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Defence Strategic Communications

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Foreword

In Celebration of the Essay

Eleven years and fourteen volumes into the life of the *Defence Strategic Communications* journal, we dedicate this special issue No. 15 to the essay as a literary genre. Our traditional blend of academic articles and review essays will return once we have explored this flexible and more subjective way of writing which is held dear by our readers, whether theorists or practitioners.

There has always existed a tension—a competition for which form could best capture essential truths—between the *novel* which offers free rein to invention, self-expression, and the emotions; the *essay* which exposes the external world to the imagination; and the scholarly *article* that prizes depersonalised objectivity. Boundaries are not always distinct; they nevertheless demarcate different genres. 'Fiction', wrote Virginia Woolf, 'is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.'[1] Brian Dillon raises the conundrum of the essay: 'Imagine a type of writing so hard to define its very name should be something like: an effort, an attempt, a trial. Surmise or hazard, followed likely by failure.'[2] When attached to an object to be critiqued—a book, performance, or exhibition—the essay as review creates further uncertainty: should the object remain the focus of attention or simply act as a springboard to freer thought? Where does the review essay end and the essay begin?

Underlying this conversation is a tension between form, content, and style, highlighting among scholars of critical writing a wariness of

1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

2 Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo, 2017), p. 12.

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drifting uncomfortably close to polemic if some basic rules fall into neglect. Abstracts, literature reviews, hypothesis, contested argument (but preferably linear), structure, referencing and citation add up to a way of conducting an evidence-based argument with transparency and source attribution. Pastiche is frowned upon, plagiarism condemned. These are the *sine qua non*, the bread and butter of academic integrity. Form disciplines content and style.

By no means an academic journal, *The New York Review of Books* is frequently held to be a paradigm of the essay form for those who value its insightful contributions from many of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' most prominent critics and commentators. It was founded during that city's newspaper strike of February 1963, and its editors were unequivocal in their intentions: its manifesto claimed the first issue did 'not pretend to cover all the books of the season or even all the important ones. Neither time nor space, however, have been spent on books which are trivial in their intentions or venal in their effects, except occasionally to reduce a temporarily inflated reputation or to call attention to a fraud.' From these 'suggestions' grew the tradition of a 'responsible literary journal' which has endured seven decades only to inspire other publications spread across the writing world.[3] The sincerest form of flattery is to seek to emulate its high standards.

Prose writing follows many roads. Each leads to somewhere unknown, a new place in human understanding, refreshing the imagination in unexpected ways. Each author seeks original points of influence to fulfil their work's objectives. Form and content come together to bridge the subjective and objective, the personal and impersonal, in any reading experience, whether of folk tales, short stories, or novels.

Should we care about what singles out one manner of writing from the next? Take one case—the *novella*. Perhaps it's churlish to rile at those who describe a novella simply as a short story. As a student of literature,

3 'The Opening Editorial', *New York Review*, 7 November 2013, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/11/07/opening-editorial [Accessed 5 May 2025].

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particularly in the German language, adding stricter definition reaches beyond pedantry, and aspires to bringing out the richness of a distinct literary form. Not necessarily short or long when measured by page count, the novella, which flowered in nineteenth-century German Romanticism, is marked out by the way it structures a story around an epicentral event and attaches to its plot a symbolic *leitmotif* that Paul Heyse called a *Falkenmotiv*.[4] Where the novel moves directly or indirectly, yet inexorably, towards its conclusion, the novella circles its subject, which is rarely far from view.[5] Meanwhile, its narrative arc revolves around a *Wendepunkt*, a turning point in the action where events characteristically are flavoured by the *unerhört*—a 'strangeness, unusualness, unexpectedness'.[6] Friedrich Schlegel was first to theorise the novella, revealing it to be 'particularly suited to present a subjective mood and point of view' without revealing explicitly the author's true feelings.[7]

Whether the novella's development followed *a priori* steps set by its earlier proponents or whether hindsight has coalesced certain features into a coherent offering may be judged by visiting, among many, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Novelle*), Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (*Die Judenbuche*), Heinrich von Kleist (*Michael Kohlhaas*), or even those who stretched the form to its limits, like Adalbert Stifter (*Bunte Steine*).

I make this diversion only by analogy to highlight *form* in the history of the *essay* over the last four hundred years, and in this journal to draw out the essay's particular features that separate it from the art of producing a scholarly or academic article—sometimes inviting controversy and condemnation.

In *Essayism* Brian Dillon hesitates to define a type of writing (barely a genre) when he considers:

4 Paul Heyse and Ludwig Laistner, *Neuer Deutscher Novellenschatz* (Munich and Leipzig: R. Oldenbourg, 1884).

5 H.M. Waidson, *A History of the German Novelle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 10.

6 Ibid.

7 See Friedrich Schlegel, *Nachricht von den poetischen Werken des G. Boccaccio* (1801).

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> I might be describing a form that doesn't (yet) exist. I have no clue how to write about the essay as a stable entity or established class, how to trace its history diligently from uncertain origins through successive phases of literary dominance and abeyance, to its present status as modest publishing revenant […] but in this case I cannot give myself to an elegant tale about the essay, neither to a pointed defence, rhetorical apology, psyched manifesto.[8]

In 1910 the Hungarian Marxist critic György Lukács had written in a similar vein:

> For the point at issue for us now is not what these essays can offer as 'studies in literary history', but whether there is something in them that makes them a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle that makes them such is the same in each one.[9]

The scholarly article by contrast—at least in the arts and humanities—captures an argument-as-conversation located in an extensive epistemology spanning both time and space. Established protocols guide its execution consistent with consensual understandings and prescriptions built up over generations of scholarship that guide how best to write an article before submission to the sharp eye of peer review. Between communities of academe, variations inevitably emerge that determine what is considered to be elegant writing, no less the fashion in which an argument is evidenced on the page, or how adventurous its style of expression should venture, or indeed what dare be included of the self while maintaining the propriety of distance.

And it is this apparent looseness of intellectual and structural boundaries that so often invites disdain. Fear of extravagance, showiness, dandyism

8 Dillon, *Essayism.*

9 György Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', in *Soul & Form*, trans. A. Bostock, ed. J.T. Sanders and K. Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 16.

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haunts the gainsayers. Style over form. We are, however, reminded by Michael Hamburger, 'but the essay is not a form, has no form; it is a game that creates its own rules'.[10]

The German theorist Theodor Adorno could be suspicious if not scathing of the essay as form. Where were the rules? 'The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned at school.'[11]

Was it ever thus? In 1571, at only thirty-seven years of age and against a backdrop of religious wars between French Catholics and Huguenots, Michel de Montaigne chose to retire to his estates near Bordeaux. He concentrated on writing, turning out a rich array of attempts, tests, experiments he called essays. Successive monarchs had different ideas, demanding his services at court. Still, by 1580 he had published his first volume of *Essais,* to which he would add new reflections in subsequent editions. From this time Montaigne would be considered the progenitor of the essay form, for which his eclectic interests set a number of guiding principles.[12] Book 1 included among its plethora of topics: *That our deeds are judged by the intention*; *How we weep and laugh at the same thing*; *On the custom of wearing clothing*; *How our mind tangles itself up*; *On freedom of conscience*; *On thumbs*; *On a monster-child*.[13] His observations were philosophical, cultural, psychological, cautious on religion, but above all eclectic.

In the following decades the English Renaissance produced the statesman Francis Bacon, who, acknowledging Montaigne's publications, saw essays in a different light, more as a legacy of the Roman Seneca's epistles to Lucretius. 'The word is late, but the thing is ancient,' he remarked.

10 Dillon, *Essayism.*

11 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 13.

12 Marc Foglia and Emiliano Ferrari, 'Michel de Montaigne', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy Archive,* ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019 edn, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/montaigne/.

13 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays,* ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), https://archive.org/details/MontaigneEssayscompleteScreech.num/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater.

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For him an underlying structure in the essay took the form of pithy antitheses—a kind of list of pros and cons—couplets in weighing an argument. What he thought of his own essays as form seems to have been unequivocal at best. His biographer Clark Sutherland Northup, for one, suggests he thought little of them: 'they were trifles that would last no longer than the ephemeral language in which they were written'.[14] Latin was his preferred way of preserving their value. But here's the rub. Northrup is nevertheless led to conclude: 'Yet it is by the *Essays*, in English, that Bacon has long been best known; and of all his writings they give the greatest promise of endurance.'

In the intervening centuries the essay would accumulate its supporters and detractors: those who saw a profligate form short on intellectual discipline, unable to connect science and art, and others who saw it as fragmentary, indeed comprising all too many fragments, rendering it unable to produce rounded arguments with universal value. This fell short of what the academy could achieve, so ran the critique. Largely opinions have divided on 'the distinction between "proper" or creative literature and criticism as a parasitic form of activity', argues Elena Gualtieri.

By the early twentieth century, the future novelist Virginia Woolf's entry on the public stage was accompanied by a spirited plea on behalf of the essay.

> Almost all essays begin with a capital I—'I think', 'I feel'—and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily an expression of personal opinion.[15]

14 *The Essays of Francis Bacon,* ed. Clark Sutherland Northup (Houghton Mifflin, 1908), p. xxvi.

15 Elena Gualtieri, 'The Essay as Form: Virginia Woolf and the Literary Tradition', *Textual Practice* 12 Nº 1 (1998): 49–67.

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Woolf's venture into essay writing in *A Room of One's Own* would echo some of her outspoken positions on themes tackled in her novels. For her, 'the essay harbours a deeper, undeveloped potential that has remained untouched by its commercial exploitation and could even be harnessed for some of the artistic projects she associated with modernity'.[16]

Lukács in a letter to the aesthete Leo Popper hesitates in his defence of the essay's unique qualities:

> Fortunately for us, the modern essay does not always have to speak of books or poets; but this freedom makes the essay even more problematic. It stands too high, it sees and connects too many things to be the simple exposition or explanation of a work; the title of every essay is preceded in invisible letters, by the words 'Thoughts occasioned by… .'

He continues to reflect on its decoupling from the object of commentary, whether book, performance, or indeed any other work of art:

> The essay has become too rich and independent for dedicated service, yet it is too intellectual and too multiform to acquire form out of its own self. Has it perhaps become even more problematic, even further removed from life-values than if it had continued to report faithfully on books?[17]

Hence the essay comes under pressure from those concerned with the constraints of form seen as a way of disciplining good argument. Theories of the novel loom large here, casting a long shadow. Would that it were so easy to define the novel, argues Childs Jason. According to E.M. Forster, the novel becomes 'a fiction in prose of a certain length'; for Don de Lillo, 'the novel is whatever novelists are doing at a given moment'; and

16 Ibid., 52.

17 Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', p. 15.

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Milan Kundera is minded of the novel's 'conquest of being', its appetite to devour anything and everything in its path. Any licence granted the novelist may be grudgingly denied the essayist.

> The individual essay, by contrast, is rarely spoken of in such ambitious terms, even if it is increasingly seen as a form uniquely capable of responding to our fragmented historical moment. One explanation for this perception would be that self-exploration, rather than symbolic patricide or the conquest of existential turf, is usually held up as the motor of innovation in the essay.[18]

Self-exploration appears to threaten rather than encourage many critics to explore ideas. Yet subjectivity is ever-present where innovation and imagination come to the fore. *Defence Strategic Communications* turns to the essay to bring something fresh to the way we think about this still nascent field of theory, albeit widely pursued in everyday practice by government communicators and media agencies in the service of the state. But common practice without conceptual frameworks able to make sense of the minutiae of communications equates only to promoting tactics without true strategy in a world that appears to elude snapshot capture. Included in this special issue is an array of themes and topics to engage the contemporary strategic communicator—to find fresh points of entry into how influence plays out in the ever more complex world of politics and geopolitics.

In this unpredictable period of history, when talk of wars has become commonplace, it is not surprising that our essayists are drawn to the flame of ideas that define our lives and our times. We have assembled a distinct and distinguished cast. And these essayists are keen to provoke fresh debate, but not before they have discovered new ways of penetrating familiar topics.

18 Jason Childs, 'The Essay and the Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay*, ed. Kara Wittman and Evan Kindley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 199–214.

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Andrew Cheatham reflects on the perceived demise of the West; Dimitar Vatsov proposes we see Russian propaganda as postmodern terrorism; Maria Golubeva considers the retreat from liberalism over the last decade; Mitch Ilbury compares different models of political leadership, past and present; Paul Bell reflects on Georgia and its seductive tyranny of hope; James Farwell sees collusion between China and Mexico's cartels as hybrid warfare targeting America's fentanyl crisis; Chiyuki Aoi observes how the performance of ballet captures changing social attitudes; and Gatis Krūmiņš asks whether Latvia can ever reclaim its future once stolen by the Soviet Union. An eclectic offering that, appreciated individually but weighed together, seeks to illuminate contemporary geopolitics, however impressionistically.

To anchor this heterogeneous collection of review essays, I include a reminder of context, a scene-setter for the story so far of strategic communications. An outline genealogy appears in the following pages. At best, it can only offer a sketch of an emergent field: this twenty-first century form of influence draws on many strands of development. But its inclusion derives from my archival research many years ago into how the Irish Republican movement, fighting British forces soon after World War I, engaged with its readership. How the editors of the *Irish Bulletin* newspaper with each issue reiterated the story so far—a key instrument for binding its readers to a more consensual framework of understanding.

Finally, as we mark this celebration of an underappreciated literary form, it bears recalling that a hundred years ago Virginia Woolf, too, pondered the modern essay: 'Vague as all definitions are,' she proposed, 'a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out.'[19]

Dr Neville Bolt
Editor-in-Chief
Spring 2025

19 The Modern Essay in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13.

The Future Is More Than *What Happens Next*: Strategic Communications and the Twenty-First Century

Neville Bolt

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, influence, geopolitics, liberal democracy, memory construction, storytelling, counterinsurgency*

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Abstract
Strategic communications appeared as if from nowhere in the early twenty-first century. The term grew in currency as interventionist policies in Iraq and Afghanistan were pursued by the Western security community and as Russian expansionism became ever more threatening, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, the question remains why the concept is so often held to be overpracticed and under-theorised. An outline genealogy is set out here and some key concerns are identified which continue to haunt a type of communications focused on long-term

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geopolitical change, which is proposed to be firmly anchored in the liberal democratic project.[1]

Introduction

Clausewitzians see war as the pursuit of politics by other means. They might similarly view strategic communications as an extension of that same politics, were it not for the fact that proponents of this emerging field harbour higher ambitions.

At the vanguard of contemporary geopolitics sit those who would influence others, imagining themselves more like Hollywood film producers: *first in* and *last out* on any project—midwife to its birth, translating pure conception into tangible being, and still there when all others have long cleared the film set and cinema houses, left alone to settle the accounts. In other words, understanding better than others an idea's probable reception by audiences, they would shape accordingly the creation of policy and navigate its delivery to its intended end: policy in action.

The story of strategic communications is the story of how for Western democrats a brief triumphalism following the fall of the Soviet empire turned to anxiety, faced with the fracturing of the post-1945 status quo and resistance from diverse fronts to Western values.

In the following pages I set out to find a place for a new form of political influence. It emerged in the wake of the Cold War, particularly the turbulent 1990s, and its genealogy is far from linear. First, I shall trace the broad outlines of how and why this nascent field appeared. Next, I shall explore some key precepts that set it apart from its predecessors.

1 An earlier version of this essay appears in *Critique & Humanism* 62 Nº 1 (2025), https://kxjournal.com/. My thanks to Dimitar Vatsov, Professor of Philosophy, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, for his generous support.

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And finally, its inherent flaws will be identified, if not addressed to complete satisfaction.

The point here is to mark StratCom (in the jargon) as a liberal constructivist project that emerged at a particular moment in the early twenty-first century when numerous historical factors converged to mutual effect. In short, strategic communications would come to represent a pushback against the perceived retreat of liberal democracy in the face of a global drift towards authoritarianism: it would be democracy revitalised, re-energised, and redux.

What Is Strategic Communications?

But first, the briefest of overviews. What is strategic communications? It is (plural noun but singular verb—synesis) a recent construct of political and geopolitical communications that sits under the broader conceptual umbrella of influence. A constant calibration between persuasion and coercion is a primary human trait woven into our daily lives at the individual and collective levels, from the citizen or subject to the government and state. Some see it as the balancing of 'soft power' with 'hard power', ideally creating 'smart power'.[2] But its roots go much deeper. Fundamentally, humans want to influence other humans. Ask any parent of a small child about a contest of wills.

Back in 2011, Christopher Paul at RAND highlighted the ambiguity of the term and how users were already talking past each other. Volunteering a working definition, he identified 'coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives'.[3] By the end of the decade, *Defence Strategic Communication*s had introduced greater nuance:

2 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

3 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), p. 3.

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> Strategic Communications entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies. [It] addresses the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community.[4]

But in that same piece, I went on to counsel:

> when digital information technologies perpetually breach sovereign borders and what was in the analogue era a national broadcast footprint, historic binaries of home and abroad rapidly dissolve; so too the binary of government and people. That makes it difficult, if not unwise, to conceive of it as some kind of hermetically sealed message projection directed at foreign states. Feedback and blowback operate in split-second dynamic loops.[5]

NATO's Terminology Working Group (TWG) would soon inject a fresh emphasis and greater concision: 'A holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment,'[6] paving the way for an insertion of competing ideas and the assertion of liberal freedoms.

Strategic communications proponents broadly agree on a defining set of criteria: it aims to affect how target audiences think and behave in the cause of offering positive change towards the 'good life', a better life. But it aims at long-term change, at strategic effects: its clock counts in decades, not simply years. Using words or images, and action or even a failure to

4 Neville Bolt, foreword, *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4–5.

5 Ibid.

6 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE, 2019), p. 46.

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act, reinforces the notion that we attach meaning ontologically to objects and activity in the world around us. Hence strategic communications draws on social constructivist and symbolic interactionist thought dating back to the Chicago School of the 1920s.[7] Ranged alongside international relations theory, it inclines towards liberal and constructivist schools. Yet what make the processes of influencing others more problematic in the early twenty-first century are both the sheer 'noise' and dynamism of an interconnected historic and digital media space, filled with frictions, distractions, and competition.

Epistemologically I identify four ways of analysing strategic communications. *Instrumentalist*—the most common—emphasises tools, techniques, and tactics of how to project ideas and campaigns to optimum effect. *Functionalist,* how it fits into and operates within institutions and organisations. *Essentialist,* which tries to get at *what it is* rather than what it does or how it does it. And *normative,* which seeks a higher purpose—less descriptive and erring on the side of becoming prescriptive, it is unashamedly less objective and more subjective: *what should it be*?[8]

Strategic communications can be more than operational. If it is to survive as a distinct field of theory-informed praxis, it should also be normative. And that means anchoring its purpose to projecting an inherent system of values. According to this argument, explicitly promoting and protecting the fundamental freedoms of the individual has come to mark it out from other forms of political communications in the early twenty-first century. Yet, all too frequently its practitioners are restrained by the quotidian or commercial demands of delivering a measurable outcome in a shifting world of complex humanity. Projecting values takes second place to the business of measuring the effect of campaigns on target populations.

7 George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism, Perspective and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

8 Neville Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023).

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Context is all. I set these observations in what I believe to be a world of irresolvable—because they are symbiotic—tensions between hierarchies and networks; linearity and non-linearity; solidity and fluidity; equilibrium and disequilibrium; democracy and autocracy, to name but a few. That exterior environment of tensions cannot be completely known to us—our calculations rely on incomplete information. And our sentient natures resist the perfecting of rational thought.

The Legacy of Enlightenment

To every problem known to humans there should be a solution. So ran a central tenet of Enlightenment conviction, the idea that rational thought held the answer to all inquiry. At the same time, it 'criticised both popular belief and religious and political authority by means of reason', writes Ritchie Robertson.[9] The *age of reason* was born to replace a history that had been shrouded in blind faith. And the scientific revolution that marched hand in hand with a rediscovery of ancient Stoicism served to counter the upheavals of a war-torn seventeenth century while subjugating human emotions to rational action.

An emergent capitalism driven by military crossings of the oceans and conquest of their littorals, international trade plied through the capture of new markets and the search for fresh sources of commodities, machine-driven manufacture powered by water pressure and factories organised by clock time to control labour, advances in optics able to produce microscopes to penetrate the life of a flea alongside telescopes that could gaze into the distant heavens[10]—all served to underline the German poet Novalis's claim that 'Nature has been reduced to a monotonous machine.'[11] Science would serve the revolution in industrial manufactures and expansion of markets, the systemisation of command and control

9 Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 21.

10 Lisa Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution* (London: Little, Brown, 1999), p. 45.

11 Andrea Wulf, *Magnificent Rebels* (London: John Murray, 2023), p. 13.

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in modern militaries, and the bureaucratisation of a soon-to-emerge nation state. Scientific advances that led to the human embrace of the rational would inevitably meet a call-and-response in writers of that diverse and amorphous movement we associate with the Romantics. Machines, these 'counter-revolutionaries' claimed, had sucked the life out of the mystical, spiritual, and emotional that were more than a legacy of a history without reason; they were the lifeblood of what made human beings human. Where were the poets, and the artists, and what of the folk tales that had for so long haunted the imagination? Moreover, machines would supply the undercurrent for the birth of nationhood, nationalism, and eventually the nineteenth-century nation state. A nostalgic yearning for distinct identity set communities apart, but charted their heritage through sentiment and family likeness rather than historical fact. Humans, we were reminded, enjoy mystery and mystique as much as evidence and proof.

But what such resistance represented finds more than an echo in a suspicion of methods employed in today's influence business. A flaw to its critics, but quest to its supporters, to predict and measure the thoughts and patterns of behaviour in contemporary populations, whether in the consumer marketplace or political theatre of contest (Oliver Wendell Holmes's marketplace of ideas), remains a constant in today's symbiosis of target audience analysis followed by measurement of effect. And recent advances in big data analytics, together with the ability of artificial intelligence (AI) to draw on large language models, promise the prediction of human thought and action with ever-increasing accuracy. The neo-scientific and the affective vie for supremacy in the worlds of marketing and advertising, captured through quantitative and qualitative analysis. No less in politics, where governments feel a need to demonstrate a return on investment to taxpayers and voters in influence campaigns bankrolled by the state. Such tension continually pervades the world of political influence—in no small part because people don't behave the way one expects them to behave. For all the scientific innovation and discovery, they remain complex and stubbornly unpredictable.

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Historic Convergence

Intellectual tensions can turn into fissures in politics, as in the world of scholarship. And they will permeate this essay too. Nevertheless, several developments coalesced in the early twenty-first century to create a fertile environment that spawned a distinct form of communications in international politics.

Broadly speaking, a new rhetoric had emerged from shifts in patterns of waging war since 1945; the failure of kinetic invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan had undermined the liberal democratic offering of the West; the return of Great Power politics would recalibrate the temporary unipolarity enjoyed by the United States with the fall of the Soviet empire; a re-energised projection of power on the part of China and Russia would become apparent by the new century; a transformation in information and communication technologies changed relationships between the consumer populace and governments; consequently behaviour between hierarchical and networked organisation shifted dramatically, affecting electoral outcomes and governance models; and a growing need to explain and account for democratic states' conduct was felt to be long overdue, particularly in the Global South.

These included the return of Great Power politics—a new struggle between the United States, Russia, and China for economic and military control that brought with it a reassertion of irredentist ambitions and desire to extend their spheres of influence.

Since the 1990s digital technologies had advanced dramatically, transforming the way individuals and groups connected to one another to spread ideas and sentiments. Mass access to low-priced hardware and software in the form of mobile telephony and the internet updated historical technologies from face-to-face, physical contact to supplying the means to connect people digitally and instantaneously wherever they might be in the world. Decentralisation of communications away from a controlling or managing centre in the state to a networked

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form of billions of users had consequences for the speed and channels through which rebellious sentiment could be delivered. At the same time, inward-looking communities could shut themselves off from a conflictual outside world and reinforce their own attitudes and prejudices with the support of algorithmic programming embedded in the coding of these technologies.

This same shift of control would play into changing patterns in the security realm. War had largely transformed since 1945 from state-on-state industrialised confrontation, organised through bureaucratic command-and-control hierarchies, to a proxy form of exploiting an array of postcolonial and post-imperial ambitions, not forgetting the personal interests of assorted warlords. Great Powers drove their rivalry through local or small wars, otherwise known as insurgencies, across Africa, Asia, and Latin America—until sub- and trans-state actors conjoined in an international network of networks that offered ideological Islamic fundamentalists both organising structures and distribution outlets to pursue their aims. Hierarchical countermeasures would struggle to contain the newly networked form of insurgency identified with al-Qaeda which disavowed statism for its followers in favour of a broader concept of divine caliphate. Islamic State (ISIS)—its very name would reject this approach—preferred to build a future inside territorial state boundaries consistent with a Weberian notion of governance and its obligations to provide for its subjects. Consequently its hold on territory between Syria and Iraq, in the face of overwhelming use of force by hierarchical states and their militaries, would lead to the proto-state's demise. Albeit only in this hierarchical form of organisation, before being obliged to retreat to a more agile and distributed network of independent groups scattered around the world, hosted anew by sympathetic governments, or finding safe haven in ineffectively policed areas of failing states.

More recently, state-on-state conflict has returned to the horrors of the First World War, combining gruelling trench warfare in Ukraine, long assumed to be committed to history, with advanced drone and missile technologies supported by satellite intelligence gathering.

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What runs through these perspectives is the recognition of a networked challenge—both physical and digital—to centralised dominance over disseminating information and communications. At stake here are two forms of state control: one, the exercise of societal regulation, norms, and methods of constraint when challenged by ideational innovation; the other, physical infrastructure and virtual software that channel and curate connectivity between consumers.

Influence *over* populations had to adjust to influence *from* populations. No longer were popular outbursts read as periodic releases of emotion as once feared by nineteenth-century social psychologists.[12] Instead, this new influence took the form of a continual hum of self-organising opposition. In the increasingly securitised atmosphere of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, bipolarity (US and USSR) transformed into *multipolarity* (US, Russia, and China) and a rearrangement of strategic competition. That transformation would extend into *multi-alignment* by medium-sized and minor-ranking states, often shopping between the US for their security protection, Russia for its energy supplies, and China for its consumer and labour markets. Meanwhile the concept of *multi-domain* would accompany a growing need perceived by the US industrial-military establishment for a command-and-control system of information and communications fit for a twenty-first-century world of threats. The idea of a NATO Digital Backbone was conceived for this purpose. In the process it could not only support Multi-Domain Operations but transform 'NATO into a data-centric Alliance and increase military effectiveness and enhance political decision-making'.[13] That system could coordinate or vary influence operations across and between all domains of land, sea, air, cyber, and space. But, crucially, the concept of employing a central digital backbone in a network of communications would be explored across the world's largest political-military alliance of thirty-two NATO member states. Military thinkers continue to weigh the project against a backdrop where high-tech companies have been

12 Gustave le Bon, *The Crowd* (Grapevine, 2022).

13 NATO, 'NATO Digital Backbone & NATO Digital Backbone Reference Architecture', https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/12/pdf/241213-DBRA.pdf.

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invited by the Trump Administration to take a central role in innovating a new era of technologically driven geopolitics.

To recap: strategic communications is a recent form of political and geopolitical communications that appeared in the early twenty-first century. This proved to be a moment of seismic shift of the tectonic plates of geopolitics. Hence the new field was identified by many as being played out on the level of grand strategy, albeit others would conflate it into a broader approach to communicating political policies and campaigns.

'Assembling' Memory and Stories

At the same time, I argue that the very backbone of strategic communications has become more recognisable as a process of constructing memory through conversations that flow between sedimented and aggregated layers of understanding and attached meanings. Ideational layers laid down over time resonate with one another. Told repeatedly through stories (historical accounts), these serve to reinforce the way individuals see and build their identity in communities, and in the way those same communities come to imagine themselves with a degree of cohesion. Increasingly this conceptual triad of memory, story, and identity appears to speak to the essence of strategic communications. When applied ontologically, this process of storytelling is employed to shift and shape significant discourses in societies. Together a linear timeline would connect the past, then the present, to the future. Hence a new continuity is constructed from temporal and spatial discontinuity. By moulding the past to one's own account, one could assert political legitimacy in today's world, only to stake a claim to owning the future.

