a mass audience comprises the first half of Pomerantsev's book. Then the author shifts focus to a historical narrative about Sefton Delmer's anti-Nazi propaganda effort. Delmer was a journalist who had developed high-level connections with Hitler and the Nazi elite. He won their trust and got to know them up close and personal. In England when war broke out, he applied his knowledge and innovative skills at strategic communications to help discredit Hitler and the Nazis.

Delmer understood that Goebbels's propaganda 'sought to put Hitler above politics, on a plane both parental and almost divine'.⁴⁶ Goebbels understood, as Tony Schwartz did years later, that charismatic leadership requires appealing to emotional intelligence. Hence Nazi propaganda aimed to form crowds into a collective mind in which conscious personality vanished, along with will and discernment. Pomerantsev astutely notes that Hitler and Trump shared the notion of offering a 'strong hand' at the helm of the ship of state.

Delmer also understood that the chief priority of authoritarian leaders is personal survival and regime preservation, achieved by gaining credibility and legitimacy. He knew that leaders forge trust by being useful to an audience and inspiring personal fealty. It is a game of cheating in which

46 Pomerantsev, *How to Win the Information War*, p. 84.

the winning message is that the leader—for Germans, the Führer; for Russians, Putin; and for Americans, Trump—is always right. A leader able to achieve that can get away with any lie. Pomerantsev points out that trust is a key to overcoming partisan biases. It is a powerful insight.

Delmer believed that propaganda did not fully entrance people. Another person lies inside all of us, grounded in reality, and ready to break free from propagandists if there is enough reason to do so. He saw his job as finding that reason and translating it into messages that struck a responsive chord with Germans. It was essential to give people the motivation to look past propaganda and to care about truth again. Pomerantsev's book itemises the tactics Delmer used to achieve his goal. In this arena, Pomerantsev points out, truth is not a value in itself, but a subset of power.

The Kremlin invoked this approach by demonising Ukrainians as neo-Nazis, and thus feeling entitled to brand them as subhuman. Just as the Nazis used that rationale to murder innocent Jews, Russian soldiers are using it to excuse sadism. Delmer applied himself to puncturing the myths that sustained Hitler's legitimacy. He went straight for the credibility of the Nazi leaders, exposing them as hypocrites and incompetent. As the Nazis cut German sugar rations, he got out the message that Nazi comrade Herr Wilkenkampner treated guests to a magnificent sugar-baked cake in the shape of Cologne Cathedral. Unbound by ethical restraints, he quoted a story—made up—of one German POW bragging that he had been able to pay less for prostitutes, to infuriate his comrades from another unit. He induced people to buy clothes based on a false rumour that large numbers of extra ration cards were being printed.

Some British officers recoiled at Delmer's use of 'black propaganda', false messages, but he argued that, by using the language of lower-class Germans, one could make an emotional connection with audiences to destroy confidence in the Nazi Party apparatus. He tried to reverse-engineer the language of Nazi antisemitism back on the Nazi leadership. He mocked German claims of success, and answered Goebbels's

disinformation tactics that minimised the success of RAF air raids. He underscored Germany's heavy losses in the east, which the Nazis tried to conceal, to stimulate desertion and shake faith in the German generals.

As a strategy, Delmer tapped into buried resentments against the Nazis. Pomerantsev admirably details how Delmer navigated an obstreperous British bureaucracy to conceive and execute an anti-Nazi campaign that struck hard. The book is worth reading to see and understand Pomerantsev's reporting on how Delmer mounted and executed his messaging. His tactics offer lessons for how to win future engagements and conflicts.

How successful was Delmer? That's a weakness in the book. Pomerantsev never really answers it, any more than he squarely answers the question posed by the book's title, *How to Win an Information War*. The issue is debated, but it appears that a majority of Germans may have viewed Hitler favourably until the very end.⁴⁷ Pomerantsev splendidly itemises Delmer's tactics, but there are no metrics to tell whether or how well they succeeded. Strategic communications rings hollow unless it helps to achieve measurable results—not necessarily data, but concrete, tangible outcomes that one can reasonably link to a communication tactic.

Still, Pomerantsev understands propaganda, and what he has to say about it is always worth reading. He's done his homework and he knows his subject matter. This book is well recommended.

47 Steve Forbes, 'Why Even Non-Nazi Germans Stuck with Hitler When Disaster Loomed', *Forbes*, 1 March 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/steveforbes/2016/03/01/why-they-stuck-with-hitler. Forbes cites Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939–1945* (Basic Books). I was unable to locate a copy of Stargardt's book and so rely upon Forbes's account.