George Orwell had seen through the state project to reveal a similar conclusion in his dystopian novel *1984*, writing, 'Who controls the past,

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controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.'[14] Such a constructivist view of temporal continuity speaks to the shaping of societal memory understood as ideological hegemony. Yet to see such (re)construction as linear is misleading, apparent only as a momentary snapshot. Discontinuity and non-linearity offer richer metaphors.

How to theorise the transition an idea makes to discourse remains elusive. And how individual memory construction bridges into collective hegemony is similarly challenging. For the individual, memories are far from resembling books on a shelf to be drawn down and opened to reveal the same fixed text on the same page time and time again. Rather, they resemble the product of assembling fragments that are reconstituted from different times and places, matching the desired effect to the needs of the moment. In fact an event may have taken place on a rainy day, but we recall the sunshine from a different day and replace rain with sun for that moment of recall. With each occasion, a slightly different account of the past may be evoked, resonating with associations we continually attach, reattach, and layer onto that past. Fragments are assembled to capture changing emotional moods or purpose.[15]

But how does a single person's memory merge into a million personal memories to create an apparent collective memory so important to a state's projection of stability and legitimate governance? How, then, on the level of collective or societal memory, should the state ensure consistent memory recall to create 'official' history, and consequently a legitimate now from which to project its coherent story? Do political hierarchies guide discourse formation, or is there an organic, self-organising principle at play?

The philosopher Manuel DeLanda draws on Gilles Deleuze to offer *assemblage* as an avenue to bridge individual with group experience, the micro with macro social dynamics. Human beings attach meaning

14 George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 2000).

15 Daniel Schacter, 'Constructive Memory: Past and Future', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 14 Nº 1 (2012); Israel Rosenfield, *The Strange, Familiar, and Forgotten* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1992); Israel Rosenfield, *The Invention of Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

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ontologically to their environment, made up of material, social, and ideational objects, mostly as a consequence of inherited bodies of sense-making. Traditions, rituals,[16] and memorials,[17] even broader institutional behaviours, may be seen as organisms or fragments in constant motion. Anchoring and reifying a consensual past, for DeLanda, is a dual process of *territorialisation* (face-to-face conversations in a physical place, as well as categorising people non-spatially by type or organisation) and *coding* (a secondary articulation that binds and stabilises the identity of the assemblage). A past becomes wedded to a place and to a group. The source of legitimate authority is significant here: traditional hierarchies achieve this through sacred narratives, while modern bureaucracies employ a constitution to anchor their storytelling.[18]

Collective understanding—nurtured from cradle to grave, from school to factory, through state instruction and hegemonic influence—raises the question whether this process can feasibly be attributed to the controlling hand of successive generations of political elites. Or whether the unseen hand of a state can determine how we read the past, while at the same time locking us, as Michel Foucault would have it, into a biopolitical state of being that denies agency. Or can we conceive of a 'common sense' that emerges over time in a Gramscian fashion, as top meets bottom in hierarchical negotiation to realise a common understanding of a story to be told with legitimacy and continuity? How an individual achieves equilibrium in their personal storytelling, then how a society comprising multiple individuals reaches a consensual point of view, speaks to the need to understand the limits of agency or free will.

For some this may be a stretch too far in theorising strategic communications. However, I argue that this triad of memory construction, storytelling, and identity building are fundamental to the nature of this

16 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

17 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

18 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 8–25. See Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

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new field of influence—which I consider to have arisen from a moment of crisis during the development of liberal democratic thought.

Recently a new line of inquiry has questioned whether this form of influence should not differentiate itself from earlier schools of persuasion and assert explicitly what has perhaps always been implicit. Namely, that strategic communications is a Western construct rooted in a liberal value system that upholds the rights of the individual as paramount.

Liberal Project Redux

Strategic communications has grown out of diverse thematic developments in Western societies, and beyond. The fall of the Soviet empire had encouraged a certain triumphalism, an 'end of history' trope celebrated against a backdrop of the high point of democratic expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. Notwithstanding the accession of former Soviet states from Eastern Europe to the European Union and NATO around the turn of the century, by the early millennium a new authoritarianism and populism had begun to haunt the West. Flows of mass migration were increasing at an alarming rate for many European and American nations while their economies faltered, which eventually led to extreme austerity programmes following the global financial crisis of 2008. Liberal tolerance was being tested, as Germany's long-serving chancellor Angela Merkel was to discover after admitting over a million refugees to her country during the following decade.[19] Germany's electorate was not unique in the West in lurching to populist nationalism and nativism.

At this point we should take a step back. The earliest mention of strategic communications in a geopolitical context appears in a report commissioned by Kofi Annan in 1997 on succeeding Boutros Boutros-Ghali as secretary

19 Angela Merkel, *Freedom, Memoirs, 1954–2021* (London: Macmillan, 2024).

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general of the United Nations.[20] And it arises from an institutional context. Annan could not avoid widespread public dissatisfaction at the repeated failure of the UN to meet its humanitarian obligations in the early 1990s. UN credibility was at stake because of a series of crises. Failure to act in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda had repeatedly undermined its reputation. Hesitant policymaking and poor decisions could hardly be concealed. Institutionally the UN had above all failed to explain its actions, thus losing relevance, while still preaching its humanitarian values to international audiences. And his report, Annan believed, would put right this dislocation, by engaging communities in a conversation between mutually respecting partners when addressed in a language or register that captured this respect. Standing in the shoes of vulnerable communities, no longer proselytising from a great moral height, meant speaking directly to people as equals.

The early 2000s witnessed a dramatic shock felt around the world. Al-Qaeda's attack on the Twin Towers in New York, relayed as it unfolded across television networks in September 2001, saw Washington launch a dual approach to seeking justice or, as some saw it, wreaking vengeance. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policies targeted 9/11's perpetrators and their hosts in conservative Islamic communities of eastern Afghanistan. Representing two edges of the same sword, counterterrorism spoke to the short-term righting of wrongs that had traumatised the world's pre-eminent power. It was reactive in nature and punitive in intent. The arrest and/or killing of criminal assailants, ordinarily a police action, was now writ large in military invasion. The intervention would attract the armed support of a further fifty states.

Meanwhile counterinsurgency—championed by US General David Petraeus, a Princeton PhD in international relations, and his immediate team, armed unusually with doctorates as their weapon of persuasion—sought pre-emptive and long-term change in societies, focused on

20 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).

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alleviating the very grievances that had spawned resistance to Western influence. These methods attuned to the pursuit of 'small wars', however, came to be interpreted in Western capitals as economic and political, less so cultural or ideological—which would lead to the eventual demise of their efforts. The counterinsurgents found themselves caught in a pincer movement between, on the one side, the traditional industrial-military complex and its historic suspicion of low-tech counterinsurgency in favour of heavy-duty men and machinery and, on the other, critical anthropologists in universities and aid and development workers. A group of academics, the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, even issued their own counter-counterinsurgency manual to highlight how the military had corrupted concepts of ethnography and culture.[21] Meanwhile development fieldworkers, who relied on the military to clear and secure the very terrain in which they operated their projects, felt compromised in the eyes of local populations by too close an association with the men of war. Consequently, as Iraq and Afghanistan failed to bend to hearts-and-minds policies, so this slow and deliberate form of persuasion faltered, only to lose favour as intelligence gathering, generous distribution of money among populations, and the hard force of counterterrorism won the day.[22]

Afghanistan is significant in theorising the development of strategic communications because institutional pressures to promote or reject the term played out for much of the second decade of the 2000s inside NATO and SHAPE-NATO bureaucracies (today NATO's alliance comprises thirty-two sovereign states). And positioning this newcomer alongside vested interests of pre-existing departments of Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations would inevitably mould what it was to become as a field of praxis.[23] Afghanistan was

21 Network of Concerned Anthropologists, *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press/University of Chicago Press, 2009).

22 Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); John A. Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of a New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); H.R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

23 Brett Boudreau, *We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us* (Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2016).

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a Petri dish for incubating it. At the same time, undue deference to the security aspect of strategic communications at the expense of economic statecraft or climate change debates driven by civil society can distort a 'thicker description'. Since January 2025 economics has begun to impact the projection of strategic communications through widespread use of tariffs as never before in living memory.

For nearly two decades Western states pursued counterinsurgency policies in Afghanistan. And for nearly two decades a series of stories would accompany the growth of the nascent field of strategic communications thinking. It proved to be more a way of self-justification towards fellow ISAF/NATO member states and their electorates than a means of explanation to Pashtun host communities offering sanctuary to al-Qaeda fighters before they too were drawn into active engagement under the banner of the Taliban. An overriding question would permeate the years of intervention that followed. Strategic communications demanded target audiences for its storytelling: who were the audiences—Western electorates or Afghan villagers? And if the answer was *all of the above*, was it even possible to tell the same story with the same effect to such disparate audiences?

What had begun as an American story (narratives and messages would become the common terms) justifying the manhunt for 9/11's essentially Saudi terrorists morphed into a campaign to dislodge and defeat networks of Pashtun Taliban fighters, in turn intent on resisting what they saw as a Western, Christian invasion to destroy Islam. As kinetic progress on Afghan soil faltered, so the need for a new story emerged: how to release the Taliban stranglehold on regional and national economies in Afghanistan. How indeed to eradicate the opium poppy crop, the country's primary product according to export value and one taxed by Taliban networks. How to do all that without fuelling villagers' grievances that their livelihoods were being threatened. Without further public explanation, a new story would soon replace the old, as the policy of poppy-crop eradication was abandoned from one year's harvest to the next.

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Counterinsurgency is understood among its proponents to be where principles of humanitarian aid and development meet counterterrorism, which is pursued through intelligence gathering and the use of force. Counterinsurgency speaks in a different register: it talks of social and economic construction. Consistent with humanitarian values, political economic solutions were to provide ways of isolating the 'bad guys' from the majority 'good guys' who provided a support base for militants in the community.[24] Under more attractive circumstances, economic grievances once addressed should provide a route to the endgame. No matter how much economic investment in roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals was lauded in the next episode of storytelling, a fresh social commitment to female rights to education and employment would be ratcheted up even further. Consequently the story would inevitably change once more. By promising democratic elections to all Afghans, intervention forces were now painting a vision of a modern nation state to be built on the soil of a predominantly rural and tribally conservative country. Afghanistan would become a laboratory for strategic communications practice, while still lacking any deeper foundational thinking or theory—or crucially, as some would point out, endgame. But when the end did finally arrive with US President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops in the summer of 2021, it raised the question of whether strategic communications had been tried and tested, and seen to fail.

Strategic Communications: An Outline Genealogy

Back in 2008, strategic communications had begun to acquire a certain currency, at least among elites inside NATO—albeit with minimal terminological investment. Not until 2023, following years of bureaucratic wrangling, would NATO achieve a degree of consensus in defining it

24 Kaplan, *Insurgents*; U.S. Army/Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

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from a values-based rather than purely operational perspective.[25] NATO is a political and military alliance. It is also the leading forum for researching terminology and theories around strategic communications. In its publication of the *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications AJP-10* its military doctrine writers emphasised that 'all activity is founded on NATO's values'[26] and the 'core tenets of NATO's narrative are embodied in the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty'.[27] The latter had stated in 1949 that signatories were 'determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law'.[28]

Meanwhile the third report of the NATO civilian wing's TWG first echoed traditional instrumentalist understandings of strategic communications before progressing to underline a keystone of NATO's *raison d'être*—a value system that reached back across the better part of a century.[29] The 1940s had been characterised by a series of high-level conversations with purpose, set against the backdrop of war and reconstructing a peace that sought security and prosperity for all nation states. The TWG also looked to NATO's foundational Washington Treaty of 1949, which in turn had drawn much of its legitimacy from Article 51 of the United Nations Charter signed four years earlier. Article 51 had spoken of 'individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member'—already a model for NATO's imminent Article 5 sworn to protect the principle of collective defence of 'one attacked, all attacked'. Meanwhile the UN's Article 1 in its original charter had sanctified the principle of 'promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion', with the UN providing 'a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the

25 For the development of earlier discussions around terminology, see Mark Laity, 'The Birth and Coming of Age of NATO StratCom: A Personal History', *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (Spring–Autumn 2021): 21–51.

26 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications: Allied Joint Publication-10 (AJP-10),* NATO Standardization Office, March 2023, p. 15.

27 Ibid., p. 16.

28 Ibid.

29 Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications.*

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attainment of these common ends'.[30] The mobilising idea was freedom of sovereign states, freedom of the individual.

Both the Washington Treaty and the UN Charter had captured the spirit of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's State of the Union speech of January 1941. There he addressed four fundamental human freedoms. Yet it was only on the fourth draft of speechwriting that the four freedoms made an appearance. Once spoken, they would come to resonate across a liberal tradition: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.[31] Already by August of that year they would form the principled basis of the Atlantic Charter declared by Winston Churchill and Roosevelt on American-British foreign and security policy.

What runs through these charters and treaties is an abiding commitment to a struggle for freedom when confronted by authoritarian and totalitarian visions. Not unsurprisingly, perhaps, by 1948 FDR's widow Eleanor Roosevelt had steered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the UN. It would declare that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'[32] Successive generations of universal humanitarian discourse, extended through the dissemination of development projects and international norms, have spearheaded the advance of liberal values across the world since the 1940s.

In May 1947 US Secretary of State Dean Acheson arrived in Mississippi to deliver a speech. It was to be the 'prologue' to the Marshall Plan, perhaps the greatest achievement of twentieth-century public diplomacy. Certainly it was its most generous. It accounted for an unprecedented 5.2 per cent of US GDP commitment to a reconstruction programme across a famine- and disease-ridden post-war Europe. Significantly, too, a Europe in the shadow of expansionist Soviet communism. Acheson's

30 *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the Court of International Justice* (San Francisco, 1945), Article 1(3) and 1(4), https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf.

31 FDR Library & Museum, *'FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech'*, https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms.

32 https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

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words resonate with our times, when threats and vulnerabilities abound, sometimes in deeply troubled pockets of the European continent. And it is especially poignant, at a moment when Ukraine faces overwhelming odds of brutal force from Russia, to summon his moral appeal to our own era's strategic communications. Acheson declared:

> Not only do human beings and nations exist in narrow economic margins, but also human dignity, human freedom, and democratic institutions. It is one of the principal aims of our foreign policy today to use our economic and financial resources to widen these margins. It is necessary if we are to preserve our own freedoms and our own democratic institutions. It is necessary for our national security. And it is our duty and our privilege as human beings.[33]

Serving the common good can be inextricably linked with self-interest. Yet even NATO member-state commitments to spell out a historic confrontation between democracy and autocracy in Ukraine—presented as an existential struggle by strategic communicators in the spring of 2022—would soon be undermined in two respects. Condemning aggression in this existential contest resonated across Europe and the US. But enthusiasm began to wane once the war drove up the market price of energy and food. The further west one travelled across Europe in subsequent months, the more economic reality challenged the humanitarian sympathy that had greeted Ukraine's refugees in the early days of the military invasion. And appeals to that existential threat that augured even worse to come for border states which had only recently freed themselves from the imperial USSR found limited support on the African continent and in the world's largest democracy, India.

33 Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 229.

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Ukraine's envoys met with a less than warm response from fellow postcolonial states in votes at the United Nations in New York.[34]

Strategic Communications: A New Paradigm

Counterintuitively, perhaps, every human being communicates strategically, but not everyone is a strategic communicator. Strategic communications is now understood as the exercise of shifting and shaping significant discourses in societies. Its ambitions are long-term, projected in decades, not months or even years, unlike other forms of political communication. But like advertising and marketing in a commercial marketplace, strategic communications segments, identifies, and targets specific audiences to achieve influence and change. Again, like these two, it acknowledges being caught up in perpetual competition in a noisy, dynamic media space with no divine right to be heard or seen, never mind welcomed into a stranger's home. Scale of ambition may be its strength. But a tendency to be tripped up by successive crises and short-term fixes that undermine the ambition is its weakness.

Fundamentally, strategic communications is built on a triad of key concepts: storytelling, memory construction, and identity construction. Around these themes a gradual consensus in policy and academic circles is perhaps emerging. Yet they remain loosely defined concepts open to interpretation and practice. Where consensus has yet to be found concerns one main dimension. Should strategic communications be defined by an ideology rooted in a particular genealogy? For it to have its own intellectual coherence and be sufficiently demarcated from earlier forms of political

34 Across six UN General Assembly resolutions (ES-11/1 – 11/6) on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, African states voted 140 in favour, 18 against, with 166 abstentions or absences. Elias Götz, Jonas Gejl Kaas & Kevin Patrick Knudsen, 'How African States Voted on Russia's War in Ukraine at the United Nations—and What It Means for the West', *DIIS Policy Brief*, 15 November 2023, https://www.diis.dk/en/research/how-african-states-voted-on-russias-war-in-ukraine-the-united-nations-and-what-it-means.

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and geopolitical communications, how important is it to reassert its liberal democratic identity? Or, put another way, a moral stance?

When viewed as a moral paradigm of two intersecting axes, strategic communications moves from being an instrumentalist or functionalist project to a normative ambition. Storytelling, it's thought, should amount to more than how most effectively to communicate an idea. In this scenario, the creation of norms becomes an end *sui generis* in a world of competing discourses. International norms, even when disregarded, nevertheless paint white lines on the playing fields of public discourse. Once articulated, they are forever present.

According to my moral paradigm,[35] a vertical axis of *authority–legitimacy* intersects with a horizontal axis of *persuasion–coercion*. More closely, authority means the act of holding power, whether achieved through election or force, while legitimacy speaks to the right to hold that power, both legal and moral. At the same time, persuasion seeks to attract adherents to its own values—while coercion chooses to force audiences to change their behaviour by exerting pressure to obey, even where the audience resists change. All four points—*authority, legitimacy, persuasion, coercion*—are in constant tension with one another. Each axis, *authority–legitimacy* and *persuasion–coercion,* is symbiotic. At this nexus of pull-and-push resides strategic communications—a kind of moral compass that points to an equitable social contract. The question arises whether that moral compass finds its true north in liberal democracy.

Recent critique of what makes strategic communications *strategic communications* has looked increasingly towards this question. Is this new field of political communications a mere synonym for what has passed before—in other words, old wine in new bottles? Or is it the expression of insecurity at the highest levels of Western societies fearful that the convergence of advanced capitalism and liberal democracy might have become a stuttering experiment in governance whose proof-of-concept remains to be seen? In that event strategic communications is cast in the

35 Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications.*

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light of a democracy project in search of rejuvenation, barely a century after the introduction of universal suffrage as its cornerstone. A counter to this argument is to see democracy in the early twenty-first century as self-critically re-examining and re-energising itself. Which raises the point whether the glass (wine bottle) is half-full or half-empty.

At the interstate level, strategic communications has set itself at odds with proponents of propaganda or political agitation, commonly associated in the Western public mind with the tragedies of twentieth-century warfare and the continued 'bad practices' of contemporary authoritarianism—although these autocracies may well view propaganda as no more malevolent than a neo-science of communications or extension of foreign or security policy. Meanwhile Western scholarship still struggles to find unanimity on what is propaganda, despite the average person on the street viewing it as politicians trying to manipulate the rest of us by peddling their lies.[36]

From Counter-Narratives to Alternative Narratives

States inherently face two challenges as they survey the world from a lofty height. One is not seeing the wood for the trees, an argument pursued to great effect by James Scott in *Seeing Like a State*.[37] The other is a failure to read adequately networked social movements and the non-linear, organic flows of ideas when viewed through a hierarchical lens.[38] When states do choose to intervene, the outcome is frequently unsuccessful, due to high modernism's inability to administer society according to scientific laws to which it implicitly aspires.

36 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

37 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

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

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For the greater part of the first two decades of this century, Western governments were absorbed in a struggle against acts of terror and insurgency. They still are, but their focus has shifted to respond to the more familiar state enemy with the return of Great Power politics. The Islamist threat came from many directions, acquiring a number of different forms. Territorial gains made in the Sahel and Middle East, alongside growing influence in Muslim communities and diasporas across erstwhile imperial powers of Europe and the former Soviet Union, became the success story of Islamic fundamentalist groups.

Faced with the dilemma of the Propaganda of the Deed—violent acts of terror caught on camera intended as lightning rods for ideological persuasion that resonate with sedimented memory and storytelling—governments responded by attempting to delegitimise religious ideologues who promoted or failed to condemn terror outrages.[39] Their plan was to counter with a truer, more enlightened interpretation of their own—but to little effect, with significant amounts of money spent on media agencies and their campaigns that were perhaps always destined to be identified as the voice of the state, and heard as the distorted voice of the 'other', the non-believer. By the second decade of counter-narrative campaigning, official emphasis had shifted from counter- to alternative narratives. In short, 'alternative' meant abandoning playing the opponent by their rules of engagement and so ceding advantage at the outset. Instead, 'alternative' proposed the adversary be manoeuvred to engage in a contest defined by one's own positive values: hence the strategy in strategic communications was to *attract to* a value system rather than *repel from* a rival set of values. Directed at the streets of Europe, alternative narratives echoed the counterinsurgents' transmission of liberal humanitarian values that had been delivered to Afghans but in the shape of better roads, schools, and clinics.

The dichotomy between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency has been aped by the language of counter-narratives and alternative narratives,

39 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

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and the more recent manifestation of counter-disinformation and strategic communications. My assertion revolves in part around the timescale of achieving outcomes otherwise known as strategic effects. Counter-disinformation is short-term; strategic communications, long-term. One is reactive; the other, pre-emptive. One addresses the here and now; the other, seemingly, the distant future. One sits closer to crisis communications; the other is potentially derailed by the wrong crisis communications. Short-terminism in democratic governments inevitably trumps long-termism since it responds to the demands of the moment. The calculus of return on investment differs too.

At a time of heightened transactional politics, counter-disinformation, more recently broadened out to embrace foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), is set alongside an established suite of tactical responses such as debunking, pre-bunking, media literacy campaigns, and resilience building. Yet an overall long-term vision of how to arrest industrially generated flows of untruth-telling, manufactured lies, and ambiguous opinion-making in a climate with decreasing regard for separating fact from fiction remains unrealised. FIMI, as conceptualised by the European Union's External Action Service, sits in a broader mosaic of sub-conflict or below-the-level-of-conventional warfare that includes concepts such as hybrid, grey zone, and cognitive warfare. These latest fashions of the security sector build on similar efforts to understand war and warfare in the 1990s: 'soldiers by day, rebels by night' (sobels); war without end or beginning; war among the people—all speak to changes in the relationship of the governed to their governments, and the power of new sub- and trans-state actors to exert a greater impact on their societies, in tandem with the introduction of new weapons technologies and ways of communicating through and around kinetic theatres of war. These lenses nuance conventional understandings of modern warfare assumed to begin with a declaration and end in surrender, stalemate, and/or treaty. That said, not only do we risk mixing apples with oranges, but the question is raised whether *subversion* of the political status quo of a rival nation state doesn't already adequately capture the rationale

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behind manipulating the truth–untruth dilemma as it merges into notions of hybrid warfare.[40]

Perhaps subversion still presents too weak a lens for analysis, since it suggests an active outsider hand or insider agent, complicit or autonomous. And if we need to adjust to the idea of a populace willing to participate in self-imposed fragmenting and self-harm, unperturbed by blurring the lines between fact and fiction, then what are the implications for strategic communications? Counter-disinformation and FIMI are not synonymous with strategic communications, but a subset of broader political communications. The bridging point here is to underline a commitment for strategic communications to speak through evidence-based truth-telling. Short-term untruths tunnel under the foundations of long-term ambitions. Hence there is a clear conversation around veracity that speaks to the spread of deliberate disinformation and unsuspecting misinformation. FIMI, by contrast, describes what states have always chosen to do. Namely, make use of all their assets (diplomatic, information, military, economic) to exploit the weaknesses of a target adversary, while exploiting both clarity and ambiguity in their communications with fellow states. Nevertheless, clear crossovers exist. China's current activities in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the South China Sea, display the employment of this variety of tools and weapons to serve its foreign policy ambitions.

'What Makes the World Hang Together?'

The rhetoric of security is one lens through which to view strategic communications. Another is a political economy understanding of the post-war settlement that balanced out liberal internationalism (foreign) against social welfare (domestic) considerations. The recent crumbling of this trade-off between Western populations and their governments

40 Neville Bolt, 'Is This the Age of Disinformation or the Age of Strategic Communications?', *Defence Strategic Communications* 14 (Spring 2024): 5–25.

since the 1990s, following the shock-and-awe rollback of the state in the stagflationary 1970s and neoliberal 1980s, begs the question whether strategic communications, if it is to be a mouthpiece for liberal politics, can find convincing ways of attracting back voters fearful of the effects of a globalisation that has gone too far. The academic Susan Strange had long since highlighted the fear that 'too much authority for managing the world economy was being pooled at the supranational level and delegated to international bureaucrats'.[41] In parallel with the arms race of the Cold War had been a social welfare race that further hardened the divide between East and West. It pacified electorates increasingly concerned that decision-making power over their lives and the cash in their pockets were moving offshore, and that their own economic prosperity needed to keep step with noble commitments to spending abroad on humanitarian ambitions. Social welfare spending had fended off suspicions that the USSR, for all its tyranny, might still offer working people a better deal in their daily lives.

This dichotomy has moved to the heart of major disruptions witnessed in the *Brexit* and *Make America Great Again* movements. And while strategic communications might rise to the challenge of defining itself in opposition to authoritarianism and totalitarianism in conversations around security, as indeed its rhetoric and actions suggest over Ukraine and China, it will be called to account on how it speaks to fixing the here and now for voters who feel betrayed, alienated, and disenfranchised from what they perceive as an alternative tyranny of Western governing elites. But fixing the immediate should be more than transactional; it should be visionary. And that entails choosing what kind of liberal statement speaks to our times, when many democracies are growing populist in sentiment if not illiberal in policy, even if we discount electoral tyrannies such as Russia which toy with the terminology of elections in a cynical public relations exercise.

41 Peter Trubowitz and Brian Burgoon, *Geopolitics and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 55.

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So far, I have looked at how strategic communications appears on the outside. That is, in the public sphere. But states engage with one another more quietly by institutionalising relations bilaterally, minilaterally, and multilaterally. These are discursive forums where ideological aims are pursued, and not simply places where the best deals are secured. Familiar names like the United Nations, the G7, the World Trade Organization, the IMF, the World Bank, and the Global South, BRICS, Quad, and AUKUS make up a hidden world of international bureaucracy. John Ruggie, a constructivist theorist of international relations, asks: 'What makes the world hang together?'

Ruggie offers a counter to the realist position that everything revolves around power and the eventual use of threatened or punitive force. That said, distant international elites of seemingly unaccountable technocrats, reaching policy decisions out of sight of accountable politics, have come to dominate a superstructure of discursive forums:

> the cognitive basis of institutionalization in epistemic communities; the formation of international regimes as a means to institute cooperative behavior [*sic*]; a 'horizontal' rather than super-subordinate structure of international authority; intersubjective understandings as a major factor in sustaining international regimes; the role of multilateral organizing principles in facilitating peaceful change.[42]

But it's fair to add that these self-same international elites of the unaccountable have become part of the problem—fuelling contemporary dissatisfaction in populist politics and inviting accusations that liberal democracy has already morphed into an oligarchy of vested interests in Western societies.

But Ruggie also urges us to be more discerning. He questions which strand of the liberal tradition applies to change: republican liberalism,

42 John Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 2–3.

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where integration requires a pluralist polity; welfare statism, which must factor in domestic politics; commercial liberalism, the effects of which support domestic economic and social agendas; or sociological liberalism, which connects transnational and intergovernmental institution building and civil society.[43] From free speech to free trade, from open society to open borders, contemporary Europe in the shape of the EU and NATO already contain within their member states and populations challenges to liberal democracy.

Far from the killing fields of eastern Ukraine and the rubble that was once Gaza lies the far from televisual world where international discourses are created. Here ideas are baked into existing architectures of interstate cooperation and through international organisations; relationships evolve in step with the negotiation between universalising ideas and national interests. Economic statecraft, understood as 'the most ambitious form of a nation's economic diplomacy [and] efforts to shape states' behaviour and the international system, primarily through economic means',[44] and commercial diplomacy ply their patient course. National interest and shared responsibilities towards global concerns compete. The rhetoric of strategic communications aimed at publics may be less apparent here, but no less present.

The arrival of President Donald Trump for a second term in the White House in a matter of weeks projected the threat of protectionist policies amid fears of a prolonged trade war. Already Mexico, Canada, China, and Europe have experienced the wrath of tariff policies as Washington seeks to catch most of the world in its net. A hidden consequence will be to force a rethink of strategic communications—in the sense of political or geopolitical communications rooted now in libertarianism rather than liberalism—if indeed the concept of strategic communications is to survive as a normative project.

43 Ibid., p. 5.

44 *UK Economic Diplomacy in the 21st Century*, LSE Diplomacy Commission Final Report (London: LSE, 2021), p. 11.

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What is at stake is more broadly the international order established by the US since the 1940s. Disruption to this would be historic. And not surprisingly, journalists are beginning their first drafts of history, casting Trump as the great disrupter, as a revolutionary intent on resetting a new world order—despite the already concerted efforts by Presidents Putin and Xi to impose their own version of a new world order to replace what they see as one established to favour the West, particularly the US. They need not try too hard; the journalist Gideon Rachman predicts a 'new great power bargain: Trump's transactional nature, his determination to avoid war and his contempt for democratic allies leads the US to strike a new grand bargain with Russia and China'.[45]

If economic nationalism and isolationism in foreign policy are to characterise the coming era, then liberal values risk being less the stuff of international norms than tradeable chips in a transactional game of geopolitics—assuming they even survive the attention of these three powerful leaders. And the story of international relations with which we are familiar may yet take on an unfamiliar appearance. That story in which, lest we forget, strategic communications is grounded.

No reminder is needed of the centrality of economic policy to geopolitical security. Pointing to the birth of today's economic world order, Ben Steil recalls the mid 1940s as the apex of US economic policy in the twentieth century. The 1944 Bretton Woods project was 'grounded in the belief, born of the Depression and World War II, that economic instability led to currency wars, trade wars, and ultimately military wars. […] But the scheme took as its starting point political stability, something lacking in the chaotic aftermath of the war.'[46] Should commentators like Rachman prove right, then an emerging world order may replace an existing international order of sovereign states built on the rule of law and respect for global institutions; parts may be stripped out to become chips for a new bargaining exchange.

45 Gideon Rachman, 'The Birth of a New World Order', *Financial Times*, 28 December 2024, p. 7.

46 Ben Steil, *The Marshall Plan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 11.

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The Future Is More Than *What Happens Next*

The future is uncertain. And we can only guess at how this emerging field of political communications will fare in the coming years, as it addresses the long-term problem of integrating into its debates seemingly intractable themes of mass migration by economic aspirants and war-displaced, and consequent populist xenophobia; of climate change in its rainbow of interrelated ecological, economic, and security challenges; of triangulated conflict theatres in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Taiwan; and of global trade competition and threats to the rule of international law. And then there's AI … a whole other set of imponderables. Together they offer a veritable cauldron of threats and vulnerabilities. Whether strategic communications should be constrained in its scope of ambition by threat rather than promise is a question which requires deeper interrogation as twenty-first-century discourses become increasingly sucked into a vortex of securitisation.

Is the glass half-full or half-empty for strategic communications? Half-full in the sense that, as a governance model, democracy is experiencing a phase of self-reflection and self-doubt that can lead to self-renewal; half-empty insofar as it turns out actually to be in retreat, no longer able to fulfil the expectations of the post-1945 social and economic promises made by Western governments—the ever-rising curve of economic prosperity.

How will strategic communications develop as a young field of praxis where its scholarship is so far counted in years, barely decades, and where its theoretical foundations remain underexplored? The year 1919 saw the introduction of the study of international relations or international studies to the university curriculum, albeit political practice preceded it by millennia. Self-reflexive fields of intellectual engagement require time and patience to evolve robust theory-building and to expose their application to real-world events. At the same time, contributing fields to an emerging discipline—in this case, disinformation and

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counter-disinformation—it may be anticipated, will follow divergent paths on the American and European continents following the closure of *inter alia* the Global Engagement Center, Washington's counter-disinformation hub. Established under President Barack Obama to thwart foreign influence, it now stands accused of censorship and media manipulation by a new administration. A broader rejection of a liberal worldview that has seen foreign aid funding and civil society capacity-building frozen, with little chance of renewal during this Trump Administration, has sent shock waves through the world's humanitarian communities.

Resort to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* risks overuse these days. It's nevertheless worth recalling: '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.' Somehow it has today's ring of truth about it. On the one hand, we speak of the return of Great Power politics. Set against that, sovereignty, claims Zygmunt Bauman, has exceeded the reach of the triune of territory, nation, and state. It is 'so to speak, unanchored and free-floating'.[47] Which only deepens the dilemma. Anchored in a value system that cherishes individual freedoms understood as liberal and democratic, strategic communications must now navigate a path between the Scylla of libertarian passions and Charybdis of illiberal governance in the West. Meanwhile, from the outside an encroaching alternative order is in the ascendant, underpinned by authoritarian self-belief with its Hobbesian code of survival of the fittest. All of which leads us to a moment of introspection: strategic communications is born of our time, and for our time, but finds itself unsure of its role in a long-term future which it so dearly prizes but struggles to read.

47 Zygmunt Bauman, '*Times of Interregnum', Ethics & Global Politics* 5 № 1 (2012): 49–56.

State of Disrepair: Technological Ambition, Global Fragmentation, and the End of the Postwar Order

A Review Essay by Andrew Cheatham

The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West
Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska. New York: Penguin Press, 2025.

The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West.
Amitav Acharya. New York: Basic Books, 2025.

Keywords—*artificial intelligence (AI), dual-use technologies, global governance, public-private partnerships, military-industrial complex, Western strategic decline, strategic communications, strategic communication*

About the Author
Andrew Cheatham has led work on disruptive technologies and conflict at the United States Institute of Peace and served with the United Nations in New York, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, as well as with the African Union in Somalia. His research explores the implications of AI, strategic communications, and institutional resilience amid a rapidly fragmenting global order.

This essay reflects on two distinct but deeply intertwined books: *The Technological Republic* by Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska[1] and *The Once and Future World Order* by Amitav Acharya.[2]

1 Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska, *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West* (New York: Penguin, 2025).

2 Amitav, Acharya, *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2025).

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Each provides a unique lens through which to examine the future. While Karp and Zamiska offer a bold and unapologetically self-interested vision of American resurgence through private-sector technological supremacy, Acharya presents a historical and philosophical account of how global order has never been exclusively Western—and why a new, more pluralistic world may now be emerging. These two publications frame the central tension of this essay: are we heading towards a world of renewed Western-led dominance shaped by Silicon Valley's techno-capitalist ambitions, or into a more uncertain and complex reality marked by civilisational diversity, structural fragmentation, and existential threats?

To explore this, the essay is organised into two parts. Part 1, on America's 'golden age', uses *The Technological Republic* as a launching point to analyse the belief among US defence and tech elites that innovation, deregulation, and public–private integration will secure long-term American strategic dominance. Part 2 offers a different perspective, tracing the global shift towards a 'multiplex' order and highlighting the deeper crises—ontological, epistemic, and institutional—that complicate any hope of global stability through power politics alone.

Part 1: America's 'Golden Age'— The Views from Silicon Valley and Washington

In April 2025 President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth unveiled plans for an unprecedented $ 1 trillion defence budget—an extraordinary expansion of US military spending that far exceeds the 2025 $ 892 billion allocation.[3] Positioned as a bold effort to rebuild American military might, the announcement included promises to cut tens of thousands of civilian defence jobs and consolidate bases to 'streamline' the Department of Defense. It reflects a political posture of accelerated armament without corresponding investment in

3 Paul McLeary, Joe Gould, and Connor O'Brien, 'Trump, Hegseth Promise Record $1 Trillion Pentagon Budget', *Politico*, 7 April 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/07/hegseth-trump-1-trillion-defense-budget-00007147.

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the institutions, diplomacy, or multilateral mechanisms necessary to preserve peace. As international organisations face funding shortfalls, arms control agreements erode, and civil governance weakens under political strain, the US appears to be charting a course of military buildup while simultaneously dismantling the very infrastructure that has underpinned global stability since 1945. This comes at a moment when tech billionaires like Elon Musk—now deeply entwined in defence contracting—have never been more influential in shaping the trajectory of government action, steering national priorities towards private-sector-driven militarisation while the architecture for peace is defunded, discredited, or ignored.

Enter *The Technological Republic*. Written by Palantir CEO Alexander Karp and head of corporate affairs Nicholas Zamiska, it offers a selective account that blends US political and institutional history, cultural criticism, and defence strategy into a bold programme for the military-industrial complex. The book's premise is embedded in the long arc of US innovation—highlighting the foundations of our digital age that started with the 1940s government-led investment in aerospace, pharmaceuticals, and the early computational sciences. The authors hark back to a time when titans of science and engineering, like Einstein and Oppenheimer, were widely revered not for any wealth they acquired but for their scientific contributions to national projects. Drawing on partial truths, this Palantir-promotional book amplifies real concerns about national disunity, technological complacency, and geopolitical threats—but does so through a deeply dangerous rhetorical framework that, much like the mis- and disinformation frequently spread by their close tech ally Elon Musk, offers incomplete diagnoses and solutions that range from inadequate to recklessly self-serving, advancing a model of state capture that endangers democratic governance and public trust.

It is no coincidence that this book came at the same time that Palantir created a consortium with Anduril, OpenAI, SpaceX, and others to position Silicon Valley and the tech sector to compete for a major share

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of US government defence contracts.[4] Ultimately, Karp and Zamiska are calling for a Manhattan Project 2025—one led not by government, but by tech companies, with Palantir positioned firmly at the helm. One of the most troubling parts of the book is its invocation of Einstein's 1939 letter to President Roosevelt urging the exploration of atomic weapons. The authors present it as a historical parallel to their call for immediate AI–military integration. But they entirely omit Einstein's later anguished regret. In 1947 he said: 'Had I known that the Germans would not succeed in developing an atomic bomb, I would have done nothing for the bomb.'[5] He spent the rest of his life campaigning for nuclear disarmament and considered the letter to Roosevelt the 'one great mistake' of his life.[6] To invoke Einstein without acknowledging this moral reckoning—especially after the widespread public re-examination sparked by the 2023 film *Oppenheimer*—is intellectually dishonest and strategically reckless.

While never using the term 'woke', the authors are highly critical of the culture of the tech industry, particularly engineers at leading firms like Google, whom they accuse of abandoning any sense of civic duty or national purpose by refusing to support military applications of artificial intelligence. Yet their critique extends just as sharply to the government itself—especially what they broadly label the 'bureaucracy'. They portray government procurement processes as inefficient, slow-moving, and structurally incapable of supporting the kind of agile, software-driven innovation they claim modern warfare demands. In doing so, they draw a direct line between outdated defence acquisition systems and national security vulnerabilities, targeting the traditional military-industrial complex as a bloated relic of a bygone era. While they criticise both old institutions and hesitant tech firms, the subtext of the book is unmistakable: Palantir—lean, mission driven, and already deeply

4 Sam Williams, 'Palantir and Anduril Join Forces with Tech Groups to Bid for Pentagon Contracts', *Financial Times*, 8 April 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/6cfdfe2b-6872-4963-bde8-dc6c43be5093.

5 Deborah Nicholls-Lee, '"It Was the One Great Mistake in My Life": The Letter from Einstein That Ushered in the Age of the Atomic Bomb', *BBC*, 6 August 2024, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240801-it-was-the-one-great-mistake-in-my-life-the-letter-from-einstein-that-ushered-in-the-age-of-the-atomic-bomb.

6 Ibid.

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embedded in defence—is offered as the ideal replacement, an emergent tech–military complex in its own right.

There is no question that the US military must urgently invest in emerging technologies and reform its policies to enable more agile development, acquisition, and deployment to remain prepared for the conflicts of the future. China's integration of its large language model DeepSeek directly into People's Liberation Army systems signals a deeply concerning trend: US adversaries are rapidly embedding dual-use AI into their national defence architectures.[7] This development should prompt urgent action from the US government to deepen collaboration with the technology sector, ensuring a clear understanding of the military potential of cutting-edge AI systems and maintaining strategic competitiveness in an accelerating global arms race. Additionally, Ukraine's battlefield innovations, as Kateryna Bondar highlights, offer lessons on the current limitations of US development practices, particularly the gap between laboratory testing and operational performance under combat conditions.[8] She recommends, among other things, establishing tighter feedback loops between frontline operators (including US allies) and manufacturers, enhancing AI model resilience through battlefield exposure.[9]

Karp and Zamiska are arguing, however, for these investments and reforms to be based on a purely private-sector rationale—one that prioritises profit maximisation and perpetual growth. It is most naturally aligned with a hyperrealist paradigm in international politics which views global affairs primarily through the lens of power competition and self-interest among states. However, this framework fails to grasp the foundations of the stability that we enjoy today, which depends not on coercive enforcement but on voluntary cooperation, shared norms, and the cultivation of soft power rooted in ethics, human dignity, and

7 Alisha Rahaman Sarkar, 'China Reportedly Using DeepSeek AI Model to Support Its Military', *The Independent*, 25 March 2025, https://www.the-independent.com/asia/china/deepseek-ai-chinese-military-pla-hospitals-b2720954.html.

8 Kateryna Bondar, 'Closing the Loop: Enhancing U.S. Drone Capabilities through Real-World Testing', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 21 August 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/closing-loop-enhancing-us-drone-capabilities-through-real-world-testing.

9 Ibid.

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the legitimacy of public institutions and civil society. The authors fail to grasp that a robust defence policy must be accompanied by diplomacy, arms control, and international law. Without these components, a purely militarised AI strategy risks spiralling into an uncontrolled arms race.

So many of the authors' claims of working for the national interest ring hollow, given their consistent exaltation of the very market forces and private dominance that have undercut public governance for decades. The triumphalism around deterrence strategies ignores the fragile international architecture that has kept the post-1945 peace: the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), international financial institutions, arms control treaties, non-proliferation agreements, and international humanitarian and human rights regimes. These structures—now under siege—are scarcely mentioned. As a result, *The Technological Republic* often feels like a rhetorical inversion of the public–private model it champions. Rather than calling for the state to guide tech development for the public good, it suggests that the tech industry—already flush with contracts, data, and unchecked power—should lead the state. This is a dangerous inversion.

The authors' disdain for 'bureaucrats' and their caricature of the public sector as lethargic and obstructive undermine the very possibility of genuine public–private collaboration. What is needed is humility—an understanding that, while engineers may design systems, only public debate channelled through democratic institutions can determine the legitimate ends towards which those systems should be directed.

Ultimately the book reflects the limitations of its authors. As brilliant as they may be in leading a successful company, they are not equipped to guide a national conversation about democratic governance, global stability, or ethical innovation. Their hubris is emblematic of a broader trend in which those who control the infrastructure of the digital age mistake technical competence for strategic wisdom. In this sense *The Technological Republic* is less a blueprint for a national revival than a cautionary tale about the dangers of letting the tail wag the dog.

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The Optimistic View

Unfortunately the assertive private-sector-led vision of American power emanating from the tech sector is fully mirrored by the political leadership of the Trump Administration. As outlined in *Four Internets* by Kieron O'Hara and Wendy Hall, this aligns with the Washington–Silicon Valley model of the cyber world. It champions a profit-driven and innovation-first approach to cyberspace, in which corporate leadership—not public priorities—drives technological development.[10]

This model assumes that unleashing market forces and minimising state intervention will optimise innovation, economic growth, and US geopolitical dominance. It is a perspective that aligns with an optimistic belief that a new 'golden age'[11] of American power is on the horizon—one in which the US will outpace geopolitical rivals through relentless technological acceleration, deregulation, and the deepening entanglement of the private sector with national security interests.

The Trump Administration and tech tycoons share the optimistic—and deeply supercilious—belief that the US can double down on power politics and maintain a zero-sum 'winning' position in an era of renewed great power competition. They feel the US enjoys strategic security through buffers from two oceans, possesses vast natural resources, and benefits from a highly innovative and entrepreneurial population that continually drives technological and economic growth. As tech investor billionaire Marc Andreessen has noted on the popular Lex Fridman podcast, despite global turmoil brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has continued to grow while Germany, the United Kingdom, and Canada have stagnated or even declined.[12] He points out

10 Kieron O'Hara and Wendy Hall, *Four Internets: Data, Geopolitics, and the Governance of Cyberspace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

11 Matt Weidinger, 'What Does Trump Mean by Promises of a "Golden Age"?', *American Enterprise Institute*, 6 February 2025, https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/what-does-trump-mean-by-promises-of-a-golden-age.

12 Marc Andreessen, interview by Lex Fridman, 'Transcript for Marc Andreessen: Trump, Power, Tech, AI, Immigration & Future of America; Lex Fridman Podcast #458', *Lex Fridman Podcast*, 3 February 2025, https://lexfridman.com/marc-andreessen-2-transcript/.

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that America's economic resilience is a matter not just of policy but also of structural advantages, including abundant energy resources—often rediscovered just when scarcity seems imminent—and a deep culture of innovation that attracts the world's best minds. Moreover, he sees the country as uniquely positioned for what he calls 'the roaring 20s', a period of explosive growth driven by technology, energy independence, and renewed industrial capacity.

Andreessen champions the new Trump Administration's framing of the coming 'golden age', one in which America will reassert its dominance by shedding regulatory constraints, supercharging technological development, and adopting a pro-growth, pro-energy stance. He describes a 'giant vibe shift' in Silicon Valley and across the broader economy, with industries shaking off a decade of stagnation and moving rapidly towards ambitious expansion. He points to the thawing of previously restrictive corporate policies and a newfound willingness among businesses and investors to take risks, spurred by a belief that the government will no longer act as an impediment to technological progress. His perspective reflects the growing influence of a new class of tech billionaires who, increasingly embedded in US policymaking (and even executive governance), see unregulated technological acceleration as the key to maintaining American dominance.

When applying this confident and optimistic analysis to the fracturing geopolitical realities, Peter Zeihan's insights are supportive. In *Disunited Nations* he argues that the US is well positioned for the coming global restructuring.[13] He posits that, as globalisation fractures and regional spheres of influence re-emerge, America—thanks to its geographic insulation, self-sufficiency in food and energy, and strong demographic trends—will not only withstand the turbulence but emerge as a net beneficiary. While other nations struggle to maintain supply chains and secure energy resources, the US will have the flexibility to dictate terms in the Western hemisphere and its broader bilateral engagements, benefiting from a more self-reliant and strategically independent international order.

13 Peter Zeihan, *Disunited Nations: The Scramble for Power in an Ungoverned World* (New York: Harper Business, 2020).

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Karp and Zamiska must be pleased that the optimistic vision of Zeihan and Andreessen is now merging with the priorities of US national security, leading to deepened isolationism, 'sovereignty on steroids',[14] and an unprecedented alignment between the tech industry and the military-industrial complex.[15] The era of sceptical engagement between technology firms and the national security establishment is giving way to a new ethos: one of full-speed acceleration, minimal oversight, and aggressive expansion into military applications.

US Vice President J.D. Vance recently lauded President Trump's second-term approach as 'all gas, no brakes',[16] emphasising an aggressive push to fulfil his agenda for the 'golden age'. This attitude extends beyond economic policy and into the evolving tech–military–industrial alliance, where Silicon Valley, the defence sector, and policymakers are increasingly working in concert to accelerate the development of new weaponry and dual-use technologies—innovations that serve both civilian and military applications. From autonomous systems and AI-driven capabilities to next-generation space and cyberwarfare technologies, this new alignment reflects how today's defence strategy actively integrates a sparsely regulated private sector to maintain strategic edge for the United States.

Throughout President Trump's second term, Silicon Valley's integration with the US defence sector is set to accelerate, driven by perceptions of great power competition, economic incentives, and the growing battlefield significance of new commercial technologies.[17] Traditionally wary of defence contracts, tech firms are now actively engaging with the Pentagon, recognising the strategic and financial value of military

14 Stewart Patrick, 'Trump Has Launched a Second American Revolution: This Time, It's against the World', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 March 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/trump-foreign-policy-second-american-revolution-nato-un?lang=en.

15 William D. Hartung and Benjamin Freeman, 'The Military Industrial Complex Is More Powerful Than Ever', *The Nation*, 9 May 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/world/military-industrial-complex-defense/.

16 Alex Gangitano, 'Vance Lauds Trump's Second Term Approach: "All Gas, No Brakes"', *The Hill*, 29 January 2025, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5115248-vance-trump-all-gas-no-brakes.

17 Katja Bego, 'Silicon Valley's National Security Pivot Will Only Accelerate under the New Trump Administration', *Chatham House*, 29 November 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/11/silicon-valleys-national-security-pivot-will-only-accelerate-under-new-trump-administration.

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partnerships. Companies like Amazon, Anthropic, and Palantir are developing AI solutions for defence and intelligence, while OpenAI and Anduril Industries are enhancing air defence systems.[18] Defence-focused start-ups, such as Castelion Corporation—a hypersonic weapons firm founded by former SpaceX employees—are securing substantial investments, reflecting a broader shift in venture capital towards national security applications.[19] This pivot is reinforced by major policy shifts, including the plans set out in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, which aims to streamline defence procurement, ensuring rapid adoption of cutting-edge technologies.[20]

To stay ahead of adversaries, the Department of Defense has expanded its investments in dual-use technology through targeted funding and partnerships. Programmes like the National Security Innovation Capital (NSIC) are designed to stimulate private-sector development of hardware technologies that have both commercial and military applications.[21] NSIC, in particular, aims to prevent adversaries like China from monopolising critical tech supply chains by funding US-based start-ups in AI hardware, quantum computing, and space-based technologies. At the same time the newly established Defense Business Accelerator, led by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Industrial Base Policy, has expedited partnerships between the Pentagon and private companies, rapidly selecting firms to develop next-generation military applications, including AI-driven cybersecurity tools and drone warfare capabilities.[22] These initiatives mark a departure from traditional military procurement,

18 Hayden Field, 'OpenAI Partners with Defense Company Anduril'. *CNBC*, 4 December 2024, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/12/04/openai-partners-with-defense-company-anduril.html.

19 Doug Cameron, 'Startup Castelion Raises $100 Million for Hypersonic Strike Weapons', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 January 2024, https://www.wsj.com/tech/startup-castelion-raises-100-million-for-hypersonic-strike-weapons-2362e7e4.

20 Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington, DC: Project 2025, 2025), https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

21 National Security Innovation Capital (NSIC), U.S. Department of Defense, https://www.nsic.mil [accessed 5 February 2025].

22 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, 'DoD's Defense Business Accelerator Speeds Selection, Funding, and Commercialization of Dual-use Technologies', U.S. Department of Defense, 7 June 2024, https://www.acq.osd.mil/news/archive/2024/DODs-Defense-Business-Accelerator-Speeds-Selection.html.

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embracing the speed and dynamism of the private tech sector to outpace geopolitical rivals.

On 23 January 2025 President Trump signed Executive Order 14179, titled 'Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence', which revokes President Biden's Executive Order 14110, 'The Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence', and further accentuates this new trajectory. The previous executive order established regulations to monitor and control dual-use AI technologies, particularly those that could contribute to the development of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons. With its rollback, the protections against the militarisation of AI and other advanced technologies are being stripped away, particularly at a time when bio- and chemical threats are becoming increasingly sophisticated and more widely accessible.

With policymakers, tech billionaires, and defence leaders now operating in lockstep, the boundaries between industry, national security, and technological dominance have all but dissolved. The guiding principle is no longer restraint, but speed. In this new landscape, military supremacy in the US will not just be determined by generals and policymakers but by the increasingly powerful technology industry, whose innovations will shape the battlefield of the future as much as—if not more than—traditional military strategy.

Part 2: A World in Trouble—The Multiplex and the Metacrisis

The 'all gas, no brakes' philosophy of some tech leaders and the Trump Administration is underpinned by an assumption of prosperity through technological supremacy and a realist notion of geopolitical dominance that overlooks the complex and volatile realities of the modern world. In reality the US is in retreat from its role as a global leader. Many of its

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policymakers are deeply intertwined with a narrative of great power competition, and the details of a trilateral strategic and economic rivalry with China and Russia. The situation, however, was more accurately framed by Fareed Zakaria in 2008, when he characterised this century's shifts in geopolitics as a new struggle between 'the West' and 'the Rest'.[23] This broader aperture allows for important considerations of the new multipolar order, which includes a fracturing Western alliance alongside an expanded BRICS+ grouping of emerging non-Western[24] powers and the fluctuating role of many postcolonial developing nations, which are often referred to as the Global South.[25]

BRICS is a club founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa which now includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia. More than thirty countries have formally applied to join the bloc or shown interest in doing so, including Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, NATO member Turkey, major oil producer Algeria, and Bangladesh, the eighth most populous country globally. These influential states wield significant economic, strategic, and ideological influence over many in the Global South.

Already, BRICS nations, particularly China and India, have significantly mitigated the impact of Western sanctions on Russia by increasing trade in energy, commodities, and technology, with India ramping up purchases of Russian oil at discounted prices and China deepening financial and industrial ties. If US sanctions tighten further, the risk of BRICS accelerating the development of an alternative banking and payment system—reducing reliance on the dollar—should not be dismissed, as initiatives like the BRICS Cross-Border Payments Initiative and local

23 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

24 The terms 'non-Western' or 'Western' are used here as terms of art, recognising that they are imperfect and often contested. 'The West' generally refers to a group of countries historically associated with Western Europe and its cultural offshoots, characterised broadly by inclusive governance, protection of individual rights, capitalist economies, and cultural values rooted in the Enlightenment, Christianity, and Greco-Roman traditions.

25 The term 'Global South' is employed here as a term of art, acknowledging its contested nature. The 'Global South' typically refers to countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania that are often associated with histories of colonialism, underdevelopment, or marginalisation in global economic and political systems.

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currency trade agreements gain traction.[26] As the recent shockwaves from China's DeepSeek AI 'Sputnik moment' have shown,[27] the West must get over its hubris and assumptions of inherent superiority over emerging economies and developing nations—the hungry underdog is often the most determined, and underestimating it is a mistake.

In *The Once and Future World Order*, Acharya offers a sweeping corrective to the Western-centric narrative of international order. Taking on intellectual figures like Fareed Zakaria, Henry Kissinger, Niall Ferguson, Francis Fukuyama, Thomas Friedman, and Richard Haas, Acharya attempts to dispel the common anxiety that the decline of the West will necessarily lead to global chaos and decline. Instead, he provides a nuanced historical survey of ancient civilisations—from Mesopotamia to the Mali Empire—to argue that the principles of diplomacy, humanitarian law, sovereignty, and peace are not Western inventions, but rather global legacies.

To support his argument Acharya provides a wide-ranging survey of historical precedents from non-Western civilisations that illustrate long-standing traditions of international order and ethical governance. The Treaty of Kadesh, signed in 1259 BCE between the Egyptian and Hittite empires, is considered the world's first known international peace treaty. The Manden Charter, proclaimed in the thirteenth century CE by the Mali Empire under Sundiata Keita, stands as one of the earliest articulations of human rights, emphasising dignity, environmental stewardship, and justice. Chinese traditions like *tianxia* advanced a vision of global order in which harmony, reciprocity, and shared cultural norms took precedence over coercive power, while Indian concepts such as *dharma-yuddha* laid the foundations for early principles of just war—emphasising non-aggression, humane treatment of combatants, and restraint in warfare. These traditions collectively reveal that norms

26 Evan Freidin, 'BRICS Pay as a Challenge to SWIFT Network', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 13 November 2024, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/brics-pay-challenge-swift-network.

27 John Cassidy, 'Is DeepSeek China's Sputnik Moment?', *New Yorker*, 3 February 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-financial-page/is-deepseek-chinas-sputnik-moment.

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of peace, diplomacy, and ethical governance are not Western inventions, but the result of diverse civilisational experiences.

Acharya's central argument is that the world is transitioning to a 'multiplex' order—no longer unipolar, bipolar, or even multipolar, but made up of many overlapping spheres of power, values, and governance models. He anticipates that no hegemon will emerge in the coming era. Instead, middle powers like Brazil, Nigeria, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as regional blocs and civil society networks, will increasingly shape global rules and norms. The future will be more complex, pluralistic, and decentralised than anything we have seen before. And while Acharya sees this not as a threat but an opportunity, this vision is far from reassuring.

The core weakness in Acharya's hopeful view lies not in its historical depth, which is extraordinary, but in its underestimation of the unprecedented scale of modern risk. The problem is not that the West is declining or that non-Western powers are rising. The problem is that nothing coherent is rising to take the place of the post-1945 global order—an order forged not just by US power, but by multilateral institutions, legal frameworks, and hard-won norms of disarmament, development, and diplomacy. Acharya's rich tour of past civilisations is important, but it glosses over the existential stakes of a world defined by nuclear weapons, AI-enabled warfare, climate collapse, and institutional decay.

Despite Acharya's insistence that the future need not be Western, he fails to grapple with a far more urgent question: what happens when the world becomes leaderless, normless, and defenceless against extinction-level risks? His vision of a decentralised order of hybrid regimes, cultural pluralism, and economic multipolarity may be accurate, but it does little to address the urgency of global coordination in an era of irreversible tipping points. The multiplex world described in *The Once and Future World Order* lacks any coherent framework for disarmament, governance of emerging technologies, or collective security.

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Moreover, there is a troubling silence in Acharya's treatment of gender, exclusion, and internal violence. While rightly criticising Western domination and exceptionalism, which no doubt has also been internally violent and sexist, he largely sidesteps the patriarchal and hierarchical systems embedded in many of the civilisations he celebrates. The rights and freedoms of women—half the global population—are almost entirely absent from his analysis. This omission is stark and significant. It mirrors a broader pattern of ignoring the internal injustices that can plague even the most diplomatically sophisticated societies.

Still, Acharya is correct to highlight the structural transformations under way. We are indeed entering a new era where US cultural dominance has waned, multilateralism is collapsing, and the geopolitical arena is crowded with influential new players. But this is not a stable configuration. In a world where the US abandons its commitments and no one else steps in, chaos—not balance—fills the void. This is not about whether the future is Western or non-Western. It is about whether we will have any system at all capable of restraining war, guiding technology, or preserving the planet.

If Acharya is suggesting that the future of global cooperation must emerge from a new, likely non-Western-led coalition, then I agree—particularly given the absence of coherent Western leadership across all spheres of the current global order. Even if such a system is as diffuse and flexible as he envisions, it must be grounded in a clear-eyed understanding—and, frankly, a sobering fear—of the catastrophic human suffering that could result from systemic breakdown. The risks of economic collapse, pervasive violence, and even nuclear war between divided powers are not hypothetical—they are looming possibilities. This new order must be led by non-Western and developing nations, not only because they draw from great civilisational traditions, but because they understand pain. These are nations that have lived through colonisation, war, and systemic exclusion, and they may have the moral clarity needed to reanimate a global consensus.

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This understanding of suffering was also known to the West after the devastation of the two world wars, and it was precisely that trauma that motivated the creation of the post-1945 order. That system, though deeply flawed, aimed to prevent another world war and to link the fates of nations through a fragile but vital fabric of law, development, and diplomacy. It succeeded not because it was Western, but because it was global, and it responded to unprecedented risk. That level of modern coordination has no parallel in any Western or non-Western civilisations before 1945. Now, with even more threats looming, this system must not be abandoned; it must be improved.

Acharya does not seem to grasp how radically different our present moment is. Nuclear weapons have existed for nearly eight decades, but they have not been used in conflict since the unprecedented devastation and human tragedy unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. That stability was not inevitable—it was constructed. Today we face not only the legacy of nuclear weapons—now vastly more powerful with the advent of hydrogen bombs and decades of technological refinement—but also entirely new forms of power and risk: AI, biotechnology, information warfare, and the reshaping of human behaviour and cognition by digital platforms. The cyber world is not just a new space—it is a new layer of reality that distorts time, erodes trust, and manipulates identity. It is the game changer that Acharya's otherwise brilliant history does not yet comprehend.

Acharya is right to envision a more inclusive, decentralised order. But inclusivity and decentralisation, while necessary, are not sufficient. What is urgently needed is a new architecture of global cooperation—a framework that blends the lessons of the past with the institutional innovation required for the future. That might involve regional governance bodies, networked multilateralism, and radically reimagined institutions, including a revitalised (or reinvented) UN. But none of this can succeed unless it is backed by the kind of collective urgency that defined the post-WWII era. Without it, the multiplex will become a shattered mirror—reflecting fragments of a world unable to govern itself in the face of collapse.

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If the United States, and Western nations more broadly, hopes to play a meaningful role in shaping the future of global stability, it must confront with introspection and humility the real existential risks facing the world. This requires recognising the limits of the frameworks that have long defined modern Western civilisation—secular materialism, reductionist science, and the pursuit of perpetual progress and capital growth—and complementing them with deeper, more holistic approaches. Many of the supporting principles can be found in contemporary non-Western societies and within the enduring legacies of wisdom that Acharya artfully identifies and reminds readers of—traditions rooted in balance, restraint, collective responsibility, and ethical governance. To begin, Western societies must first see the nature and complexity of the threats they face—and clearly enough to motivate the kind of deep societal change this moment demands.

The Disruptive Technology Polycrisis

Both *The Technological Republic* and *The Once and Future World Order*, despite their starkly different worldviews, ultimately fail to grasp the true scale and nature of the crisis before us. Karp and Zamiska offer a hyperrealist, private-sector-driven vision that reduces complex geopolitical, ethical, and existential challenges to problems of innovation speed and procurement efficiency, sidestepping the deeper risks of an ungoverned AI arms race and the erosion of democratic legitimacy. Acharya, by contrast, provides a rich historical narrative of civilisational diversity and the promise of a more inclusive, multipolar world order—but underestimates the unique systemic threats of our time: climate collapse, nuclear instability, digital fragmentation, and the existential consequences of exponential technologies. Both books, in their own ways, misread the moment. They offer either a misplaced confidence in technological dominance or an overly optimistic belief in decentralised resilience—when what is needed is a sober reckoning with the unprecedented fragility of our planetary systems, the collapse

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of shared meaning, and the urgent need for ethical, institutional, and civilisational transformation.

A different perspective is offered by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, which, on 28 January 2025, set the Doomsday Clock to 89 seconds to midnight—the closest it has ever been to global catastrophe.[28] In their statement of caution the scientists hope that 'leaders will recognize the world's existential predicament and take bold action to reduce the threats posed by nuclear weapons, climate change, and the potential misuse of biological science and a variety of emerging technologies'.

This warning is not an isolated concern; it is a reflection of a larger reality beyond US shores. The entire world is living amid what has been best described as multiple 'polycrises', a term coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin.[29] A polycrisis is a complex situation where multiple interconnected crises converge and amplify each other, resulting in a predicament that is difficult to manage or resolve. These polycrises—geopolitical conflict, economic fragility, environmental degradation, societal fragmentation, and technological disruption—are mutually reinforcing and exacerbating each other in unpredictable ways.

Moreover, these polycrises that the world faces are embedded within a larger 'Metacrisis', a term popularised by Daniel Schmachtenberger to describe the deeper structural failures of human civilisation.[30] Unlike discrete crises that arise from external events, the Metacrisis is fundamentally ontological, epistemic, psychological, sociological, and governance related, shaping how societies perceive, respond to, or even recognise the crises unfolding around them.

Among these entwined polycrises, the rapid acceleration of disruptive technologies stands apart. It is not merely another challenge alongside

28 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 'Closer than Ever: It Is Now 89 Seconds to Midnight', https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/2025-statement/ [accessed 4 February 2025].

29 Edgar Morin, *Terre-Patrie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993).

30 Daniel Schmachtenberger, 'The Metacrisis with Daniel Schmachtenberger, Part 1: Green Pill #26', *Civilization Emerging*, https://civilizationemerging.com/media/the-metacrisis-with-daniel-schmachtenberger-part-1/ [accessed 5 February 2025].

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climate change, nuclear instability, or social fragmentation—it is a cross-cutting force multiplier[31] that is capable of exacerbating all other challenges at an unprecedented pace and scale. Within tech, AI is the ultimate force multiplier, evolving far faster than the world's ability to regulate or even comprehend the implications.

The unique risk of technology within is that it is not simply an outcome—it is a driving force of further destabilisation. In their book *The Coming Wave*, Mustafa Suleyman**,** CEO of Microsoft AI, and writer Michael Bhaskar explain the power of the convergence of advanced technologies, particularly those that merge digital 'bits', the realm of data processing, with physical 'atoms', the realm of manipulating our environment across space and time.[32] Historically, technological progress, starting with things like fire and horsepower, focused on the latter. However, in the mid twentieth century there was a shift towards higher abstraction and a recognition that 'information', encoded in fundamental particles, binary formats, or DNA, is a core property of the universe. This led to parallel revolutions in computer science and genetics, producing technologies like smartphones and genetically modified crops.

Suleyman argues that new developments uniting the control of big data using AI, cyber and information warfare technologies, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and robotics have created new threats and a new conflict paradigm. Traditional distinctions between war and peace, combatants and civilians, and physical and digital security will blur. Despite the destabilising effects of previous technological revolutions, Suleyman believes the scale, speed, and nature of changes from merging bits and atoms will be qualitatively different.

Dario Amodei, CEO of the Amazon-funded AI outfit Anthropic, argues that AI technology is potentially reaching concerning capabilities very

31 LII Team, 'Technology as a Force Multiplier', *LII News*, Cornell Law School, 5 February 2024, https://blog.law.cornell.edu/blog/2024/02/05/technology-as-a-force-multiplier/.

32 Mustafa Suleyman and Michael Bhaskar, *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-First Century's Greatest Dilemma* (New York: Crown, 2023).

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soon.[33] He cites 'scaling laws' which suggest AI capabilities increase exponentially, with each injection of capital increasing computational resources and the size and quality of datasets.

On the basis of these assumptions, Amodei outlines Anthropic's 'Artificial Intelligence Safety Levels' (ASLs). He assesses that ASL 3, where AI systems pose substantial bioweapon and cyber threats, could be reached as early as this year or next. ASL 4, involving AI systems significantly enhancing state actors' offensive capabilities and potentially replicating autonomously, could be achieved between 2025 and 2028. Amodei emphasises the geopolitical implications, expressing concern about AI power concentration in authoritarian regimes and its potential to exacerbate global instability. He stresses the need for democratic countries to lead AI development and for international cooperation in governance and responsible deployment.

As AI becomes more powerful and accessible, the distinctions between civilian and military applications blur, raising the spectre of autonomous weapon systems, AI-generated cyberattacks, and synthetic bioweapons that could be deployed with minimal human intervention. The risks posed by these technologies extend beyond their immediate destructive potential—they destabilise the geopolitical order itself, shifting power away from traditional nation states and into the hands of private tech actors, rogue states, and decentralised entities.

These threats demand robust international coordination, but they are emerging at a moment of profound institutional weakness, driven by cultural and political crises in Western nations, particularly the United States. The international order, once governed by Western-led institutions—primarily in the UN system, and the World Bank—is now fragmented and eroded. Designed for twentieth-century realities, these international institutions are proving incapable of adapting to a multipolar world disrupted by new technologies and strategic and economic realignments.

33 Dario Amodei, interview by Ezra Klein, *New York Times*, 12 April 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/12/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-dario-amodei.html.

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The West in Decline and the Metacrisis

Upstream of global governance, at a higher level of analysis, Schmachtenberger lays out the Metacrisis as the deeper structural failures that threaten humanity's capacity to deal with any of the polycrises, much less the entire collection of existential threats. At its core, these ontological and epistemic crises have eroded the world's ability to make sense of reality, as media, academia, and political discourse become distorted. Beyond geopolitics and economic models, the Metacrisis reveals a deeper crisis of meaning, identity, and coordination, exposing humanity's inability to align its knowledge systems, governance mechanisms, and psychological resilience with the speed and scale of twenty-first-century transformations.

This breakdown in shared reality fuels a human coordination failure, where collective sense-making collapses, making it nearly impossible to achieve broad-based cooperation to manage existential threats. This can then be understood as a global governance crisis, reflecting how international institutions designed for a past era are incapable of navigating exponential technological and geopolitical change, further exacerbated by an incentive structures crisis that prioritises short-term profit and political gain over long-term survival. These psychological and epistemic dimensions of the Metacrisis reveal why technology is not just a material threat but a cultural one.

In *The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience*, Adam Frank, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson argue that modern science has systematically excluded subjective human experience, giving rise to an incomplete and even misleading view of reality.[34] The prevailing scientific paradigm seeks a detached, 'God's-eye' perspective, reducing the world to quantifiable metrics and objective models, while disregarding the lived, embodied experience that shapes human perception. This exclusion, they contend, is not merely an oversight but a fundamental

34 Adam Frank, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson, *The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

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flaw in Western thought, deeply embedded in its epistemic structures. They warn that by ignoring this blind spot, science risks developing an alienated, fragmented, and ultimately self-destructive worldview, particularly when applied to fields such as AI, economic modelling, and climate science. This critique aligns with the long-standing warnings of Henri Bergson, whose seminal work *Time and Free Will* (1889) exposes the dangers of reducing human experience to scientific metrics and artificial categories, a tendency that has shaped Western philosophy, governance, and technological development.[35]

Bergson argued that Western thought has fundamentally confused time with space, leading to a mechanistic and reductionist worldview that distorts our understanding of reality. His critique of scientific measurement and its over-reliance on abstraction serves as a direct intellectual precursor to the arguments presented in *The Blind Spot*. For Bergson, human experience is fluid, continuous, and deeply qualitative. Attempts to quantify it and categorise it into discrete units creates an illusion of knowledge—one where numbers replace meaning, and metrics substitute for depth. Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson take this argument further, showing that ignoring subjectivity in science has profound consequences for governance, ethics, and the way we navigate existential risks.

This epistemic failure is further deepened by what Iain McGilchrist identifies in *The Master and His Emissary* as the Western mind's left-hemisphere dominance. He argues this has caused Western civilisation to decline by prioritising abstract, mechanistic, and decontextualised thinking over holistic, embodied, and relational understanding. He uses the metaphor of the 'Master' (the right hemisphere) and the 'Emissary' (the left hemisphere) to describe the proper balance between the two: the right hemisphere, which is open, integrative, and meaning-seeking, should guide human perception and decision-making, while the left hemisphere, which is focused on categorisation, control, and manipulation, should act as a subordinate tool.

35 Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1889).

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However, in modern Western society, the Emissary has usurped the Master, leading to an epistemic and cultural crisis where efficiency is valued over wisdom, data over meaning, and control over understanding. The left hemisphere, McGilchrist argues, is incapable of seeing the bigger picture—it works in narrow, linear processes, seeks certainty at the expense of ambiguity, and is obsessed with power and domination rather than depth and insight. Yet, it has no business calling the shots because it cannot recognise its own limitations; it mistakes its fragmented, reductionist worldview for the whole of reality. This is why Western civilisation is trapped in cycles of technological acceleration, economic exploitation, and ideological rigidity, unable to recognise the existential threats posed by its own blind spots. The left brain thrives in control-based systems—surveillance, bureaucratic governance, AI-driven algorithms—but lacks the wisdom, humility, and existential awareness necessary to govern in alignment with human flourishing. The result is a world that sacrifices depth for efficiency, meaning for materialism, and interconnectedness for self-interest, accelerating its own decline through the very systems it believes will save it.

This crisis of meaning is reflected in *Zombies in Western Culture: A Twenty-First Century Crisis* by John Vervaeke, Christopher Mastropietro, and Filip Miscevic.[36] The zombie, they argue, has become the defining metaphor for the modern Western mind—numb, disoriented, and blindly consuming without purpose. Unlike traditional myths that offer paths towards redemption or transcendence, the zombie myth reflects a civilisation that has lost its ability to envision meaning or direction. The zombie is neither fully alive nor fully dead, mirroring the spiritual and existential stagnation of Western society, which remains trapped in an endless cycle of consumption, digital addiction, and ideological fragmentation. This figure embodies the loss of genuine agency and the erosion of deep human connection, as individuals drift through an increasingly alienating world governed by hyper-rationalised economic systems, automated technologies, and decontextualised information flows.

36 John Vervaeke, Christopher Mastropietro, and Filip Miscevic, *Zombies in Western Culture: A Twenty-First Century Crisis* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2017).

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As the book explores, contemporary Western culture has left people vulnerable to nihilism, resentment, and ideological possession. Unlike ancient mythologies (such as the biblical Apocalypse) that frame human struggle within narratives of renewal, sacrifice, and transcendence, the zombie narrative lacks an ultimate resolution or redemptive arc, reflecting the postmodern Western condition of aimlessness and despair.

This pervasive sense of aimlessness and despair is not confined to metaphorical representations but is evident in tangible public health concerns. In the United States approximately half of adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults. The 'epidemic of loneliness' has significant health implications, including increased risks of heart disease and stroke. Recognising the severity of the issue, the US surgeon general, Dr Vivek Murthy, has emphasised the importance of rebuilding social connections to address this crisis.[37] Similarly the United Kingdom appointed its first minister for loneliness in 2018, acknowledging at governmental level the critical need to address social isolation. These developments underscore a broader societal failure to foster meaningful human connections, leading to increased rates of mental health issues, including depression and suicide. The erosion of community bonds and the rise of individualism have not only impacted personal well-being but have also contributed to systemic governance challenges. A populace that feels disconnected and devoid of purpose is less likely to engage in collective action or trust in institutions, thereby exacerbating the crises of governance and coordination that define the contemporary global landscape.

Technology is already destabilising the global order—in part by its fusion with other trends eroding Western culture. The questions are whether international institutions, already weakened by internal decline, are capable of preventing catastrophe and whether Western countries will be able to contribute to the needed reforms. The crisis marked

37 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.

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by these is deeply rooted in epistemic, psychological, and ontological challenges. These foundational issues manifest as political dysfunction and institutional paralysis, hindering coordinated responses.

The UN Summit of the Future, held in September 2024, sought to tackle these challenges by proposing the 'Pact for the Future', aiming to revitalise multilateralism and to reform outdated international structures. However, the summit has not yet led to actions to address the deeper crises. While reform discussions emphasise institutional restructuring and enhanced global cooperation, they cannot address the underlying epistemic and cultural disintegration that ultimately prevents effective problem-solving. Without confronting these Metacrisis-level dysfunctions, efforts to reform global institutions may remain superficial, unable to meet the demands of an increasingly complex world. Addressing the polycrises of technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, and economic fragility will require more than policy adjustments. It demands a fundamental shift in how societies construct meaning, value holistic understanding, and foster genuine human connection. Only through such a transformation can governance structures evolve to confront the unprecedented challenges of the twenty-first century.

The current dysfunction of institutions is not merely political or administrative; it is symptomatic of a profound cultural exhaustion and moral disorientation. Addressing this requires more than policy—it demands a revitalisation of the cultural imagination. The way forward will not be found in harder tools of statecraft alone, but in the softer realms of arts, storytelling, education, and cultural renewal, where values are shaped and collective purpose is restored. If the West is to re-enter the global stage not as a hegemon but as a responsible partner, it must first do the internal work of healing its fractured society.

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Conclusion

The collision of exponential technological advancement with a fractured global system is not merely a governance challenge—it is a civilisational reckoning. Both *The Technological Republic* and *The Once and Future World Order* attempt to offer frameworks for navigating this uncertain future, yet neither fully captures the scale or character of the crisis before us. Karp and Zamiska advocate for a technocratic revival through a public–private fusion led by defence-focused tech firms, but they do so with a hyperrealist lens that dangerously downplays the risks of state capture, arms races, and the erosion of democratic legitimacy. Acharya, on the other hand, offers a sweeping vision of a decentralised, pluralistic global order rooted in diverse civilisational traditions—but fails to reckon with the unprecedented stakes of a world marked by AI, nuclear weapons, ecological collapse, and digital epistemic decay.

This is the essence of what Daniel Schmachtenberger and others call the Metacrisis: a convergence of crises in meaning, coordination, and identity that render conventional solutions ineffective. The techno-optimist belief that acceleration will lead to salvation runs headlong into the reality of governance systems incapable of managing the very forces they are unleashing. Western civilisation risks being flanked and overwhelmed by an onslaught emerging from its own blind spots: reductionism, short-term incentives, and strategic arrogance. The zombie-like condition diagnosed by Vervaeke et al.—of disoriented, disconnected individuals drifting in a culture of consumption and distraction—is not a metaphor, but a lived reality that is hollowing out the civic and institutional fabric necessary for global resilience.

As the UN's Summit for the Future has shown, even moments of global consensus lack the depth of transformation required to respond meaningfully to these challenges. What is needed is not just reform, but reinvention: of how we define progress, how we build trust, and how we anchor technological development within frameworks of justice, dignity, and shared purpose. Without such a reorientation, we will

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drift—fast and unseeing—into the coming wave, mistaking momentum for mastery and dominance for durability.

In short, we are not suffering from a lack of ideas or innovation. We are suffering from a crisis of sensitivity—about what kind of future we are building and at what cost. It is not too late to choose differently, but doing so will require humility, imagination, and a global coalition grounded in wisdom, solidarity, and a healthy dose of fear.

Terror as a Postmodern Game: Unexpected Conclusions about Russian Propaganda from Two Art Exhibitions

A Review Essay by Dimitar Vatsov

Fake (f)or Real? A History of Forgeries and Falsifications
National Ethnographic Museum, BAS, Sofia, 16 July – 20 October 2024.

Its Toxic Doubles: Watch Your Feed!
Goethe-Institut, Sofia, 25 March – 30 April 2025.

Keywords—*Russian propaganda, postmodern bricolage, randomness, terror, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Sometimes a researcher—even one who has dedicated decades to a particular topic—might fail to notice things that an artist sees instantly, with a mere snap of their fingers. Here, I will recount two such instances—two exhibitions that allowed me to draw unexpected

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conclusions about Russian propaganda, which I have been studying for years. The first—*Fake (f)or Real? A History of Forgeries and Falsifications*—an exhibition of the House of European History in Brussels (an initiative of the European Parliament). It was visiting the Bulgarian National Ethnographic Museum in July–October 2024. A special Bulgarian section was created by the artists from the Convo Foundation, the Atelier 3 architectural studio, and MP-Studio.[2]

The installation *Step Up, Face Fear* was dedicated to propaganda and disinformation, old and new, and particularly to Russian propaganda in Bulgaria (Figures 1 and 2). More specifically, it focused on a network of so-called 'mushroom' websites that gained international notoriety.[3] From November 2022 to April 2024, this network inundated the Bulgarian online space with thousands of pro-Russian news articles every day. The network involved tens of thousands of completely automated, uniform websites (bots) that mechanically filled their pages with the same content daily. Behind hundreds of these sites, there was often a specific individual whose job was to share this content on social media for a fee.

This actually existing network is represented in the installation: screens woven into a dark space, almost identical in appearance, project various Russian narratives against the EU and about the war in Ukraine. The technical IT term 'mushroom websites' is illustrated on the ceiling with poisonous mushrooms that seem to sprout from a children's cartoon. This simple but very effective collage, in my view, as someone who has been carefully monitoring the real network of tens of thousands of sites (mushrooms) for over three years, suddenly shows me: Russian propaganda is, in some sense, deeply unserious—it resembles a childish game. It is a product of *postmodern bricolage.*

2 *The Step Up, Face Fear* Bulgarian add-on installation, dedicated to the topic of disinformation and fake news from past to present, was developed in collaboration with the Sofia Platform Foundation, the Human and Social Studies Foundation–Sofia (HSSF), and the Institute of Ethnology and Folkloristics at the Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

3 The network of 'mushroom' websites was uncovered in 2022 by a team at the HSSF. Subsequently, it became the subject of research by other investigative entities, such as the Center for the Study of Democracy and the Digital Forensic Research Lab. Numerous publications appeared in both national and global media. After being publicly exposed, in 2024, the network first ceased to distribute pro-Russian content and then stopped functioning altogether.

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Figure 1. *Step Up, Face Fear.* Convo Foundation, Atelier 3, and MP-Studio. Photographer: Maria Tsvetkova

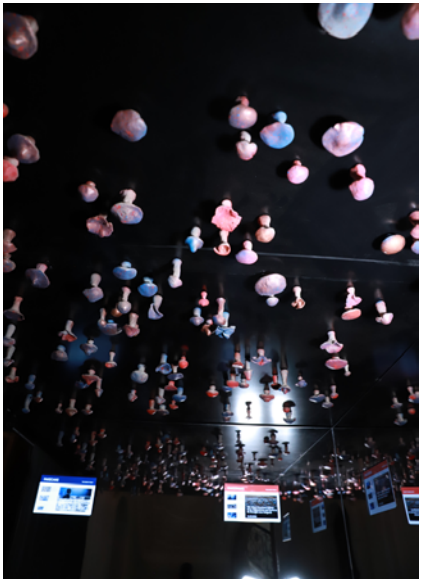

Figure 2. *Step Up, Face Fear.* Convo Foundation, Atelier 3, and MP-Studio. Photographer: Maria Tsvetkova

Let's clarify terms. By propaganda I mean, in the spirit of Jacques Ellul, 'a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of

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individuals'.[4] Ellul also points out that propaganda works less through lies about facts than through general interpretations that frame facts. Unlike Ellul, however, who works with the mentalistic vocabulary of 'intentions' and 'interpretations', here I view propaganda as a linguistic phenomenon. I analyse the common linguistic clichés that are strategically disseminated for propaganda purposes and which—if propaganda is successful—turn into a *basic grammar* that frames the concrete articulations of the world, and hence the actions of individuals. If I am to paraphrase Ellul in linguistic terms, the working definition would be: *propaganda is a set of linguistic clichés that are strategically disseminated by some at least relatively organised and institutionalised group with the aim of framing linguistic articulations, and hence the actions and inactions of a mass of individuals.*

If propaganda is an instrumental action aimed at achieving unilateral control over a mass of individuals, we must distinguish it from strategic communications. I share the normative paradigm of Neville Bolt,[5] according to whom strategic communications is a value-based type of political communications founded on the principles of liberal democracy. The main difference from propaganda is that strategic communications does not treat the audience as a passive mass of 'judgemental dopes' who must be subordinated. By promoting individual freedom and autonomy, strategic communications attempts to cultivate them in its audience—to endow individuals with voice and reflexivity, rather than to silence them and demand obedience.

And what about Russian propaganda today? How is it both a one-sided instrumental action and postmodern? Here, we must immediately say two things: Russian propaganda is neither indigenous nor, unlike Soviet propaganda, is it ideologically coherent. It is a product of postmodern bricolage on two levels.

4 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 61.

5 Neville Bolt, 'Bolt's Paradigm of Strategic Communications', in Neville Bolt (ed.), *Understanding Strategic Communications*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

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First, because various and seemingly incomparable technical means are used for its implementation—official media, yellow press, media doppelgangers, anonymous media, troll factories, armies of bots, etc. The Russian state and its associated businesses constantly invest in and experiment with new forms of media dissemination and social influence, generally using trial and error: the 'social impact' is what matters.

But the same postmodern bricolage, second, prevails regarding the ideological content. Russian spokespersons seem to have read and applied as a kind of recipe book the complex theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on discursive hegemony.[6] As a reminder: for a social group to achieve dominance over another group, the language of the first group must become hegemonic—it must become the language that the second group is forced to speak. For this purpose, according to Laclau and Mouffe, 'chains of equivalence' must be established between certain concepts and realities—originally different in their origin and meaning. But the differences in their meanings should be reduced and they should start to form common messages: they must say the same thing. The hegemonic operation that Laclau and Mouffe call 'articulation' represents precisely this: a process of violent reduction of the differences between the elements of the discourse and their transformation into seemingly logically connected moments within a broader discursive formation.

Such 'hegemonic articulation' has been systematically performed by Russian and pro-Russian speakers for more than a decade. They do not invent; rather, like diligent little bees, they collect pollen from various flowers to process it into propaganda honey. They gather all sorts of facts and narratives, often completely incompatible with each other, and put them into a mode of metonymic layering on top of one another—as if there were no differences between them. Leftist critiques of financial and corporate capitalism (developed immanently in the West) are overlaid on conservative critiques of value cosmopolitanism (also from the West)

6 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

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as if there were no difference between them either: after all, is it not the *West* that is to blame?

Everything that can undermine the *West*—from justified critiques of colonialism to any demystification of the application of double standards, to critiques of the unintended consequences of the war on terror and humanitarian interventions—all these critiques, however legitimate they may often be, are instrumentally absorbed by Russian propaganda: after all, is it not always the West that is to blame?

Accordingly, everything that could elevate the image of Russia and the resistance against the West is uncritically absorbed and ground down, in an endless metonymic layering, as if there were no difference between Russian nationalism, the glory of the Russian Empire, nostalgia for the Soviets and internationalism, the might of the Russian army, pan-Slavism, Orthodoxy, anti-fascism, heterosexuality, and Eurasianism—all of these are 'traditional values'.

Paradoxically, the biggest essentialists today—the supporters of 'traditional values'—turn out to be the biggest postmodernists and constructivists in practice. Without any hesitation, they take narratives from absolutely incompatible cultural and historical contexts and traditions and place them in a metonymic mode—of saying one instead of the other—as if the whole time it were about the same thing.

The 'chains of equivalence' that Russian propaganda constructs are actually based on a simple conspiratorial grammar. Furthermore, we can comfortably add that they are based on simple 'fairy tale logic':

- There is one Great Villain—in this role, the US, NATO, Brussels, the collective West, but also specific figures, like Soros, Obama, Merkel, Biden, are metonymically positioned. Who will be specifically pointed out depends on the context.
- This Great Villain claims to uphold certain universal values (liberal democracy and human rights), but these values are by

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no means universal; they are merely a facade behind which the Villain hides to pursue their self-serving private interests and to oppress nations (ordinary people).

- The Great Villain, in order to keep their evil intentions hidden, acts as a puppeteer, pulling the strings of their marionettes—paid agents or useful idiots. In fact, all actors who, in various places and with various means, uphold the values of liberal democracy—through civic protests, civic organisations, parties, media—are metonymically portrayed as proxies, marionettes, lackeys of the Great Villain. When this propaganda is institutionalised through law, anyone who disagrees with the power is treated as a 'foreign agent'.
- Of course, the victims of the Villain are nations—they lose their sovereignty—and, no surprise, their saviour is Russia. Russia, along with other forces from the Global South, will break the hegemony of the West and create a just and balanced multipolar world.

The conspiratorial grammar described creates a 'great narrative'—but it is actually a 'short narrative' in the sense of the discursive theorist Albena Hranova.[7] The great narrative here is metonymically shortened, and everything can be 'summarised' through substitution in its simplified grammar, which is capable of digesting any semantic differences and even contradictions. Thus, it can contain many narratives, each composed of sub-narratives.

For example, let us broadly list the means by which the Great Villain enslaves the peoples—these are separate sub-narratives, which also have their own sub-sub-narratives:

1. The Villain economically drains people and nations (sub-sub-narratives: through international financial institutions and regulations, through the green transition).

7 Albena Hranova, *Historiography and Literature: On the Social Construction of Historical Concepts and Great Narratives in Bulgarian Culture, 19th–20th Centuries.* Vol. 1, *Historiography, Literature, Sociology: Theories, Crises, Case Studies* (Sofia: Prosveta, 2011), pp. 188, 360–61.

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2. It enslaves them militarily (through the expansion of NATO, which is not an expression of the sovereign will of Eastern European nations but an evil plan to encircle Russia).
3. It destroys them demographically (the 'war on terror' and humanitarian interventions are actually an evil plan of the CIA/NATO to ignite civil wars; the goal is to cause waves of migration that will flood Europe and melt its peoples).
4. It injects culturally the poison of liberalism and 'gender ideology'.
5. It engages conspiratorially in all kinds of other ways (the CIA creates viruses in biological laboratories—SARS-CoV-2—or, on the contrary, it lies that there is a SARS-CoV-2 virus in order to sell vaccines to pharmaceutical giants or even to microchip people).

And so on.

The variations are endless, but the contradictions between them go unnoticed. The versions are layered on top of one another as if to form part of a common narrative, and they are additionally stored next to each other so that they can be reheated at the next opportune moment.

Of course, we must note that, in July 2021, Russian propaganda, through a well-known article by Putin[8], created its more ideologically consolidated version for internal use—regarding the 'trinity of the Russian people' composed of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, and the broader multi-ethnic and multi-confessional *Russian world* which gravitates towards the core of the trinity of the Russian nation. This fascist-imperial construct continues to be used to consolidate and control Russian society even today. However, it is harder to sell abroad. Therefore, the broader propaganda package is marketed internationally, often without this ideological emphasis, focusing instead on criticisms of the West—on all possible narratives that can undermine trust in liberal democracy and its principles.

8 V. Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 [Accessed 8 May 2025].

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The Russian propaganda package—the great narrative, which is actually a shortened metonymic story—is multifaceted and even multi-cartridge. The individual narratives are separate modules that can be attached or detached from the main narrative as needed in context. The great narrative, much like a catalogue, has literally gathered within itself, as if in drawers, borrowings from all sorts of heterogeneous cultural and historical contexts: everything that can undermine the West or elevate Russia is stored in it. Moreover, the recipes, before being stored, are maximally simplified—to recipes for quick reheating. The catalogue, however, does not concern itself with the contradictions between the recipes. On the contrary, once collected, the catalogue is offered up for free use—anyone can reheat a quick dish by pulling out their preferred drawer.

Here, more than ten years after its publication, I will quote the title of Peter Pomerantsev's book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*.[9] This maxim is still valid, even though Russian propaganda has already transcended surrealism and adopted a fully postmodern attitude towards 'reality'. However, in its current postmodern collages, there is nothing cheerful, light, or playful, as in the classic examples of postmodernism; instead, there is something heavy, brutal, and cynical. There is something deadly! Where does that come from?

Getting the answer to this question was helped by another exhibition of young artists—*Its Toxic Doubles: Watch Your Feed!* Once again the curators, Sophia Grancharova and Philip Stoilov, along with artists Lexi Fleurs, Yanitsa Fendulova, Slava George, Marina Genova, Nikola Stoyanov, Nikola Andreev, Nikola Tsvetanov, and Kyril Buhowski, direct the viewer's attention to the poisonous counterparts of truth in the media.

Among the installations and games with the past surrounding the monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia or the faces of 'influencers' from Socrates and Jesus, to Caesar and Mao, to modern anime heroes, you can scroll through 288 hours of Telegram chats, in which pro-Russian bots

9 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

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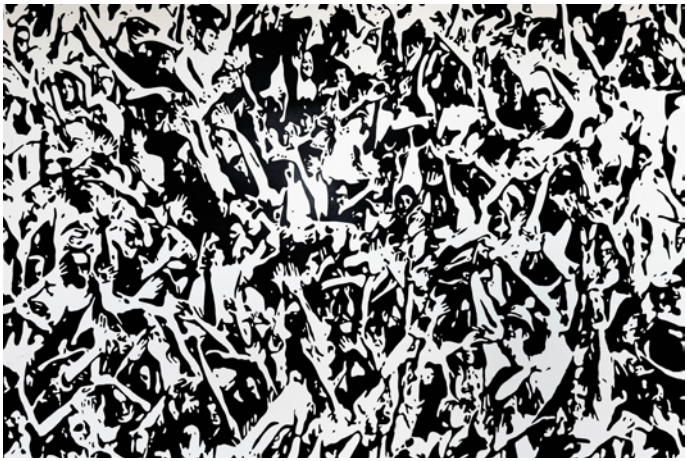

Figure 3. *Internal/External Enemies*. Nikola Andreev. Photographer: Joro Aranjoro

Figure 4. *Realities Weakening*. Yanitsa Fendulova. Photographer: Joro Aranjoro

flood the audience with hate and, mostly, nonsense, or watch a video where vloggers and analysts share how public consciousness is being radiated. But for me the most revealing was the piece *Internal/External Enemies* by Nikola Andreev (Figure 3)—strange faces, outstretched arms, multiplying the horror of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*—beneath

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which bullets and a torn condom wrapper are scattered on the floor, the installation *Realities Weakening* by Yanitsa Fendulova (Figure 4).

These installations, intentionally combined by the curators, suggested to me the key to answering the question: why is the postmodern bricolage of Russian propaganda so dark, and downright deadly? And the answer is: the postmodern play is used for a brutal terror.

But this immediately raises a second question: how is it possible for the postmodern play, which is an almost childish, innocent exercise, to become a tool for terror? And the answer here is: they share a common multiple—and that is their randomness, their arbitrariness!

But this argument deserves to be elaborated further. According to its dictionary definitions, terror is 'a state of intense or insurmountable fear' or an act (brutal violence/threat of violence) that creates such insurmountable fear.[10]

Let us recall the three classic cases of mass state terror: Jacobin, communist, and Nazi. Violence in all these cases is arbitrary in that many of the victims are innocent. As Hannah Arendt said, 'Terror as we know it today strikes without any preliminary provocation, its victims are innocent even from the point of view of the persecutor.'[11] This arbitrariness is most often maintained through various forms of exceptional justice: those declared to be 'enemies' are denied legal protection. Even the means of retribution—the guillotine, the shot to the back of the head, and the explosive device, as well as the gas chamber—guarantee both the mechanical ease and mass nature of the killings and their alienation from the will of the executioner. In terror, death befalls the victims as a fate: impassively, alienated, and non-committal. However, even the inherited cultural representations of Fate are too anthropomorphic to describe the randomness of terror. That is why, during the French

10 See 'Terror', *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terror [Accessed 28 April 2025].

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* new edn (San Diego, New York, and London: Harvest, 1979), p. 6.

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Revolution, revolutionary terror was often represented as an impersonal natural force—an earthquake, an epidemic, a volcano.[12]

Moreover, terror is so terrifying precisely because of the randomness of the violence within it. A person never knows when and from where violence will erupt, nor do they know what to do to avoid being struck by it—there is no recipe for innocence. If, before modernity, terror was a whim of the ruler against specific individuals, the paralysing horror of unaddressed violence transforms terror into a tool for mass control in modern times, as again Hannah Arendt observed.

The same contingency that unleashes terror can be found in the discourse of populism, and hence in communist, Nazi, and contemporary Russian propaganda. For all these forms of propaganda, despite their important differences, are forms of radicalised populism transformed into state governmental strategy.

Laclau and Mouffe note that populism makes use of 'empty signifiers'—that is, concepts that are largely emptied of meaning; they have become, in a certain sense, 'hollow abstractions', but it is precisely because of this that they possess mobilising power.

To recall: for Laclau and Mouffe, populism is a discursive strategy, a type of political language that privileges 'the people' and opposes them to 'the elites', thus creating an antagonistic frontier between them. The elites, whoever they are in a given case—'the old regime', 'the national government', 'global corporations', or others—are those who, by presumption, actually govern. However, the actual rulers are suspected of conspiring against the people—that they govern not in the interests of the people, but selfishly, for their own benefit. Accordingly, populism is a political appeal—a raising of voice in defence of the people and against their enemies—which often escalates into antagonism: into demands for radical (militant) retribution against the elites.

12 Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789–1794* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

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In order for the populist appeal to be convincing—to mobilise the people for action—it must present 'the people' as a homogeneous body without internal rifts and contradictions. Thus, populism ignores the differences among the members of the group—for example, in terms of social, professional, cultural status—and seeks to construct 'chains of equivalence' between them: to present them as if they are elements of the same entity. 'The people' becomes an empty signifier: the differences are crushed within it; it is a concept black hole that absorbs everything. But in this way, 'the people' serves as a term that can mobilise the masses: it does not matter who one is, particularly; everyone can and should identify themselves with 'the people'.

However, Laclau and Mouffe, being left theorists and defending the emancipatory power of populism, do not explicitly acknowledge that something quite similar happens with the meaning of the 'enemies', who are the constitutive other of the mobilised 'people'. The 'enemies', of course, are negatively connoted as the 'villains' against whom 'the people' unite. However, just like the people, the 'enemies' are also turned into an empty signifier, devoid of specific meaning. And although enemies are usually typologically classified—by estate (the old regime during the French Revolution); by class (kulaks and imperialists during the Red Terror); by race (Jews, Gypsies in Nazism)—this typological categorisation does not establish a clear *differentia specifica* of the enemy (what exactly someone must do or what characteristics they must have in order to be considered an enemy).

Consequently, potentially anyone can be declared an enemy of the people. Indeed, as is known, the peasants who were guillotined during the French Revolution far outnumbered representatives of the aristocracy; during Stalin's purges, it was primarily communists who were executed; and so on. The empty signifier of 'enemies of the people' suggests the arbitrariness of connotation: no one is pre-designated by it, therefore anyone can potentially be labelled ad hoc. Thus, let us again quote Pomerantsev from 2014 in a changed context, 'nothing is true and everything is possible'. The empty signifier of enemies unleashes discursive

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terror. The more emptied of meaning the signifier enemies is, the more it becomes an instrument of terror.

We see from well-known examples that there is often a direct link between labelling someone an enemy of the people and their physical elimination. Discursive terror is a prerequisite for physical terror.

By the way, inside the Russian Federation, discursive terror has long become physical. Among the already liquidated 'internal enemies' we need only mention Politkovskaya, Nemtsov, and Navalny. The war against Ukraine and its civilian population is a brutal export of terror abroad. And in the more distant abroad, the attacks on Litvinenko, Skripal, and Gebrev are just the beginning. Russian propaganda in Europe is increasingly intensifying its attacks against 'enemies of the people' (declaring all civil activists and pro-democracy forces as 'foreign agents' and sexually deviant 'LGBT'), especially in the former Eastern bloc. It can be argued with a high degree of certainty that discursive terror in these cases is preparing the artillery for inducing physical terror.

But what prevents us from clearing our information space of discursive terror, so as not to allow the return of physical terror? The installation *Dirty Laundry* by Slava George (Figure 5) provides the answer. A red tie has blocked the washing machine.

Figure 5. *Dirty Laundry*. Slava George. Photographer: Joro Aranjoro

Germany's Democracy between 'Battlesome' and Embattled

A Review Essay by Maria Golubeva

Freedom: Memoirs, 1954–2021
Angela Merkel and Beate Baumann. St. Martin's Press, 2024.

Putins Angriff auf Deutschland: Desinformation, Propaganda, Cyberattacken
Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven and Leon Erlenhorst. Econ, 2024.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Angela Merkel, freedom, Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven, globalisation, FIMI*

About the Author
Maria Golubeva is a public policy analyst and historian, and founder of the think tank Baltic Initiative on European Reform. She has served as a member of the Latvian parliament (2018–22) and as Minister of the Interior (2021–22). She holds a PhD in history from the University of Cambridge.

In the days of the Cold War, there lived a girl in the Socialist bloc who longed for freedom. When the Iron Curtain fell, she availed herself of the opportunities offered by the free world, and later became a universalist, globalisation-loving politician.

While the lines above could as well be the summary of my own life before 2022, they in fact describe a vastly more successful and better-known figure of Western politics, the former chancellor of Germany,

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Angela Merkel. Or at least, they sum up the gist of her autobiography, co-written with Beate Baumann, which Merkel published in 2024 under the telling title *Freedom*.

The ex-chancellor's memoir is not exactly a page-turner but a warm, circumspect, well-meaning book. The tone is mild and humble, the focus personal; Merkel describes her family background in rather more detail than is afforded some of her key policies. She grew up in East Germany, but with strong family ties to the West. She rose through the ranks. She became a minister, then a prominent opposition politician, then the chancellor. Her candidacy to lead Germany used to warm the hearts of moderately feminist, academically educated German women (I knew a few). Then she came to be profoundly respected by a much wider audience of European and international leaders. After a long rule she retired, and the shortcomings of her policies came back to haunt German politics and the German economy for years to come. Aptly summed up by Liana Fix, 'she deepened Germany's economic dependency on China and its energy dependency on Russia while abandoning nuclear power; she underinvested in German security and defense … and her migration policy sowed the seeds for the success of the right-wing extremist party Alternative for Germany'.[1]

Understandably, given that critical reception of Merkel's policies is now commonplace, the tone of the autobiography is mildly assertive. Merkel reminds her reader that she lived her creed—liberal democracy, humanism, and openness to trade with the whole world. That instead of paying lip service to these notions, she actually took care to practise, in her politics, what she (and many others) preached. That was the reason she traded with Russia, welcomed Syrian refugees, and encouraged German industry to develop ever-closer economic ties with China.

Merkel's combination of universalist humanism with a trust in traditional German industrial policy and global trade almost too easily lends itself

1 Liana Fix, 'Angela Merkel Makes Her Case in "Freedom"', *Washington Post*, 29 November 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/11/29/angela-merkel-freedom-memoir-review.

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to being caricatured as quintessentially globalist, and therefore hopelessly passé—even more so since this includes a de facto justification of ever-stronger economic links with Russia and China.

'In spite of everything,' Merkel states, 'I was right to make a point … of preserving our contact with Russia … and of maintaining links through trading relationships that were about more than just mutual economic advantage.' This leaves open the question of what constitutes 'more'. Screeds of editorial and scholarly opinions were written before and after 24 February 2022 about the futility of attempts to tame Russia via trade as a means to impose the norms of liberal democracy ('Wandel durch Handel' used to be the German way of putting it). This does not mean that Russia (or any other country, for that matter) is somehow irretrievably impermeable to civilisation. Without slipping into racist clichés, one can safely assert that for years before 2014 (the occupation of Crimea) Russia had been a highly centralised authoritarian state, with a very high degree of state capture by former KGB officers and affiliated gangsters. This is not exactly the right mix for attempting to convert a country to liberal democracy by trading Western cars and luxury goods for Russian oil and gas.

Germany's industrial symbiosis with China has been, until recently, less discussed than the mistakes made in trusting Russia. Today Germany's car industry (and other more or less high-tech consumer goods industries) is struggling to maintain its niche in a world where China has used German expertise and German industrial machines to wean itself off technological dependency on the West.

This goes hand in hand with failure to reform. One cannot help but agree with the historian Richard J. Evans, whose review of *Freedom* is rather damning on this point: 'Above all, Merkel shows no awareness of how the German economy has got into trouble through its failure to modernise and prepare for the post-industrial age. She is full of praise

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for Germany's traditional "automobile industry, mechanical engineering, and the chemical industry", a thoroughly shortsighted view.'[2]

Yet economic policy is admittedly not the central topic of *Freedom*. Rather, the book is a stubborn and in its own way admirable defence of policy guided by universalist and humanist values. There is no reason, at least not on the pages of *Freedom*, to doubt that Merkel was sincere in believing that her policies were leading to a better world. To quote Liana Fix again, in the age of Trump and Trumpism, '"Freedom" reminds us that another politics, humanist and humble, can exist.'

It is not Merkel's values, but rather her way of promoting and defending them that raises many questions. Her decision to admit asylum seekers from Syria en masse in 2015 had dismal but indirect political consequences. It is not quite fair to blame Merkel directly for the rise of the extreme right AfD (Alternative for Germany), which at the time of writing was polling at 24 per cent.[3] The mainstreaming of xenophobia is a sloppy and toxic response to the increasing socio-economic woes of those (predominantly East) Germans who feel they were left behind. Opening Germany's borders to refugees in 2015 certainly did not improve the chances of mainstream politics. Yet Merkel's decision was perfectly in accord with international humanitarian law and with the human rights values that, in 2015, it was still possible to admit in polite society one held dear.

The same goes for the belief in an open approach to globalisation. What can provoke a bitter, cynical sneer in 2025, with US trade policy wreaking havoc in global markets and Russian bots distorting the German public sphere on the eve of elections (more on this later), was the default approach around 2015. Maintaining and nourishing trade connections with other countries and continents—not just with EU neighbours—used to be a perfectly default, everyday concept, and so was

2 Richard J. Evans, 'Freedom by Angela Merkel Review—Her Lips Are Sealed', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/dec/01/freedom-by-angela-merkel-review-her-lips-are-sealed.

3 Sabine Kinkartz, 'Germany: Far-Right AfD Rises in the Polls', *DW*, 3 April 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/germany-far-right-afd-rises-in-the-polls/a-72132087.

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the enthusiasm for open borders. We were, as Mark Leonard revealed to us in *The Age of Unpeace*, building the connectivity which later could be weaponised to strangle our economies and undermine our democracy.[4] But we were also building a less fearful, more trusting world—or so it appeared, before the Covid pandemic.

I remember the first weeks of the return of borders in 2020. I sat with a friend in a café (about to be closed), not far from the street leading to Riga airport (about to be closed), and we attempted to bend our minds around the fact that as of today, there would be no trips to other countries, no face-to-face meetings with people from other cities and continents, at least not for the foreseeable weeks and months. This was unimaginable, even though I myself had just voted for those restrictions as a member of parliament. Stopping freedom of movement, even for a while, almost felt like sacrilege to me. Two weeks later, on Twitter (it was not X in those blessed days), someone wrote, 'I wish I could now sit in the most dismal, overpriced airport café, waiting for a plane to the most boring destination.' I knew exactly what that person felt.

From there, it was only two short years to the spring of 2022, to travelling by train across vast expanses of (European) terrain to Kyiv, because the sky was locked to all but military aircraft. In the Polish town of Przemyśl, where those trains start, the station brimmed with war refugees. Our group of politicians visiting Ukraine underwent obligatory training on what to do if one hears a ballistic missile approaching. The world of happy globalisation was no more.

Reading Merkel's memoirs evokes a nostalgia for a bona fide globalism, an optimistic faith in people, ideas, and goods from elsewhere. The intrinsic value of this faith, I dare say, has not changed.

What has changed is the intensity of the struggle for survival in the increasingly atavistic world of politics after 2022. Faced with Russia's reborn barbarity, Western and democratic policymakers feel induced to

4 Mark Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace* (London: Bantam, 2021).

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prioritise security over, say, the human rights of migrants. This is part of a wider phenomenon: finer points of international law keep falling by the wayside, like the luggage discarded by the multitudes fleeing to Helm's Deep in *The Lord of the Rings*. In Europe we are increasingly throwing considerations of universal human dignity (of foreign-born, dark-skinned strangers) out of the window, to make space for defences that will, we hope, help us survive until dawn, and prosper in the future beyond. We should take care that we have preserved enough human decency by the time the sun rises.

A vastly different perspective from Merkel's on where the policies of trusting Russia as a partner have led Germany is presented in *Putins Angriff auf Deutschland: Desinformation, Propaganda, Cyberattacken* (Putin's attack on Germany: disinformation, propaganda, cyberattacks), written jointly by the former German diplomat (and ex-deputy head of the Federal Intelligence Service) Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven and the communications researcher Leon Erlenhorst.

The first chapter of the book opens with Putin's speech in the Bundestag as far back as 2001, reminding the reader that German politicians' love affair with Russia has known even more intense stages before Merkel came to power.

Nevertheless, there is an element of indirect but noticeable reproach directed at Merkel's Russia policies, and not only that. Freytag and Erlenhorst do not resist the temptation to name the chapter dedicated to the (political) mismanagement of migration 'Wir schaffen das—nicht' ('We will manage it—not'). 'We will manage' was what Merkel famously said about opening Germany's borders to Syrian refugees. The chapter does make a tenable connection between openness to migration (without proper policy tools to control its side effects) and vulnerability to security threats, but the primary focus here and throughout the book is on the effect that these vulnerabilities have on political discourse. The inability to adequately handle German society's discourse on migration provided space for Putin-friendly radicals to push their agenda.

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The book introduces the German reader to the sheer scale and sophistication of Russia's information war on German society and democratic institutions. Part 2 is entirely dedicated to a litany of vulnerabilities that lend themselves to be exploited by Putin's info warriors and their friends: from the polarisation of society around issues of migration and Covid restrictions, to social fragmentation and the rise of the extreme right.

Most of these vulnerabilities are familiar to European experts and journalists, but perhaps not so widely known to the home audience. One interesting facet of this analysis is the discussion of the Kremlin's role in exacerbating tensions around the Gaza war through reinforcing positions on both sides, pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli. The tactic serves a wider FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference) strategy to reinforce differences within society (chapter 13).

The authors make no secret of the objective of their book: to open the eyes of German audiences to the fact that Russia's war 'is not only waged with weapons in Ukraine, but also by hybrid means, in Europe'. The turning of the tide in the West makes matters worse: Donald Trump's ambiguity or outright indifference to the security guarantees earlier offered by NATO is also mentioned in the introductory chapters (the book was published before the outcome of the 2024 elections in the USA was known). 'We barely have time to arm ourselves,' concludes one paragraph. The urgency (and somewhat different taste of the German readership) partly excuses the slightly sensationalist tone of the book, which, for my British-influenced taste, has too many exclamation marks.

'Putin's attack' is not primarily about a new defence policy, but about the need to strengthen German democracy's capacity to protect itself. The notion of 'well-fortified', 'battlesome', 'defensive', or 'militant democracy' (all being English translations of the German constitutional term 'wehrhafte Demokratie') is more rooted in the German legal and political discourse than in that of other countries. It implies that the key institutions, such as the federal government, the Bundestag, and

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the judiciary have the mandate and the duty to protect the fundamental liberal democratic order from those who may want to overturn it—and that includes not just Russia's proxies but also any group or party that may attempt to do so, be it even by an elected majority.

Freytag and Erlenhorst see that the legal and institutional guarantees protecting liberal democracy, effective against 'traditional' threats coming from radical politicians or terrorists, are ineffective against foreign information manipulation on the scale that Germany is dealing with currently. The perception that bot networks and other industrial machines of information manipulation are just some digital fad, divorced from the real world and less dangerous than, say, physical sabotage of critical infrastructure, is certainly wrong—and the authors are right to call it out.

The recommendations that Freytag and Erlenhorst promote are also sensible, treating Russian manipulations in the German information space as a national security threat, and accordingly advising the establishment of institutional bodies that deal holistically with the threats presented by FIMI.

Importantly, the authors caution against seeing or making the German response to Putin's attack in the image of an Orwellian truth ministry. What is needed is not some sort of 'censorship central', but rather a permeating threat-awareness among officials and the media, and in the wider circles of opinion leaders who have more than once proven feckless in the face of Russia's infowar effort.

To preserve our democracies—not just in Germany—we need to act decisively, while all the time exercising utmost caution. It is easy to mistake a Russian-manufactured, bot-network-delivered message for a genuine opinion. Unfortunately it is also tempting to indulge in self-censorship or even in outright censorship of opinions that may seem too 'soft' under today's harsh circumstances. Rather than rant against the past mistakes of globalisation, we should be able to reclaim

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it for democratic discourses. This can be done, if we regulate not the discourse of government-funded institutions and universities, but tech giants providing the platforms for manipulation, and if we do not close ourselves to trade, but give preference to democratic trade partners. These ideas may sound hopelessly idealistic, but reclaiming liberal democracy and globalisation with open eyes is the only option we have.

The path from an open, globalist, interdependent liberal democracy to a 'battlesome' one is wrought with dangers, some of which have already been addressed in the first part of this essay. Not losing sight of the values we are striving to protect through our institutions, such as the freedom and dignity of every individual, free expression, and respectful coexistence, is a formidable task when faced with adversaries—not just in Russia—who for now do not need to bother about these values. But Freytag and Erlenhorst are certainly right to point to the need to supplement old institutions with new ones, suited to protecting our democracies in the radically different environment in which we find ourselves.

Looking back on both books, one could wish for more elaborate advice on what to do about the persistent polarisation of the German (or British, or American, or French) political spectrum, in which centrist politics striving to preserve the liberal democratic order is increasingly embattled. But that would be the topic for another book.

How Difficult It Is to Recover a Future Once Stolen: The Case of Latvia

A Review Essay by Gatis Krūmiņš

Flow [Straume]
Film directed by Gints Zilbalodis; written and produced by Gints Zilbalodis and Matīss Kaža. 2024.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Latvia, USSR, recovery, turbulence*

About the Author
Dr Gatis Krūmiņš is a historian, currently a leading researcher at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. His first education was in music, and he has used his jazz improvisation experience both as university rector and in his writing. Gatis composes music, and views life and his scientific work through the perspective of art. As a historian, he is not afraid to think about the present and the future also.

The Latvian-made animated film *Flow* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2025. It was a big event not only in Latvia. An independent film studio with a new approach and a relatively microscopic budget ($ 3.5 million compared to other nominees' $ 80 to $ 200 million) won the award and has encouraged many independent artists and producers around the world. The example of *Flow* proved that you don't have to represent mega-corporations to gain international recognition. The animated film proved the power of daring and not being afraid to be different.

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For those yet to enjoy the film, it tells the story how various animals are forced to cooperate when they find themselves in a critical situation. Their inhabited area is flooded, and the only way out is a boat. A grey cat becomes the leader of the animals, without really wanting to. The cooperation of the animals saves them from destruction, and as the film's director, Gints Zilbalodis, said during the Oscars ceremony: we are all in the same boat.

Flow's success in Latvia sparked several discussions. One was whether the Oscar and more than sixty other international awards were a coincidence or a natural consequence. The Latvian government also reacted emotionally. In addition to awarding generous bonuses to filmmakers, a decision was made to create a special study programme for making animated films in the country. This issue is now being addressed by two universities in Latvia—the Academies of Culture and Arts. Cynics with a sense of humour say that serial production of the animation 'Oscars' will now begin.

Many in Latvia think that the success of *Flow* is logical and unsurprising. Latvians are creative and talented, and over the past hundred years have left a deep cultural imprint on the world. If you consult various artificial intelligence tools about the most influential and recognisable Latvians, the most common names that come up are the painter Mark Rothko, chess player Mikhail Tal, composer and pianist Raimonds Pauls, conductor Mariss Jansons, opera soloist Elīna Garanča, basketball player Kristaps Porziņģis, poet Rainis, and ballet dancer and actor Mikhail Baryshnikov. Almost everyone is in some way connected to the creative industries, including the basketball player. There is no entrepreneur, inventor, or politician.

Flow has appeared at a time when the usual order of things in the world has gone awry. What passed for uncertainty a couple of years ago now appears like a dream to which we could only wish to return. The pace of events has increased rapidly, which once again confirms how a world created by humans develops in waves, oblivious to any calendar discipline.

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More can happen in a couple of weeks than in twenty years. It was ever thus, particularly in late August–early September 1939, in October 1962, and in late August–early September 1991. Indications of something similar have also appeared in 2025.

In early 2025 the book *Turbulence as a Driving Force: Latvian People and Economy over 150 Years*[1] was published under my editorship. I had hoped that the last chapter of the book, 'How Not to Get Lost in the Future', would light the road ahead for anyone interested in the future of Latvia and Europe over the coming decades. Only a few months after the book was published I realised that I would have written several things differently had I been writing it now. Such an opportunity has indeed arisen: the manuscript of the book is currently being prepared in English, because, in my opinion, we can learn a lot from the history of Latvia. Namely, what are the consequences if a foreign culture is imposed on a territory and its inhabitants? Also, what are the long-term consequences of accepting, in the name of some larger agreement, the subjugation and plundering of a territory that does not belong to it by an aggressor country? What happens when a colonial policy is implemented for half a century in a previously independent, prosperous country? I will include some of my reflections in this essay.

Turbulence as Normality for 125 Years

There are not many countries in the world where the population is smaller today than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. One such place is Latvia. While the world's population has increased approximately fivefold in 125 years, in Latvia it has decreased. Though not at the same pace as the world's, the population of neighbouring countries on the shores of the Baltic Sea has grown significantly. Let us look at how the population has changed in three relatively close countries with similar climatic conditions: Denmark, Finland, and Latvia (Figure 1).

1 G. Krūmiņš (ed.), *Turbulence kā virzītājspēks: Latvijas cilvēki un tautsaimniecība 150 gados* (Riga: Jumava, 2025).

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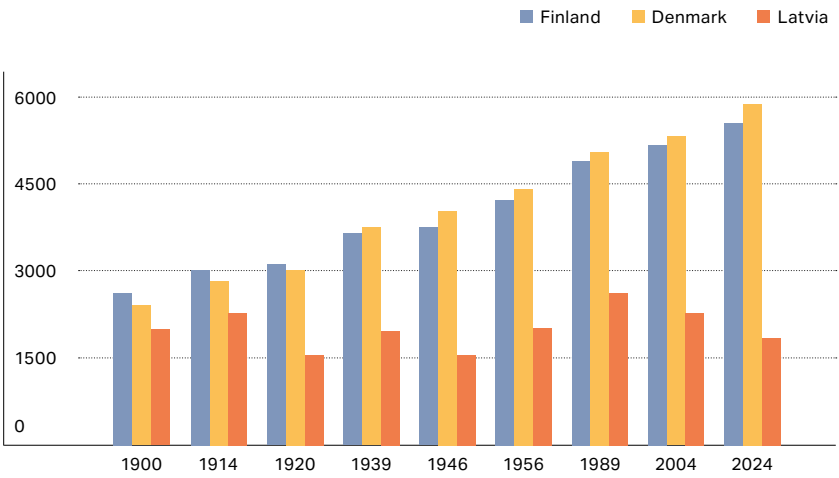

Figure 1. Population in Denmark, Finland, and Latvia, 1900–2024 (in thousands)

Looking at the demographic picture, the most obvious conclusion is that the trend in Finland and Denmark is significantly different from that of Latvia. The Danes were a little ahead of the Finns during World War II, and history buffs know why. The Finns fought a heroic war with the aggressor state, the USSR, losing part of their territory, but still preserving their independence. The USSR at that time was an ally of Nazi Germany and tried to implement in reality what the two countries had already agreed in the secret protocols attached to the non-aggression pact signed on 23 August 1939—the mutual division of extensive European territories (the so-called Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). This agreement allowed Nazi Germany to attack Poland just over a week later. This day, 1 September 1939, is now recognised as the beginning of World War II. We will return to the events of the war several times, but for now I shall focus on Latvia.

Why is Latvia's population currently less than a third the size of Finland's and Denmark's, but until relatively recently—in 1914—it was four fifths

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the size? In 1922 Marģers Skujenieks, a brilliant Latvian politician and statistician, wrote that, had demographic trends in Latvia continued as they did until World War I, by the year 2000 the population of Latvia should have been around 6.6 million. This forecast was relatively accurate in relation to Finland and Denmark, but in Latvia things turned out completely differently. Why? Have Latvians lost their instincts for reproduction? Or have they acted responsibly, realising that human overpopulation creates serious problems for our planet? Of course, all of these are nonsense and the causes are completely different.

The two world wars caused the biggest population losses in Latvia. During World War I, Latvia was divided by a front line for several years. The Russian Empire, aware of the weakness of its army and the risk of losing even more territory than it had already, evacuated all factory equipment from Latvia and encouraged a large part of the population, who had been left unemployed, to leave. In order to prevent any resources from falling into the hands of the enemy, even church bells were torn down and taken away. In total, Latvia lost about a third of its population during the war years—more than anywhere else in the world. First of all, citizens of Germany and Austria-Hungary and Jews were deported. In Riga alone, as a European city, about 10,000 German citizens had found work, and if some rational explanation could be found for the deportation of these foreigners, then there was no basis to be argued for the expulsion of Jews. The pretext for ordering the Jews to leave the entire Courland province (in fact, half of Latvia) within a few days was the unverified news that Jews had been hiding German soldiers en masse in their basements in a Lithuanian village. Although an investigation later found that only one Jew in this village owned a small basement, and that the panicked retreat to the front was caused by the incompetence of military personnel, no one cancelled the order to expel the Jews.

The statistics of World War II are no less grim. Of two million inhabitants in 1939, only one and a half million remained in Latvia by the beginning of 1946. So a quarter had disappeared. Most Baltic Germans responded to Adolf Hitler's call to return to their homeland. Almost all Jews were

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exterminated in the Holocaust. A significant part of Latvia's intellectual and economic elite fled to the West when the Red Army again approached in 1944. Both totalitarian armies illegally mobilised Latvian citizens into their armies and involved them in hostilities where many were killed and maimed. This was not enough. The USSR, which had reoccupied Latvia, continued widespread repression. In March 1949 more than 40,000 Latvian residents were deported to Siberia.

With both wars the picture is clear. But why has the population continued to fall over the last thirty-five years? During this time Latvia regained its independence, and it has been a member of the European Union and NATO for more than 20 years. The decrease is gladly used by the Kremlin's propaganda mouthpieces, declaring Latvia a failed state. Of course, they ignore the fact that gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has doubled in these years, average life expectancy has increased by more than five years, and the proportion of people with higher education has tripled. The quality of life of the population has improved significantly, but Latvia's macroeconomic indicators and incomes still lag significantly behind those countries on the other side of the Baltic Sea and Western Europe in general. This is also the main reason for the population decrease. Taking advantage of free movement and employment opportunities, many have moved to other countries where they can earn higher incomes. During the occupation of the USSR, nothing like this was possible; the borders of this totalitarian state were closed. One could ask a rhetorical question: how many people would have remained in the USSR if they had had the opportunity to leave?

It is worth recalling that the main reason for the construction of the Berlin Wall was to stop Germans escaping from the socialist paradise of East Germany to West Germany. It was not the fear of American tanks, but the fear of the population itself, which was not ready to live under the political and socio-economic conditions offered by the USSR-controlled East Germany. In the month of July 1961 alone, shortly before the construction of the wall, about 30,000 East Germans fled to West Berlin. The total number who left East Germany was 2.6 million.

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This is exactly how many people lived in Latvia in 1990, on the eve of the declaration of independence.

Population movement is one of the indicators of high uncertainty. Leaving one's place of residence is a major step out of one's comfort zone. The Latvian case shows that people leave their homes relatively voluntarily if they fear the danger of retaliation, or if living and working conditions elsewhere look much more promising.

Yet Latvia has also been a place that attracts people. I have already mentioned German guest workers in Riga at the beginning of the twentieth century. The reason for their arrival was simple: rapidly growing industry in Riga required extensive labour, more than could be attracted from rural areas of Latvia. The condition for working in technologically complex enterprises at that time was elementary education. Guest workers from Russia turned out to be unsuitable for this work; almost all were illiterate. The 1897 census of the Russian Empire found that only one in five could read and write. But not everywhere: in rural areas of Latvia, in the Kurzeme and Vidzeme provinces, the literacy rate exceeded 90 per cent, which was one of the highest rates in Europe. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Provodņiks chemical industry company in Riga had only 177 Russians out of 2800 employees. The overwhelming majority were Latvians and Lithuanians.

During the interwar period several tens of thousands of guest workers from Poland and Lithuania were employed in Latvian agriculture. This is not surprising, since GDP per capita in Latvia in 1939 was almost twice as high as in neighbouring Lithuania. A historical paradox—relative economic backwardness and poverty represented one of the factors that saved Lithuania from widespread immigration from the USSR in the first decades of Soviet occupation. And even today, it helps Lithuanians better overcome the consequences of Soviet occupation.

Latvia experienced a large-scale wave of immigration during the USSR occupation. The difference in the quality of life in Latvia and the Soviet

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Union that had captured it was striking, and this news spread like an epidemic throughout the totalitarian state. In 1946 alone, about 150,000 immigrants entered Latvia, which was 10 per cent (!) of the population living in Latvia at that time. Such an intensity of immigration in a conquered territory seems to have been experienced in Europe only during the collapse of the Roman Empire. This trend continued in the following five decades of occupation. The increase in the population was ensured by immigration—people who were looking for a better place to live and who, for the most part, came to Latvia with no respect for the local language, culture, or traditions. The historian Valdis Klišāns interviewed his neighbour in 2002 about how and why she had come to Latvia:

> Until 1950 my husband and I lived in Penza [a city in Russia]. That year, my husband heard at work that electricians were needed in the *Pribaltika*,[2] and he was also promised a higher salary. I knew nothing about the Baltics, but my sister's husband told me that German-speaking people who hated Russians lived in the *Pribaltika*. He tried to dissuade us from moving, but my husband was firm in his decision.[3]

From 1939 to 1990 the population of Latvia had grown from 2 to 2.6 million, while the number of Latvians had actually decreased during this period by about 120,000. In the Latvian capital, Riga, the proportion of Latvians had decreased to 37 per cent. From 1981 to 1988 only 25 per cent of residences in apartment buildings constructed in Riga were allocated to Latvian families.

However, not only were Latvians forced out of Latvia. The Latvian language was also deliberately forced out of state administration, business, and education systems. I studied at a Latvian school in a Riga micro-district in the 1980s. The class teacher was the wife of a Russian officer

2 Term used in Russian for the Baltic States when they were under Soviet occupation.

3 V. Klišāns, Facebook post, 28 April 2025. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=9791146237632316&set=a.1518278598252496.

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and for five years did not utter a word of Latvian. Neither in class nor on excursions. Only now, as a historian, do I understand that this was no coincidence, or that there was a critical shortage of Latvian-speaking teachers at that time. I have found documents in the archive that prove that the Russification of the education system was a targeted action and that orders came from Moscow.

In a nutshell, the rapid fluctuations in the population of Latvia have been caused by increased socio-economic turbulence, which in turn was caused by the presence of various geopolitical conflicts in Latvia. In a short time Latvia experienced both the devastation of two world wars and their consequences, and the widest range of political and economic systems. In non-academic terms—if any trouble happened, it happened right here. Very interesting for historians, but tragic for those who experienced it all. I have heard painters say that painting an ugly person is much more interesting, and the process provides much greater artistic fulfilment, than depicting someone who meets general standards of beauty. Is the history of Latvia ugly? Such a characterisation does not quite hit the mark for me, but there are parallels with the example of painting. The reader may agree: the monetary history of Latvia, with its dozen different currencies, countless devaluations, confiscatory reforms, and waves of inflation, is significantly more fascinating than that of Sweden, where the eternally boring krona (I beg the Swedes' forgiveness for such a designation, which is only for artistic purposes in the context of this essay) has experienced only a couple of devaluations. A country with a turbulent past is a desirable object for historians, but this realisation is a weak consolation for those who have experienced it all first-hand.

Some More Comparisons between Latvia and Finland

The peoples of Latvia and Finland have a similar recent history. In the nineteenth century they had come completely under the control of the Russian Empire, but they were sharply different from the territories

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inhabited by the Russians themselves. Latvia and Finland were distinctly European-oriented territories. Their aristocratic elites were much more closely related to the elites of other European nations—the Finnish to the Swedish, and the Latvian to the German and Polish. The inhabitants represented religious denominations typical of Europe—Lutheranism and Catholicism—and the level of education was incomparably higher than in Russia. There were also differences: Finland, unlike Latvia, had a certain autonomy and even had its own money in circulation. The territory of Latvia was not even united into a single administrative territory, and the eastern region of Latvia, Latgale, which was included in the Vitebsk governorate, suffered the most from this. Latin-script printing was banned in Latgale for a long time, and serfdom was abolished half a century later than in the rest of Latvia. The comparative development of Latgale and the rest of Latvia before World War I is a vivid example of what happens to territories and populations that have experienced a closer Russian embrace.

Latvia and Finland gained independence under similar circumstances. As the Russian Empire, which had not withstood the burden of the world war, collapsed, the oppressed nations took advantage of their opportunities. In both territories, supporters of a national, democratically oriented statehood had to prove their strength with weapons, defeating and driving eastward the radical supporters of Bolshevism, who dreamed of a world revolution under the auspices of Russia.

The starting positions in the formation of the nation states were different. Latvia was much more devastated during the war, with 90 per cent of the buildings in the territories adjacent to the front line destroyed. The situation was identical to that in the active combat areas of the Western Front in Belgium and France. All factory equipment and other valuables had been taken out of Latvia. The population had decreased by a third. However, the pace of recovery in Latvia was surprisingly rapid. Bold agrarian reform provided the population with work and the first entrepreneurial skills—managing one's own farm was completely different from being simply part of a hired labour force on a large farm.

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Figure 2. A new bell is installed in place of the one stolen during World War I. Latvia, Lēdurga Parish Lutheran Church, 1926. Photo by Jānis Jurjāns (Lēdurga). From the author's private archive.

Industry also gradually recovered. Complex radio-electronic goods, cars, and even aeroplanes were produced in Latvia. In 1935–39 the main sector of the Latvian economy was the bioeconomy, which also provided the majority of exports. Unlike Finland, where 90 per cent of its exports came from timber, Latvia also exported agricultural products. The bioeconomy was the backbone of exports not only in Latvia and Finland, but throughout the Baltic Sea region. The timber industry also provided 50 per cent of exports of the comparatively more industrial Sweden. Latvia's recovery was also confirmed by its GDP per capita, which in 1939 had reached 90 per cent of that of Europe (the modern European Union countries plus the United Kingdom) at that time.

On the eve of World War II, Latvia and Finland were socio-economically comparable countries. The GDP per capita differed by only 10 per cent, while residents in Latvia lived slightly longer than those in Finland. Both countries had access to an education system. The number of university students in Latvia was the largest in Europe relative to the size of the population, while in terms of the number of printed books relative to

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the population, Latvia was second only to Denmark. The cost of living was relatively low: an industrial worker in Latvia could afford more for their salary than a worker in Vienna, Rome, Prague, Warsaw, or Brussels. Statistics from the late 1930s showed that the average Latvian resident consumed more meat and dairy products than anyone else in the world. At a time when the world is struggling with climate change and other human-induced hazards, meat and milk consumption has a rather negative connotation. However, a hundred years ago it was one of the indicators characterising prosperity. In the 1930s, Latvia was a leader in another indicator that receives increased attention today: gender equality. In female employment, Latvia ranked second in Europe, right behind Lithuania.

Soviet Nightmare

In the confines of this essay I won't delve into the details of how Latvia lost its independence. In short, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact opened the gates to World War II, and the USSR, an ally of Nazi Germany at the time, shamelessly took advantage of the reluctance of three neutral, peaceful countries to engage in military confrontation. In June 1940, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were occupied. When the two totalitarian dictators Hitler and Stalin found European territory too constraining, a mutual conflict broke out in June 1941. The USSR became an ally of the USA and Britain, and helped defeat Nazism in Europe. In 1945 Stalin managed to convince his allies at the Yalta Conference and elsewhere that it was not worth damaging relations and nerves over such a trivial issue as the future of the Baltic States. In the end Stalin also held on to a large part of the rest of Europe, with which he could do as he pleased. Significantly all the countries that managed to free themselves from the domination of the USSR and become members of the European Union still receive support from the European Union's cohesion funds—thirty-five years after the collapse of the USSR! This makes us think about the far-reaching consequences and long-term costs of sacrificing territory to

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the destruction of totalitarian regimes, eighty years since the end of World War II.

Here I will only talk about Latvia during the period of occupation by the USSR in economic and financial terms. But first, a little theory. It is generally accepted that larger production volumes, along with a wide range of services provided, are an important prerequisite for the well-being of a country—even more so if some of its manufactured products are sold outside the country's borders, that is, exported. Logically, it is assumed that a profit is obtained from the sale, which can be used for other purposes, including improving the general quality of life.

In Latvia's case, during the period of the Soviet occupation things were different. There was no direct correlation between the rapid growth of production and obvious changes in the quality of life of the population in a positive direction. As an example, we can cite the changes in life expectancy in Latvia and Finland. If in 1960 life expectancy in Latvia was still (as was the case in the 1930s) higher than in Finland, then in the following decades, as the pace of industrial production in Latvia further increased, life expectancy decreased, contrary to what was happening in Finland. According to official USSR sources, the total volume of industrial production in Latvia increased 53 times between 1940 and 1985. If this figure is not sufficiently convincing, then one could take heavy industry, which I have already mentioned: metalworking and mechanical engineering. There the increase was 766 times, but in chemicals and the petrochemical industries, it was 817 times. These figures are considered exaggerated today, but a significant increase in production is undeniable, and this applies to both industry and the livestock sector in agriculture. This growth dynamic is also reflected in a relatively rapid growth in GDP per capita. Thanks to this growth rate, by the end of the 1960s Latvia's GDP per capita had approached 80 per cent of that of Europe (the modern European Union countries plus the United Kingdom) at that time. It was higher than in the satellite countries of the USSR in Central Europe, for example Czechoslovakia, but that country's standard of living at that time would have been recognised as significantly higher by any Latvian resident who had travelled there.

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Why is that? What explains this phenomenon of socio-economic processes in Latvia? Why did the growth in production and GDP not lead to an equally rapid increase in the quality of life of the population? The answer is quite simple: Latvia was located in the USSR's high-intensity production zone. The distribution of all produced added value did not take place according to any territorial principle. As a result of inter-territorial payments from the USSR budget, added value flowed out of Latvia and was spent not in the interests of the Latvian population, but for the goals set by the central government of the USSR in Moscow.

A clear answer is given by the accounts prepared by employees of the Latvian Republican Branch of the State Bank of the USSR on the execution of USSR budget revenues and expenditures in each calendar year. Latvia was an evident loser in the internal transactions of the USSR budget. Such a conclusion can be drawn by analysing all Soviet budget revenues and expenditures in the territory of Latvia, summarising both components of the USSR budget: the Union budget and the Latvian SSR budget. During the entire period of occupation, more was paid into the USSR budget from the territory of Latvia than was spent from the budget in the territory of Latvia. In percentage terms, 18 per cent more was paid into the USSR budget from Latvia than the budget spent in Latvia. This calculation also corresponds to elementary logic. Where did the war-ravaged USSR, which refused financial assistance from other countries to restore its economy, get funds to invest in the prosperity of the Baltics? And why do so in a territory that was in a relatively better situation than other areas widely devastated by the war? In a way, what the USSR did can be called an interpretation of cohesion policy (funds from more developed regions were redirected to other purposes and to other territories). Only in Latvia it was never coordinated with anyone.

When analysing budget expenditures of the USSR in Latvia, one cannot fail to mention disproportionately high military expenditures. In the early 1950s they even approached half of all budget expenditures of the USSR in Latvia. This is evidence that the USSR was intensively preparing for war. Riga was the headquarters of the USSR Baltic War

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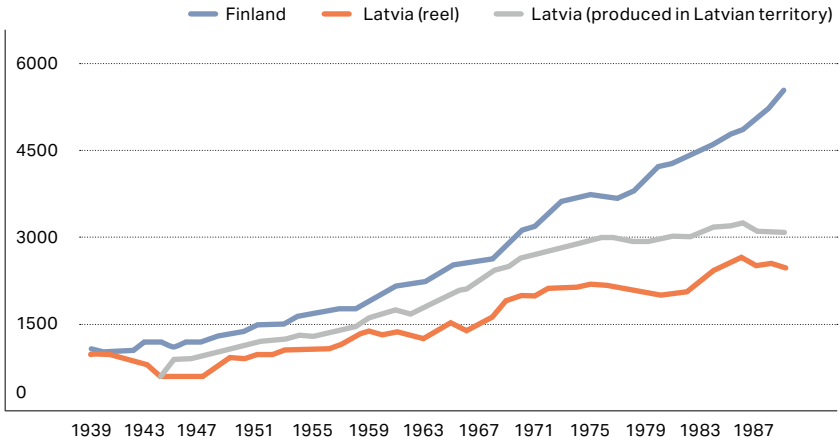

Figure 3. GDP per capita, Finland and Latvia, 1939–89 (in USD at 2011 rate, at constant prices)

District, and a significantly larger military contingent was concentrated in Latvia than in Lithuania and Estonia. Of course, it can be said that the presence of the army in the territory of Latvia also warmed up the economy; however, the negative consequences significantly outweighed this potential benefit. To summarise the entire period of the occupation, expenditures of the military and repressive ministries (the Ministry of Defence, KGB, and Ministry of Internal Affairs) were 19 per cent of all expenditures in the territory of Latvia from the budget of the USSR (taking the budget of the Latvian SSR and the Union together).

This is the right moment to return to the comparison of Latvia and Finland. Let me remind you that in 1939 GDP per capita of Latvia and Finland differed by only 10 per cent (Figure 3). In turn, by 1990, Latvia's GDP per capita was half that of Finland's. And if we apply the identical USSR 'colonialism coefficient', which we obtain from an analysis of USSR budget payments, the difference is even greater. By converting the unearned GDP into modern EUR, then the amount for 1946–90 is 824 billion. This is what was stolen from Latvia, from the development of Latvia, in modern monetary terms. These were funds that were not

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invested in Latvia and in people—in infrastructure, health, education, and development. And this best explains why Latvia, like other territories that have been under the USSR, still lags behind Western European countries in many socio-economic indicators.

Conclusion

Immediately after the restoration of independence, no one understood how badly Latvia was affected by the USSR occupation. With the benefit of what we know today, we would certainly have carried out many reforms in the 1990s much more resolutely. We would have replaced those in power who were too entrenched in the previous system, and we would have introduced more radical changes in education at all levels to bring it up to European standards.

Looking to the long term, we can certainly learn how expensive it is to sacrifice a territory to aggressor countries. If anyone believes that returning large territories of Ukraine to Russia is worth the price—because, perhaps, peace and a certain reconciliation will be achieved in the short term—then supporters of such a peace had better understand what the negative consequences will be, especially for those residents and territories that will fall under Russian control. In the long term, it will certainly cost much more, and the example of Latvia and the entire Baltics and Central Europe perfectly demonstrates this.

Crimes committed in the USSR have still not been assessed internationally. It should be our common moral and legal obligation to all who have suffered from these crimes. And not to turn against the criminal is to create new crimes, because the criminal has developed a feeling of impunity.

Another thought comes to mind. Perhaps biting into the Baltics turned out to be too bitter a taste in the end for the USSR. It was not possible

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to completely devour the Baltics, and this was one of the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. The desire of the Baltics to restore their independence ultimately shook the foundations of the Soviet empire and allowed others to gain independence as well. This is of course a bold hypothesis, but it is perhaps worth the leaders of the current Russia reflecting on as they attempt to swallow the surrounding territories and their inhabitants.

Just as a sustainable forest ecosystem requires different sizes of animals, so does a human-made ecosystem require the same of countries. The small grey cat in *Flow* saved its bigger companions from trouble, while relatively small Latvia gave *Flow* to the world. Just like some history lessons.

Change through Resonance in Classical Ballet

A Review Essay by Chiyuki Aoi

Mayerling: Paris Opera Ballet at the Palais Garnier, 2024/25 season.[1]
Sixtieth anniversary retrospective of MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet: Royal Ballet, London, 2025.

Giselle: English National Ballet, Taiwan, May 2025.[2]

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, art, ballet, resonance, social change*

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This essay discusses the contribution of art, particularly classical ballet, to twenty-first-century Western societies. Contemporary populations face endemic socio-economic problems of segregation and alienation—important dimensions of identity politics that characterise their societies. The arts, including classical ballet, make a significant contribution to how we understand strategic communications by considering social issues surrounding migration, the status of women in society, and mutual co-optation of political power and private interests, to list a few. 'Contemporary forms of slavery' is an appropriate way to describe the experiences of migrant women exploited and often abused in

1 Choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan and first performed by the Royal Ballet in 1978; the reviewed version is the Royal Ballet's co-production with the BBC (1994).

2 Choreographed by Akram Khan and first performed by the English National Ballet in 2016.

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domestic household work.[3] At the same time, transnational Me Too movements have emerged to bring down powerful male figures in film, fashion, entertainment, journalism, and finance who for decades abused aspiring actors and models, subordinates and minors. Feminism is now being redefined in Europe within a framework of ethnonationalist and anti-immigration ideologies[4] to further complicate conversations around segregation. In a world where wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated in a small elite of individuals, the ways in which powerful individuals interact with governments influence public policy and inevitably create new schisms and divisions, while benefiting only the few. In other words, I am looking at the intersection of social issues of segregation and exploitation with strategic communications expressed through the arts, in this case classical ballet.

The year 2025 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Royal Ballet production of the twentieth-century masterpiece of narrative ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan. The Royal Ballet Covent Garden, London, is celebrating this milestone at the time of writing. Such a commemoration represents the ballet world's attempt to retell the famous story and explore the masterpiece's fresh relevance to today's audiences. The relaunch of the much-loved repertoire proves the continuing resonance of this work to contemporary dance audiences.

How does classical ballet speak to the field of strategic communications? This question may be surprising to many, even to theorists of the latter or its practitioners. The answer lies in ballet's ability to continually retell stories known to and loved by people across the world and not limited to its point of origin in Europe. And just like film and music—two popular art forms understood to reflect closely shifting norms in society—classical ballet also reflects the society in which it is born and experienced.

3 Documentaries such as *Overseas* (dir. Sung-A Yoon, 2019) chronicle these practices. Other press revelations include Michelle Abad and Ana P. Santos, 'Report Shows Abuse of Domestic Workers by Diplomats', *DW*, 19 September 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/report-shows-abuse-of-domestic-workers-by-diplomats/a-66862451.

4 Note entities such as Collectif Némésis, among others. Alessandra Bocchi, 'The Rise of Right Wing Feminism in France', *American Conservative*, 13 July 2020, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-rise-of-right-wing-feminism-in-france/ [accessed 31 March 2025].

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Like films and music, classical ballet is built around *resonance*. According to Neville Bolt, resonance is about having an ability to evoke strong emotional, cultural, or ideological responses in audiences' minds, and further, through connecting with their pre-existing beliefs, emotions, or memories, amplifying their impact and embedding them into larger existing narratives.[5] Similar processes are reproduced in ballet. Though it is an art form deeply rooted in the classical tradition, it cannot at the same time but reflect contemporary social attitudes and changes in society. *Resonance* and *relevance* sit at its heart. Ballet cannot hope to continue without connecting with compassion to the emotional lives of audiences, but it also reflects particular social, economic, and political trends and upheavals that capture a particular historical moment. It not only affirms change but projects to the future, while at times undermining established attitudes and behaviours. Hence, ballet is an influential promoter of change beyond the artistic sphere. In other words, *renewal*, not simply resonance and relevance, sits at its core.[6]

A triad of resonance, relevance, and renewal is essential to delivering successful strategic communications. Ideas and memories resonate in the minds of audiences in such a way as to reinforce their relevance to people's lives by renewing what is familiar, rendering it ever more appealing. Choreographers by this analysis are strategic communicators. So, too, are directors and producers of ballet who invest these fundamental precepts into each new performance. Accomplished choreographers are without exception masters not only of an extremely demanding art form but of storytelling.

Storytelling in ballet is represented through movement and silent acting, not through words (except where opera pieces are inserted, for example). Audiences are required to understand (even intuitively) the meaning of

5 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

6 I am indebted to Kevin O'Hare, director of the Royal Ballet, Covent Garden, who was principal dancer with the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet/Birmingham Royal Ballet before leading an equally successful career as a director/producer. He confirmed in my interview (4 March 2025) that these elements are central to classical ballet production. I am grateful to Sir Lloyd Dorfman for his support in writing this essay.

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certain movements, the very placement of the body, and what it signifies. Rigorously trained dancers appear amid stage sets, decor, costumes, lighting, and music; in other words, the creation as a whole under a director and producer presents a far more persuasive way of projecting stories and messages than bald words or logical explanations of social, economic, and political policy.

Classical ballet is widely associated in the popular imagination with fairy tales, like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *Giselle*, and tragedies such as *Manon* and *Romeo and Juliet.* The presentation of these pieces on stage, as the stories are retold, evolves over time, reflecting preferences and social conventions of the time, as well as a director's and choreographer's personal creativeness and preferences. Meanings and lessons people draw out of viewing these performances may alter, depending upon social situations and conventions of the time. Not all depicted themes or stage presentations change substantially in their content or interpretation. For example, established training and techniques of dance continue to define classical ballet, including using pointe shoes. Yet ballet captures different moods of the time, symbolising the journey through time and history, and bringing viewers the past, present, and future together on a single stage. Classical ballet juxtaposes past traditions with evolutions and even radical (re)inventions, or (re)interpretations of stories or events mark departures from the past.

Perhaps one such departure was the Royal Ballet's new production in the 2024/25 season *MaddAddam*, choreographed by Wayne McGregor. Highly acclaimed for its multidisciplinary collaboration with other genres such as contemporary dance, music, fashion, and literature, the ballet tackles complex themes around climate change, bioengineering, societal collapse, and human hubris, drawing on the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood's dystopian trilogy. The staging of this production was precisely such an attempt to 'renew' the art form of ballet.[7] It also brings a new perspective to both the art and contemporary concerns relating to environmental degradation and societal fragility. Choreographers,

7 Kevin O'Hare, interview with the author, 4 March 2025.

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directors, and producers are agents of change: their projects translated to the stage often mirror social and political struggles in the outside world, and they spread their ideas in pursuit of their progressive ambitions.

Two pieces of choreography that characterise late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century ballet encompass resonance, relevance, and renewal. Both were groundbreaking work that represented a radical departure from traditional ballet styles, as will be explored below, and contributed to the evolution of narrative ballet. One is *Mayerling*, one of the many masterpieces by the doyen of the theatrical Royal Ballet tradition, MacMillan, which premiered in Covent Garden in 1978*;* the other is Akram Khan's *Giselle*, first performed by the English National Ballet at Sadler's Wells in 2016, which is a radical reinterpretation of the original piece dating back to the mid nineteenth century. Both creations have remained fixtures in the cherished repertoires of these companies, performed frequently in theatres far from home. *Mayerling* was at the Palais Garnier in Paris in the 2024/25 season, and *Giselle* by the English National Ballet toured Taiwan in 2025.

What follows is not an art critic's review of these ballet masterpieces in performance. Rather, I attempt to bring a fresh perspective to ballet as both art form and strategic communications, through an exploration of ballet as an inherent form of strategic communications. First, I will clarify the story these masterpieces tell; ballet is essentially a storytelling art in which English ballet has a particularly strong tradition. Second, I want to discuss how these two pieces represent both renewal—highly creative—and relevance—a highly ambitious form of storytelling. Finally, I want to show how resonance builds on them to offer a fresh perspective on strategic communicators.

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The Story: Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling* and Akram Khan's *Giselle*

Both MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*, now in its sixtieth year, and his *Mayerling* are large productions in three acts, each a narrative ballet with a complex storyline. Both stories are well known, but the way each was presented by the choreographer was groundbreaking. Both have dynamic and emotional *pas de deux*, with breathtaking techniques and a lyrical quality. The former's emotional character owes much to Sergei Prokofiev's musical score, while a compilation of scores by Franz Liszt invests the latter with a rich emotive quality. Yet *Mayerling* was considered more radical in featuring dark and controversial themes such as addiction, illness, and violence, as well as more realistic 'emotional crises known to men and women today',[8] so much so that its choreographer was fearful of critical review.[9]

The story of *Mayerling*[10] features a male protagonist, a tormented young prince (Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria-Hungary), who finds himself drawn to more liberal causes than favoured by his conservative father. Unable to find comfort and love at the court and consumed by his own illnesses and addiction, he is driven to double suicide with his younger mistress, Baroness Mary Vetsera. While this was not the first ballet to feature a male lead, it marked a significant shift by placing a male character at the centre of a full-length narrative ballet with intense psychological complexity and technical demands. The protagonist's distressed emotional status is expressed through five different *pas de deux* with three main female characters—his wife, Princess Stéphanie of Belgium; his mother, Empress Elisabeth; and his mistress, Vetsera—each a strong personality in her own way.

8 Kenneth MacMillan, interview with Clement Crisp, https://www.kennethmacmillan.com/interview [accessed 30 March 2025].

9 Jann Parry, *Different Drummer: The Life of Kenneth MacMillan* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

10 The theme was featured in well-known films such as *Mayerling* (1968), starring Omar Sharif and Catherine Deneuve, and *Mayerling* (dir. Anatole Litvak, 1936).

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The prince's relationship with other women is intricately danced and acted out in separate *pas de deux*. One is with Countess Marie Larisch. As the crown prince's former mistress courting his renewed attention by introducing Vetsera to him, she is probably one of the most interesting female characters in ballet.[11] Another *pas de deux* is with Mitzy Caspar, a tavern worker (or courtesan) and a businesslike confidante of the prince, and who was his first choice before Vetsera with whom to commit suicide. Exhibiting some common sense, she rejects his offer. Both modern and feminised depictions of intimacy in these different relationships make this masterpiece a more intelligent and recognisable narrative than the original story might have inspired in audiences' minds.

The choreography is 'feminised' because its female dance is not only complex and technically demanding, but also expressive of the variety and depth of its female characterisation. MacMillan demonstrates a deep understanding of female dance techniques, which he pushes to extremes and which results in complex and nuanced portrayals of female characters.

A similarly radical departure from traditional ballet is to be found in the present century in Akram Khan's *Giselle*. This reimagining of the beloved classical ballet, which premiered in 1841 at the Paris Opéra, incorporates traditional Indian Kathak dance (in which Khan is trained) as well as contemporary dance. At the invitation of the then artistic director of English National Ballet, Tamara Rojo, a renowned former principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, Khan choreographed his own version of *Giselle* for the company. As Rojo observes, Khan was especially strong in projecting 'narratives'. He was also notable for his ability to mix different dance vocabularies, as exemplified in these various forms of dance.[12]

In a modern twist, Giselle in this original Khan choreography is set among a community of migrant workers (the Outcasts) in a garment factory. As the curtain goes up, workers place their hands on a gigantic wall at the rear of the stage. But the wall does not move, symbolising

11 Attested by Kevin O'Hare, interview, 4 March 2025.

12 'Akram Khan's *Giselle*: Ballet Meets Kathak', https://www.ballet.org.uk/production/akram-khan-giselle/ [accessed 20 March 2025].

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separation of the working community from the Landlords, who have long exploited them. Albrecht, who approaches Giselle on her side of the wall, is a landlord, unbeknown to her. In this version of *Giselle* she seems to be pregnant with his child, as with a gesture she draws his attention to her abdomen. But as the landlord's family and fiancée appear from behind the wall, Albrecht returns to them. Giselle comes to realise that from touching the fabric of the dress his fiancée is wearing, their worlds are different.

The setting involving migrant factory workers gives the well-known story of love and betrayal between patrician and commoner a socio-economic and cultural-ideological twist. Giselle is abandoned to her grief and to her death, and in her death joins the band of ghosts (the Wilis)—a story grounded in a nineteenth-century obsession with phantoms.[13] In this version, however, the Wilis are not betrayed young women who died before their weddings, but women who were killed while working in the factory, indicating a highly dangerous work environment where they are exploited, reflecting the choreographer's intent to further reorient the story. The highly original choreography gives the combative band of Wilis and the leading Wili (called Myrtha) a swordlike stick. They carry it between their teeth before beating the floor to produce a loud sound. Giselle is striking in her expression of determination to protect her lover against the aggressive Wilis. The character of Myrtha is one of the most complex female figures in the world of ballet, who seems to be torn between tender hesitation and temptation for violent revenge. Giselle is depicted not as a naive, exploited young woman but as an independent human being exercising her free will, capable of making her own decisions in complex situations. Having protected her betrayer, she leaves him behind forever and disappears with the Wilis as night falls.

Perhaps characteristic of the twenty-first century, the choreography reflects a highly intercultural atmosphere. Ballet companies are more cosmopolitan probably than at any time in ballet's history, reflecting the

13 Noritaka Kikuchi, 'La légende transformée de Wilis sur la scène de *Giselle*', *Life Design Studies* 13 (2017): 93–106 [in Japanese].

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practice of international hiring of young talent and the spread of ballet as an art form beyond Europe. At the 2025 Prix de Lausanne, considered the measure of success for dancers below the age of eighteen aspiring to become professional ballet dancers, winners of the competition for the most coveted scholarships included two from South Korea, two from Japan, one from China, three from the United States, and one from the United Kingdom.[14] Khan's *Giselle*, meanwhile, is a phenomenal mixture of Indian classical and contemporary and classical ballet; hence its cosmopolitan vocabulary. Like *Mayerling* it is a superb form of narrative ballet, a storytelling par excellence, engaging not in words but in this case multiple dance 'vocabularies'.

The powerful reinvention of the classical story, already familiar around the world, conveys a strong feminist message through the portrayal of a determined and compassionate woman who remains marginalised. The narrative is overlaid with another story—of a migrant worker living in a world indifferent to her struggles and those of her community. This resonates with contemporary societal challenges, particularly the integration of intercultural migrants, which brings both enriching contributions and cultural or political tensions with which societies often find themselves grappling.

Relevance

As is already clear, MacMillan's *Mayerling* and Khan's *Giselle* are masterpieces that speak to our everyday moral and social dilemmas. They represent proof that classical ballet does not always have to speak of fairy tales, although classical forms and fairy tales are a magnet for first-time ballet viewers. Rather, it reinvents and adapts, so that themes become relevant to our contemporary concerns and sensitivities.

14 Prix de Lausanne, 'The Prix de Lausanne Is Pleased to Announce the Names of Its Nine Prize Winners!', 8 February 2025, https://www.prixdelausanne.org/prize-winners-2025/ [accessed 24 March 2025].

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Each piece speaks to different sets of issues, which underline the versality of the ballet form. *Mayerling* deals, at its core, with the complexity of human emotions and sociopolitical relations, which, when handled by troubled personalities in positions of power, intertwine to produce unforeseen and catastrophic outcomes. The ballet's choreography depicts both private and public scenes, subtly adapting to different settings—ranging from household and apartment dramas to chaotic tavern dances and conspiracies at the imperial court, where individuals and groups plot to serve their interests, whether for the security of the court, or wealth, or affection. The male heir to the empire eventually falls victim to his own troubled life and the pressures of public duty, compounded by conspiracies and even suspicion from his own father, who fears that his son may threaten his own position. The blending of private and public interests emerges as a universal theme in politics, strikingly reminiscent of twenty-first-century dynamics where national power and billionaire-owned industries often co-opt one another. In this context private lives—marked by personal preferences, wealth, and excess—are interwoven with public affairs.

In *Giselle* the classical tale is transformed into a scene of ideological and social struggle. The celebrated story of love, betrayal, and redemption is overlaid with tragedies of intergroup rivalry involving migrant workers. Again this is peculiarly reminiscent of twenty-first-century Western societies.

But the most striking theme both pieces commonly evoke is the evolving representation of women in societies. While *Mayerling* centres on a male character, the women around him display strength, though they are contained somewhat inside stereotypical female roles. They are independent characters, who, while playing the role society imposes on them, exercise a considerable degree of strategic autonomy, whether in accepting or rejecting the approaches from the prince (his mother rejects him, to his dismay), while most women keep him at arm's length. The young Vetsera seems to be the only star-struck character intent on accommodating his demands.

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Khan's *Giselle* marks a complete departure from the stereotyping of women in Western fairy tales. Here, Giselle exercises her own choice over the limited options society allows her. In many ways she is depicted as a rebel, first against social convention—although she proves too weak to physically survive rejection and abandonment—and after death against the rule of mighty Myrtha, who pushes her to avenge Albrecht for his betrayal. In this ballet the classical peasant girl from a picturesque village is replaced by a ghostly image of a garment-factory worker in her minimalist grey costume, acted out against a wall of grey. Even the Wilis—still pronounced in their lethal intentions—are far less willowy (this ballet has long been known for its sylphlike phantoms) but have become more warrior-like. Here we can discern the suggestion of genderless characters, more in tune with the cultural preferences of many twenty-first-century societies.

Renewal

Both *Mayerling* and *Giselle* reveal a radical departure from tradition (while keeping it as the foundation of the art form) with a modern characterisation of both male and female characters, which gives these masterpieces a contemporary relevance. Indeed, it is through renewal—reinterpretation and reinvention—that ballet as an art form survives and thrives.

In 'renewing' ballet, physical improvement of dancing technique in the art form becomes an essential part of storytelling. The more intense the emotions projected in the storylines, the more physically demanding becomes the performance. The physicality of dance sustains its visual appeal. Viewers understand the story and are moved by it through *seeing* the movement as it develops on stage. Movement in itself—feats of athleticism achieved by human bodies—becomes a strong conveyer of

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messages, and triggers processes of association through resonance much more effectively than would words alone.[15]

Mayerling demands, from both male and female dancers, an excellent level of technical mastery, especially for the dancer performing the crown prince's part. As the central character of the ballet, he has to dance through all three acts, with numerous high lifts of female dancers. The physique, particularly the upper torso, needs to be trained with support from scientifically and medically accomplished trainers. This is a very contemporary evolution compared to the time when MacMillan was still training in the 1940s. Indeed, the choreography of the crown prince and the lead female characters in a series of *pas de deux* defied the norms of the day when the ballet premiered, and remains breathtaking today.

Such a level of creativity seems to have grown out of the particularly free and flexible culture of the Royal Ballet, London. The company has produced and benefited from a series of world-class, innovative choreographers.

Not only culture but administration and management seem prerequisites for productions to survive the test of subsequent generations. The training required to attain high-quality ballet performance speaks to the fact that ballet is in many countries supported through high levels of state funding and managed as a national project. But causality should perhaps be seen from the other perspective. Unless the science and 'management of the body' requiring certain types of bureaucratic organisation and increased budgets are demanded, the height of artistic form will remain elusive. A new organisation of a political economy to enable the systematisation (or scientification) of types of training which existed only in the European political sphere before the twentieth century, but now are prevalent globally in the twenty-first century, seems to have contributed to the evolution and renewal of the art form.

15 Kevin O'Hare, interview, 4 March 2025.

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Resonance

Elements of both relevance and renewal have an impact on storytelling in ballet. These have made the *effect* of these pieces greater than simple entertainment, by creating more emotional and intellectual connections to contemporary audiences. Hence, they *resonate* with memories and associations of meaning at individual and collective societal levels. The effect becomes broader as the art form grows increasingly borderless. As well as being enjoyed as a high art form and as entertainment, both *Giselle* and *Mayerling* have been profoundly influential across the world and across cultures. Perhaps because ballet is a visual medium, as well as musical, it travels further than words alone.

This speaks to the conditions that allow for resonance. First, there is the *universal* character in messages that these pieces carry. Again, the two stories that are introduced above resonate with very different characteristics and emotions—*Mayerling* with its emotional crisis, experienced by various personalities comprising the story, but especially the protagonist, the prince, who take the path to self-destruction, and *Giselle* with a determination to exercise strategic autonomy despite the insurmountability of the human condition, namely, a young woman choosing to save a betrayer. Lessons that viewers might draw may be culturally or age dependent. Yet the stories themselves are universal.

Mayerling tells a tragic story of the life of the rich and powerful that spins out of control. A victim (albeit a willing one) chooses to comply out of her own adoration of the prince. This story is universal. It evokes in the viewers' hearts both sympathy and criticism. Sympathy perhaps for the intensity of emotion lived on stage, as well as for the inevitable fates that both male and female characters meet. The very drama that unfolds at court, too, seems a universal story: the peculiar exchange between holders of privilege and those whose ambitions seek to benefit from that power. Here is a familiar story of power and corruption in high places. Who can say this symbiosis is not universal?

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Giselle, too, is a widely recognisable story, depicting love, trust, and betrayal. There is a common admiration, perhaps, for redemption after betrayal, symbolised by the image of the once lively young woman who turns into a ghostly, willowy figure. The plot is not overly idealistic or simple; there is no happy end. In Khan's version the story leaves behind an unhappy, solitary Albrecht, who continues to search the grey wall with his bare hands, the wall that separates his original world from one where his memory now rests. But that sadness and regret are also universal sentiments. In setting the scene in an ideological context of class and cultural separation between landlords and immigrants, however, Khan's version makes a plea to the minds of viewers for a world where such an artificial separation need no longer exist. Audiences would certainly be left to wonder if it might at all be possible to remove the injustice of irrational, artificial separation, while still blaming Albrecht for his weakness. His indecisiveness and in-betweenness trap this character in a form of ambiguity.

This brings up a second aspect of resonance in these two stories. That is, the possibility of further evolution towards a better life, although ballet as a visual art remains far from any didactic qualities, logical or concrete, resembling a policy or manifesto. But one leaves the theatre feeling a sense of agitation, which provokes one to consider a dilemma roused by the event just witnessed on stage. Here the idea of individual and societal improvement is not so culturally dependent as one might otherwise think; again, it appears to be *universal.* Endemic corruption of the court seems to be a constant, but still one widely condemned. And who would wish the world to be filled with even more Giselles? Should societies tolerate individual freedom being sacrificed for the power dynamics of their governments or for social conventions that sustain Giselle's and her community's marginalisation for reasons of class?

The effect of these ballet masterpieces, then, goes beyond the reproduction of tragedies that stem from power and its abuse, or from social conventions. The visual depiction of horrific consequences of tolerating such injustices persuades audiences of the need for change. Words required to depict

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the extreme conditions of real life are translated and distilled into a 120-minute dance, the effect of which is immediate and uniform, while consistently reflected in the enduring popularity of these stories. If resonance is about evoking strong emotional, cultural, or ideological responses in the audiences' minds, and hence structuring reactions in a way that conforms to more dominant narratives, as noted by Bolt, then ballet performs this with astonishing success.

Hence resonance is a function of both universality of the message and suggestion of change in the right direction. Which usually calls on a liberal resolution to extant political and social problems, rather than the preservation of corrupt power relations or repressive social conditions that divide and segregate groups and communities.

Implications for Strategic Communications

These observations bring us to the most recent discussions about how to understand strategic communications in and around the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The first strategic communications doctrine that NATO published, *Allied Joint Publication-10* (AJP-10), and the third report from the Terminology Working Group of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, both published in 2023, endorsed a concept of strategic communications rooted in fundamental freedoms of individuals that support and extend liberal values across the member nations of the Atlantic Alliance.[16] Hence AJP-10 contextualised strategic communications within the rules-based international order as 'constantly challenged by actors with alternate ideologies', and declared strategic communications to be 'founded on NATO's values' as enshrined in its foundational Washington Treaty of 1949, which speaks of fundamental freedoms. AJP-10 further

16 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications: Allied Joint Publication-10 (AJP-10)*, NATO Standardization Office, March 2023, p. 25.

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emphasises that all activities of NATO forces, at all times, will remain 'coherent with the Alliance's narrative, aims, objectives and values', indicating the weight it attaches to narrative coherence with actions, or a commitment to closing the so-called say-do gap so that actions speak louder than words.[17]

The NATO Strategic Communications Terminology Working Group considers strategic communications to be 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'. Increasingly, values that apply here are meant to be liberal, democratic, and Western in the context of NATO strategic communications.[18]

In light of the earlier discussion of resonance in the two ballet masterpieces, these concepts explored by NATO strategic communications essentially place values at the centre of any intellectual inquiry. Bolt's dictum of 'the long-term shaping and shifting of discourses in societies … aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions'[19] is served successfully by ballet's masterpieces, as they rely on visual images (moving images) to achieve effects intended to provoke viewers into reflecting on their own societies in a particular way. More precisely, the primary effect must be for audiences simply to enjoy this sophisticated art in itself, but the secondary effect might be that they are led ('nudged', in the jargon) to believe that what they have seen is rather awful or sad, albeit in a dramatic form of entertainment. And the values they instil in the hearts and minds of viewers are essentially liberal, centring on fundamental freedoms. Hence, audiences are at the same time given hope that things will turn towards the better in the future, given the historic trajectory of liberal values set on changing societies. Practice at the court with its unchecked powers, limited only by personal weakness, evokes a sense of

17 Ibid., p. 69.

18 Neville Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023).

19 Neville Bolt, foreword, *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4–5.

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disdain and inspires an urge for change in audiences' minds. The ghostly figure of Giselle evokes not only a sense of sympathy but one of enmity for social conventions that propel separation rather than unity.

Universal and timeless emotions explain the longevity of these stories. They reveal the power of stories that move people. When performed by trained dancers of excellence, their movements create effects that reach depths that words alone cannot reach. The impact of visual materials, such as lighting and staging, and the accompanying music are not as subservient as might be thought at first sight; rather, they serve to harmonise diverse cultures.

Again, the power of the visual (dance) grows by creating a relevance to contemporary society—unchecked power and corruption, and social conventions that segregate groups in society. These form the underlying themes of the story being danced out. The power of the visual also stems from renewal. Both masterpieces strive to ensure that techniques meet the most exacting standards, enhanced by scientific, medical, financial, administrative, and artistic experts. Aesthetics are enriched when costumes and stage settings of older generations are updated with contemporary variations. Increasingly we see a tendency to more minimalist than elaborately romantic variation. All this creates multiple resonances connecting layers of memory through the centuries, making stories more empathetic and appreciated by audiences.

Conclusion

Ours is an age of contested change in social attitudes. Movements of outrage such as Me Too globally still contend with forces that undermine female self-determination, decontextualising and recontextualising feminism within strong or extreme right-wing ideologies, or address contests over equality of pay in the workplace more generally. They are set against what appears to be a rise in human trafficking across borders,

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and at the same time the promotion of misogynistic bloggers on the internet—all of which offers a background to how we should see our world through the eyes of ballet. Two of its masterpieces, one from the twentieth century and another from the twenty-first, display common features that speak to strategic communications, especially the centrality of relevance and renewal in enabling resonance in the minds of audiences to mirror a broader reading of what strategic communications can be in today's societies. Ballet's competitiveness as a strategic communications medium stems from the universality of its message and optimistic posture towards a better future. It weighs the direction of likely change in societies, which contemporary ballet at least defines as liberal-democratic. Ballet thus becomes a form of strategic communications in itself, as it strives for continued resonance with global audiences.

Leadership Lessons from the Limelight and Shadows

A Review Essay by Mitch Ilbury

Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy
Henry Kissinger. Penguin Random House, 2024.

On Leadership
Tony Blair. Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, leadership, decision-making, strategy, geopolitics*

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Mitch Ilbury is the director of Mindofafox. He co-authored with Clem Sunter the bestselling book *Thinking the Future: New Perspectives from the Shoulders of Giants*, published by Penguin Random House.

Who knows more about leadership: the prince, or the prince's advisor? The former is at the helm, making the big decisions—his head is the one history will mount on a pike if things go awry. The latter lurks in the shadows, nudging, manipulating, prodding, restraining—unencumbered by the burden of direct accountability but wielding influence in ways the prince often cannot. The advisor, unblinded by the glare of power, sees nuance, while the prince feels the weight of expectation.

Tony Blair was the prince of British politics for more than a decade, the architect of a centrist revolution that dragged Labour's calcified leftism into the realm of electability. He forged his leadership in the heat of public scrutiny through persuasion, pragmatism, and political theatre—part conviction, part performance.

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Henry Kissinger, on the other hand, was never a prince. He was the strategist in the wings, the Machiavellian maestro whispering in the ears of presidents. He dealt in the currency of power but spent it in careful increments, exercising influence that outlived his tenure in office. For over half a century, he was Washington's grand strategist, a geopolitical consigliere whose words shaped the calculus of power from Washington to Beijing.

Both men—one a prince, the other a prince's advisor—have turned their reflections on leadership into books. Both have legacies that inspire admiration and invite condemnation in equal measure. But to ignore their perspectives would be to ignore two of the most influential figures in modern political history. If we want to understand what makes a great leader—not in abstract theorising, but in the messy, real-world grind of power—we must grapple with their ideas.

Our task here is set out clearly in Kissinger's own assessment of the importance of deep literacy:

> What risks being lost in an age dominated by the image? The quality goes by many names—erudition, learnedness, serious and independent thinking—but the best term for it is 'deep literacy', defined by the essayist Adam Garfinkle as '[engaging with] an extended piece of writing in such a way as to anticipate an author's direction and meaning'. Ubiquitous and penetrating, yet invisible, deep literacy was the 'background radiation' of the period in which the six leaders profiled in this book came of age.[1]

So, what can we learn about leadership when looking at it from the shadows and the limelight? To give the game away at the outset, the lesson

1 Henry Kissinger, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2024), p. 405. The Garfinkle quotation cited is from Adam Garfinkle, 'The Erosion of Deep Literacy', *National Affairs* Nº 43 (Spring 2020), https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-erosion-of-deep-literacy.

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is simple: leadership is complicated. It demands navigating competing tensions: ideals versus pragmatism, vision versus execution, long-term strategy versus short-term necessity. A leader's decision may appear 'right' at one level but 'wrong' at another. Few, if any, consequential decisions are unambiguously good across all dimensions.

This complexity is magnified in an age where strategic communications is central to leadership. The ability to craft, influence, and share stories can determine the legitimacy of leadership itself. Blair, the quintessential modern politician, mastered the art of message discipline and media engagement, turning perception into political capital. Kissinger, a diplomat and strategist rather than a public performer, played a different game—more measured ambiguity than artful rhetoric. If Blair's leadership was about winning public sentiment, Kissinger's was about managing elite power structures.

Leadership, as revealed through these books, is about understanding the different levels at play—operational, strategic, and historical—articulating a coherent direction through the chaos, and convincing others to follow. *Great* leadership, to go beyond, is measured not just by its impact in the moment but by how it stands up to the cold, unsentimental judgement of history.

Does History Make Leaders, or Do Leaders Make History?

Various so-called great leaders of history—Churchill, Napoleon, Mandela, Roosevelt, Catherine the Great—are often revered as singular figures who bent the course of events. But were they truly the architects of history, or protagonists in a play penned by circumstance? The relationship between leaders and their contexts is a chicken-and-egg problem as old as political thought itself.

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There is an argument, favoured by the Great Man theorists, that history is the story of individuals who, through sheer force of will, intelligence, or charisma, shaped their eras. Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority is often referenced here—where a leader's power is derived not from inherited position or traditional dignity, but 'by virtue of which he is set apart from other men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities'.[2] Think of Marvel superheroes decked in spandex and flowing capes and sweeping in to save the day.

Although each is charged with different superpowers, all six leaders Kissinger examines—Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Richard Nixon, Anwar Sadat, Lee Kuan Yew, and Margaret Thatcher—were towering figures in their times. All were 'known for their directness and were often tellers of hard truths'; they 'all had a penetrating sense of reality and a powerful vision'; and all could be bold and 'acted decisively on matters of overriding national importance'.[3] Kissinger knew and had dealings with all six of them—notably as sidekick to President Nixon—but perhaps it is de Gaulle who emerges most vividly as a man whose leadership was defined by sheer self-belief in the face of impossible odds, changing from a Clark Kent into a Superman almost overnight.

If confidence is a prerequisite for leadership, then few have embodied it more unshakably, and at a more improbable moment, than the French general turned politician. In 1940, with France reeling from German occupation, de Gaulle unilaterally declared himself the leader of the Free French. His political résumé at that point? A mere two weeks as deputy defence minister.

Virtually unknown in London, where he sought to build a government in exile, de Gaulle forged ahead with his characteristic obstinacy. He alienated almost every ally he encountered; yet, through 'sheer force of will', and armed with 'nothing but his uniform and his voice',

2 Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 358.

3 Kissinger, *Leadership*, pp. 401–03.

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transformed himself from an obscure military officer into the unassailable figurehead of French resistance.[4]

In an essay in *Harper's Magazine*, published in 1965, Kissinger wrote that during World War II, de Gaulle was thinking beyond the physically existential quality of the fight.[5] His view, says Kissinger, was that victory meant nothing if it did not also restore the soul of France and its position in the world. These are notably strategic communications concerns—seeing beyond the immediacy of the blood, guts, bullets, and bones of war, and homing in on the higher purpose of *what end* the conflict should serve. He never lost sight of that and drew on it like a well of identity.

The title and essence of that essay by Kissinger described de Gaulle as an illusionist: someone who had to, for a large part of his career and leadership journey, persist in defining an image of France's greatness in the face of evidence to the contrary. As heroic as that may be, it is not difficult to see how that illusionary magic could be mustered not for good, but for evil.

On the other side of the battle for ideas and territory in World War II was another fiery and stubborn leader, Benito Mussolini. He sharpened his charisma and bold rhetoric to raise revolutionary spirit in Italy after World War I, winding together violent passions to shape the 'bundle of sticks' and protruding axe blades of fasces symbolism and intent.[6]

When addressing the Chamber of Deputies in 1922, Mussolini alluded to his ambitions to quite literally rewrite history: 'I am here to defend and strengthen to the utmost the revolution of the blackshirts and to insert it firmly into the history of the nation.'[7] This was illusion taken to the extreme—no less forceful than de Gaulle, but villainous rather

4 Ibid., p. 59.

5 Henry Kissinger, 'The Illusionist: Why We Misread de Gaulle', *Harper's Magazine*, March 1965.

6 The fasces was more than just a ceremonial object in ancient Rome—it was a stark symbol of state power, signifying both discipline and the ultimate authority to punish.

7 Benito Mussolini, *La nuova politica dell'Italia*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1928), vol. 1, p. 8.

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than heroic, highlighting the all-important connection between ends and means in strategic communications.

However, even Mussolini, one of history's most notable strongman archetypes, acknowledged that no doctrine is born completely new or can claim absolute originality.[8] He was not the absolute origin of the views that would go on to define his coming decade, but rather a chef turning raw ingredients into something of his own creation. His force of will inspired a post-war Italy where many were fired with an intense but unchannelled desire for change. Mussolini stood up and seized that naive embrace of a fascist revolutionary 'solution', thereby scrambling the rich yolk and fluffy whites of circumstance into his own evil omelette.

This distinction between hero and villain may appear obvious to most of us, but the dividing line has hidden in history for many. Kissinger identifies one striking commonality among all six of the leaders he explores was their divisiveness. He writes, 'They wanted their peoples to follow along the path they led, but they did not strive for, or expect, consensus; controversy was the inevitable by-product of the transformations they sought.'[9]

A leader doesn't push through sweeping economic reforms like Margaret Thatcher, broker peace with sworn enemies like Anwar Sadat, or forge a thriving multi-ethnic society from scratch like Lee Kuan Yew without ruffling feathers and acquiring scores of detractors along the way. To challenge the status quo at that level is to invite hostility—it's a given. Entrenched interests don't relinquish their grip willingly, and no serious act of leadership comes without alienating those invested in keeping things exactly as they are.

Often leaders must compromise on aspects of their own vision, too, which may be impossible to hold in pursuit of an overarching strategy. Sometimes it may even require doing something abhorrent, such as

8 Philip V. Cannistraro, 'Mussolini's Cultural Revolution: Fascist or Nationalist?', *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 № 3/4 (1972): 118.

9 Kissinger, *Leadership*, p. 403.

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President Truman's authorisation of dropping two atomic bombs, killing more than 150,000 innocent civilians, or Winston Churchill's ruthless yet apparently necessary call ordering the destruction of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in 1940. Broader forces were at play in both decisions, but ultimately the buck stopped with the agency of the individuals to make the calls.

Structuralists push back against these kinds of examples and instead point to the scaffolding within which certain types of leaders emerge. No Churchillian steel without World War II, no Bolshevism from Lenin without the decayed carcass of the Russian Empire, no visionary New Deal from Roosevelt without the Great Depression. Leaders may make decisions, but they do so within constraints—economic, political, social—that they can never entirely escape.

So where does Henry Kissinger stand in this debate, between Great Man theorists and structuralists? As may be expected from a focused study of six prominent leaders, he's not shy about the scope and scale of impact of great individual leaders. In his introduction Kissinger writes:

> Do individuals matter in history? A contemporary of Caesar or Mohammed, Luther or Gandhi, Churchill or FDR would hardly think of posing such a question. These pages deal with leaders who, in the unending contest between the willed and the inevitable, understood that what seems inevitable becomes so by human agency. They mattered because they transcended the circumstances they inherited and thereby carried their societies to the frontiers of the possible.[10]

Diving into the rest of the book, you may think the stage is set for these notable protagonists of history. However, a nuanced reading of the following chapters shows that Kissinger resists any simplistic dualism.

10 Ibid., p. xxvi.

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It is the relationship between structure and agent, context and person, shaper and shaped, that defines the perceptive scythe of these six figures, and the angle of the cut which marks their assent.

Kissinger intimately links each leader with the context in which they emerged, but also emphasises that *their very strength as leaders* was borne of their ability to be what was needed *at the time*. Adenauer embodied a strategy of humility for which Thatcher's hard-nosed strategy of conviction would have been ill-suited; and whereas de Gaulle's strategy of will was required to fashion a French revival, Lee Kuan Yew's direction of travel for Singapore came out of a pursuit of excellence.

The key skill of the great political leader, according to Kissinger, is balancing past, present, and future considerations to both understand where the country needs to go *and* how to take it there. Kissinger artfully articulates this in the first few lines of his book—which should adorn the bedroom walls of any aspiring leader out there:

> Any society, whatever its political system, is perpetually in transit between a past that forms its memory and a vision of the future that inspires its evolution. Along this route, leadership is indispensable: decisions must be made, trust earned, promises kept, a way forward proposed.[11]

Henry Kissinger references Churchill's famous assertion that to prepare for leadership, one must study history. It is fitting, then, that reading Kissinger often feels like engaging with a man who did not just study history but shaped it over the last sixty years. His reflections on leadership are steeped in historical context, but they also carry the weight of someone who understood the interplay between individual agency and grand historical forces.

11 Ibid., p. 1.

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Yet, while studying history may be necessary, it is not sufficient. Even the most diligent historian cannot fully penetrate what Kissinger might describe as the mist of unfolding events. Some realities remain veiled, obscured by incomplete information, shifting circumstances, and the unknowable variables of human behaviour. All the more reason why great leaders must see multiple layers of context simultaneously—an awareness that is crucial but made difficult by the ever-present fog of uncertainty.

Strategic leaders, then, must possess the qualities of an artist—sculpting the future using the materials of the present and memories of the past. Isaiah Berlin wrote:

> what makes men foolish or wise, understanding or blind, as opposed to knowledgeable or learned or well-informed, is the perception of [the] unique flavours of each situation as it is, in its specific differences—of that in it wherein it differs from all other situations, that is, those aspects of it which make it insusceptible to scientific treatment.[12]

In other words, the strategist must grasp the intangible, the nuances and subtleties that cannot be reduced to formulas or historical analogies alone.

The essential skill of a strategic leader is this: seeing the layers of the current context shaped by the past and creating a future that will generally involve compromise. But here lies the final test—the force of will behind the strategic choice must endure, and it must be strong enough to pull others forward in its wake.

So, do leaders make history, or does history make leaders? The answer, as ever, is both. Leadership is a dialogue between context and character, between fate and free will. Those who understand this duality—and communicate it effectively—are the ones who leave their mark on the world.

12 Isaiah Berlin, 'The Sense of Reality', in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 29–30.

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Mountaineering with the Political Master

Those that pick up Tony Blair's book *On Leadership* hoping to learn more about leadership generally may be disappointed. It reads like a manual for current and burgeoning statesmen. Which poses the question: what is the relevance for those of us not making the big decisions of state? Because most of us are not. While we may not need an Ikea-style build-it-yourself assembly manual for leading the mechanisms of state, understanding how the mechanisms work, and, more importantly, the mindset and considerations of those people operating the levers, will surely help us understand the system as a whole.

Blair's account provides deep insight into these inner machinations of how political leaders think, or how he believes they should think. In turn this provides a wide variety of readers with a more systemic view as to how the complex factory of political, economic, and social production works in industrial international relations. Most of us are cogs, but a more nuanced view can help us understand how and where we stack up in the estimates and judgements of those in the control room of decision-making.

Blair's leadership lessons for the twenty-first century range from taking power, to delivery, to policy lessons and communications in a new media environment. A whole section also focuses on what seems to be his primary object of attention these days: artificial intelligence (AI). His technical analysis is solid, if only surface level, and his arguments as to why AI will be the defining new technology to take our factory forward are convincing. The hope he shows, however, is quite firmly based on the positive impacts of AI, without giving due attention to the complications and unintended consequences of a new technological wave rapidly overhauling nearly all factory processes.

The two parts of Blair's book that are most relevant for our discussion, and to the readers of this journal, are parts 5 and 6, on foreign policy and communications. In his chapter titled 'Strategic Communication:

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The Difference between a Narrative and a Press Release', he makes the patent distinction between communication tactics (the 'what') and strategic communications (the 'why').

It is his reference to Peter Mandelson—former colleague, now tasked with one of the tougher jobs in British politics as UK ambassador to Washington—that sheds some original light on how Blair and other leaders may think of strategic communications—'like a washing line running the length of government … Each individual policy or initiative must be attached to the line like an item of clothing.'[13] A thoughtful and useful analogy, but perhaps only when the weather is warm, and a balmy breeze tugs gently at the dangling delicates. When the climatic conditions are less favourable, it may help to think of rock-climbing carabiners rather than washing-line pegs.

Throughout the book Blair reinforces the critical lesson that leadership must be rooted in strategy, rather than reactive impulses. A true leader does not lurch from crisis to crisis but operates within a framework of certainties—anchoring their strategic vision on known constants. Sound strategic advice. Identifying certainties—those facets of the future that can be counted on with some level of predictability—provides footholds on the steep and sheer rock faces of many geopolitical challenges. Just as a climber surveys a route, seeking stable points to plant their feet, so too must leaders map out their ascent. Big decisions can be broken down into smaller moves, each building incrementally, transforming a daunting challenge into something manageable.

Footholds of certainty are also clear and unambiguous, which means they can be communicated easily to others, or pointed out by those with a better vantage point, such as the scientists that are alerting us to the rising temperatures of climate change, or the economists warning of the effects of ageing populations. A team of climbers must agree on these stable points, ensuring a shared understanding of what will hold and what is treacherous. These footholds—and the direction they

13 Tony Blair, *On Leadership* (London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024), p. 231.

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map—become especially important when confronting the crux: the most difficult section of the climb, where minor miscalculations can have major consequences. In strategic decision-making, the crux is that crucial sticking point that makes or breaks a choice, separating a shrewd decision from a disastrous one.

Two examples in Blair's book stand out as footholds in his strategic thinking. The first comes in his justification for the Iraq War, where, despite the enormous controversy surrounding his decision-making, he identifies what (he believed) mattered most: 'It was crucial for Britain in the long term to remain America's closest ally, because it would serve our deep interests.'[14] On one level, this is a rational argument—America, as the world's pre-eminent superpower and with whom the UK has had a long-standing 'special relationship', might be expected to safeguard British interests over the long term. Whether history will judge this decision as right or wrong, the rationale behind it is clear: maintain alignment with the dominant power to preserve strategic leverage.

The second example is Blair's assertion that, despite the diplomatic noise, 'whatever you hear to the contrary, Europe will ultimately go with the Americans'.[15] His assumption is that, when faced with hard geopolitical choices, European leaders would follow the United States. The logic, again, is apparent—shared history, security arrangements, and economic ties all create gravitational pull. However, this raises deeper strategic questions. Does the necessity of alignment with a powerful partner justify the risks of subordination? And are the historic and institutionalised threads of the alignment strong enough to withstand the powerful winds whirling around one man? President Trump is yanking at these threads in ways that were once thought unthinkable, challenging Blair's assumption to its core.

Before the arrival of Trump, the logic of this assumption was sound. It is pragmatic to ally with a powerful player whose interests overlap with

14 Ibid., p. 189.
15 Ibid., p. 204.

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your own. But since his arrival, strategic alignment has been exposed as strategic dependency. The analogy here is a double fisherman's knot—a secure way to tether two climbers together, distributing weight to prevent small slips from becoming catastrophic falls. But should one climber take a serious plunge, the other risks being ripped from the rock face.

This risk is heightened in the current global landscape. Traditionally the enduring institutions of American democracy provided a form of geopolitical belay—a system of checks and balances ensuring that strategic commitments were stable, predictable, and relatively insulated from individual leadership whims. Yet today's United States is increasingly unpredictable. The redistribution of power within its system, the shift towards more personality-driven politics, and the willingness to abandon long-standing alliances have made reliance on the US a far riskier proposition. The belay has loosened, and the lead climber is scrambling erratically.

The Crux of the Coming Decades

If Blair believed Britain's geopolitical footing was secured by climbing in step with America, today's leaders face a much tougher climb. America's moves are more destabilising than ever, and each step seems to mean more as the world claws towards what feels like a significant crux: the narrowing space, and potentially conflicting paths, between the United States and China. If America once offered the singular, dominant ridge to climb, the route now runs between two vast overhangs, each exerting a powerful pull, each with its own risks, and neither offering an easy hold.

The United States remains many countries' principal security partner, the world's strongest economy, the home of the dominant language of business, the wellspring of much of the world's popular culture, and an enduring leader in global affairs. Its influence is deeply embedded in international institutions, and its military alliances—particularly NATO

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and the Indo-Pacific partnerships—provide strategic security guarantees to a wide range of states. However, the stability of these commitments has been seriously undermined and they are in the process of being broken. Shifting domestic politics, economic uncertainty, and a growing isolationism mean that countries can no longer rely on Washington as the global policeman they once knew.

China, on the other hand, has rapidly cemented itself as the central economic partner for nearly every country in the world—often second only to their immediate neighbour. The gravitational force of Beijing's trade networks, investment flows, and technological reach means that even the most ardently pro-Western leaders cannot afford to ignore the economic reality: decoupling from China is virtually impossible. Yet the risks of overreliance on Beijing are equally apparent, which is why regional supply chains are now being pursued as an urgent priority for many around the world, none more so than in the United States. China's strategic assertiveness, its economic coercion tactics, and its ability to use market dependencies for political leverage have created a precarious balancing act.

Blair says that if you talk to virtually any leader today, the discussion will, sooner or later, turn to the question of navigation between these two powerhouses. A misstep towards either side risks alienating the other, while attempting to straddle both invites the risk of being pulled apart. The challenge, then, is not simply choosing a foothold, but learning the art of weight distribution—shifting between strategic engagements while maintaining enough autonomy to avoid dependency on either. Keir Starmer is an example of a leader attempting this balance, but will he be able to do the splits and survive the pain?

In the grand climb of geopolitics, the true test ahead is not simply in choosing a path, but in mastering the balance. The real crux is not just about staying upright—it is about ensuring that, when the moment of greatest difficulty comes, leaders have the grip, the positioning, and the agility to make their next move without falling.

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Conclusion

Blair and Kissinger offer contrasting vantage points on leadership—one from the limelight, the other from the shadows; one a prince, the other a prince's advisor. Blair frames leadership as poise within uncertainty: strategic foresight, intuitive principles, and consistency of message. Kissinger, by contrast, casts leadership as a calculated engagement with power, shaped less by charisma than by cold logic. Between them lies a revealing contrast—one of persuasion versus precision, performance versus power-broking. Yet both converge on a central truth: leadership is the art of navigating complexity without losing strategic direction.

Blair embodied the democratic leader of his moment (1997–2007): media-savvy, ideologically fluid, and fluent in the language of aspiration. Would he have thrived outside that moment? Kissinger, however, was a product of Cold War realism—a world of hard power and harder choices. His relevance seemed uncertain only a decade ago in an era of asymmetric threats and diffuse influence, but is his brand of realpolitik seeing a revival?

The lessons for today's leaders are sobering. Those who see themselves as historical architects risk hubris; those who defer too readily to circumstance risk irrelevance. Great leadership lies in inhabiting the moment while retaining enough agency to shape it.

Strategic communications is central to this. The ability to frame a story—Blair's forte—or to obscure one, Kissinger's speciality, can determine whether a leader rides the tide of history or turns its course. Blair engineered a message machine that turned New Labour into a brand, carving out new constituencies flipped in favour of a bluer-than-before Labour Party. Kissinger deployed ambiguity to outmanoeuvre allies and adversaries alike, working with Nixon to cement a stronger Republican base in the South. In both cases leadership was not just about making decisions, but ensuring those decisions resonated—publicly or privately.

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This leads to a compelling provocation: how would Kissinger reflect on the leaders shaping our world today? Trump, Putin, Xi—none is likely to draw from Blair's playbook. All, however, would surely wish to be studied for years to come, as per Kissinger's chosen six. The task now is not to wait for history to pass judgement, but to adopt Kissinger's analytical lens and turn it forward. What strategic essence defines these figures? How do their pasts shape their present decisions, and what might that mean for the future?

This is where Kissinger's legacy speaks most powerfully—not in celebration, but in scrutiny. His method invites us to dissect leadership as it unfolds: to read behaviour, map strategy, and track the shadow each leader casts. Most of us will never lead from the front. But some can, like Kissinger, observe, interpret, and learn from the wings. Most will remain spectators from the cheap seats.

One of Kissinger's final reflections provides a fitting epitaph: 'Books record the deeds of leaders who once dared greatly, as well as those who dared too much, as a warning.'[16] In a fractured world, where the stakes of misjudged leadership grow even higher, that warning should not go unheeded. Because in the end, it's not just decisions that define a leader, but the story the world recounts of them, and the story they tell the world.

16 Kissinger, *Leadership*, p. 406.

The Tyranny of Hope

A Review Essay by Paul Bell

Autocracy, Inc.
Anne Applebaum. New York: Doubleday, 2024.

On Freedom
Timothy Snyder. London: Bodley Head, 2024.

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> 'It's not the despair, Laura. I can stand the despair.
> It's the hope.'

Thus the English playwright and novelist Michael Frayn's immortal line from the 1986 film *Clockwork*. Brian Stimpson, an English headmaster (played by John Cleese), is on his way to a conference that will be the pinnacle of his career. But his journey is bedevilled by a series of mishaps, and as he sits dejectedly in the middle of a country lane in ironic English sunshine, clothed in a dressing gown and sandals, Stimpson confronts the likelihood that his appointment with destiny will be denied.

The English are all too familiar with Stimpson's seesaw emotions. Ask any football fan: the hope that defies expectation; the stubborn insistence that victory is possible, despite a string of defeats and the immediate

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run of unequal play; the ecstasy as a striker fires at goal; the agony as the shot goes wide.

That was Georgia's democracy for me in the years I lived there, 2019–24. There I was, in the stands, surrounded by believers—I so wanting to believe along with them—but watching hope gutter and a wind blow out the sun.[1] Hope sat there in dressing gown and sandals. Hope with its head in its hands.

For democracy worldwide, the run of play has been discouraging. The V-Dem Institute at Sweden's Gothenburg University collects data from 180 countries, and reports annually on the quality of government and democracy. In 2024 it reported that 'the world is almost evenly divided between 91 democracies and 88 autocracies'.[2] In 2025 it reported 91 autocracies and 88 democracies.[3] In 2024, 71 per cent of the world's population lived in autocracies; in 2025 it's 72 per cent—a proportion that has grown 50 per cent in a decade. Liberal democracies are now the *least common* regime type in the world, a total of 29 in 2024—the year Georgia joined V-Dem's detention class of elected autocracies—while 'the favorite weapon of autocratizers is media censorship, followed by undermining elections and civil society'.[4] (What will it be in 2025? The executive order?)

With such statistics in mind, and sunk in close and dismal observation as Georgia's democracy closed down, I wanted to put a bit of meat on the bones of my understanding of how a democracy dies—like Hemingway on bankruptcy, perhaps? Gradually, then suddenly?—and turned to two books published in late 2024—Anne Applebaum's *Autocracy, Inc.*, and Professor Timothy Snyder's *On Freedom.* Both writers are Americans: Applebaum a journalist and writer of histories; Snyder a historian by

1 A phrase inspired by the poet Derek Walcott's *Omerus*.

2 Marina Nord, Martin Lundstedt, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Cecilia Borella, Tiago Fernandes, Lisa Gastaldi, Ana Good God, Natalia Natsika, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2024).

3 Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization—Democracy Trumped?* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2025).

4 Ibid.

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profession. Both have lived in Poland, are widely travelled in hard places, and are among America's most powerful advocates for liberal democracy and freedom, also painfully observing their own country's democratic decline. Applebaum is the reporter and analyst, weaving together a series of stories from China to Venezuela, tracing the evolution of a transnational brotherhood of klepto-autocrats—leaders intent on consolidating their power, protecting their wealth, and advancing their collective boundaries in collegial pursuit of a world order unfettered by the political and moral precepts, obligations, and restraints of liberal democracy. Snyder is the engaged social observer and humanist: passionate in his defence of liberal democratic government as the *sine qua non* in the development of a benign, nurturing society and state; scathing of the anti-democratic tendencies he sees in his own country; lyrical in his description of how its people will have to rediscover each other if they are to revive the American dream.

While both are equally bloody-minded in their critiques of the tyranny and greed they perceive not only across the autocracies but within their own United States, their voices are quite different, yet entirely complementary. If Applebaum is the diagnostician, Snyder has the healer's touch. Her voice clinically restrains the acidity that accumulates in her narrative. His is wistful, at times wearied by his fear of what is at risk for human society if we lose our sense of each other as free, sovereign beings capable of choice with, for, and through each other, and laced with references to a moment from his childhood in the Midwest—the ringing of a freedom bell—that glows in his memory like a golden sunset.

The two books are quite different—Applebaum made me angry, Snyder made me blink back tears—but they are similarly organised in fives.

In five staccato chapters—my ears imagine the pounding of an old Remington—Applebaum sets out the relationship between kleptocracy and autocracy, how the world's autocracies have built a web of cooperation that shares goods, techniques, and technologies needed to sustain their politics and economies, and how they have used media to develop the

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thought control that keeps their citizens pliant, and the narratives that attack the democratic ideal globally. The world's strongmen, writes Applebaum, are an informal cartel with the single shared purpose of retaining their own power and wealth. They have no need of a common ideology, but collaborate where it serves that shared purpose, trading hard resources—energy, capital, weapons, technology—and soft methodologies like sanctions busting, money laundering, information control, and narrative framing, and subverting by any means the now-besieged international rules-based order. They share, too, 'a determination to deprive their citizens of any real influence or public voice, to push back against all forms of transparency or accountability, and to repress anyone, at home or abroad, who challenges them'.[5] They have 'long ago hardened themselves to the feelings and opinions of their countrymen, as well as the feelings and opinions of everybody else'.[6]

In all of this Applebaum makes clear the West's own share of responsibility for the metastasising of this monster, for mistakes that were made partly through greed, and partly through naivety. The naivety is the product of thinking that originated in Germany, hungry for Russian energy and trusting to the notion that freer trade would enliven the economies beyond the Wall, leading to rapprochement with Russia and to the gradual democratisation of Russia's politics. The West went on to make the same mistake with China. 'Everyone assumed that in a more open, interconnected world, democracy and liberal ideas would spread to the autocratic states,' Applebaum writes. 'Nobody imagined that autocracy and illiberalism would spread to the democratic world instead.'[7] As for the greed, she looks to the army of financiers, state bureaucrats, investors, manufacturers, lawyers, realtors, and the like, who were only too happy to take the US dollars that flowed westward from the autocracies in either investments or ill-gotten gains. She warns that the autocracies 'understand that the language of democracy, anticorruption, and justice … poses dangers to their powers. They will continue to try

5 Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc.* (New York: Doubleday, 2024), p. 3.
6 Ibid., p. 5.
7 Ibid., p. 27.

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to mold our politics and our economics to their advantage, even if we cover our eyes and ears and refuse to notice, as many would prefer.'[8]

Snyder's *On Freedom* unfolds around five themes, each a different element of what in his view it means to be free—sovereignty, unpredictability, mobility, factuality, solidarity. In a series of vignettes he peels back his own philosophy layer by layer, often writing while on the move between one place and another, be it Poland or Ukraine, or the jail in Washington where his lectures provide learning and therapy to black prisoners. He builds his platform on the work of the German philosopher Edith Stein, who died in a concentration camp. Stein places two German words, *Leib* and *Körper*, at the centre of her thesis—they mean the same thing, *body*, but they don't. *Körper* is the physical body, dead or alive, and also connected to the body as a social or racial unit. *Leib* is something more vital, the body alive, the person, the individual identity, the sovereign entity that gains knowledge of the self through knowledge of the world, and empathy through the acknowledgement of others—a concept similar to Bantu-African *ubuntu*, that universal bond through which we experience our humanity by recognising it in our fellow human beings; literally 'I am because you are'. Snyder references, too, the writing of Simone Weil, whose 'mystery of the body' is its presence in both realms of life, the *is* and the *ought,* of which the journey between is the pursuit of a better world. Here, says Snyder, is the source of a politics of freedom.

From here Snyder unpacks his view of negative and positive freedom. The former is *freedom from*, a repressive isolating idea that stands in the way of imagining or building a world of greater possibility; 'a political trap [that] involves self-deception, no program for its own realization, and offers opportunities for tyrants'[9] (one can hear the outraged screams of libertarians and Doge-niks who attack the idea of *big government*). Positive freedom is *freedom to*—'when we see ourselves as *Leib*, and understand the world [and therefore] see what we would have to build together in order to become free'.[10] Positive freedom, as I understand

8 Ibid., p. 174.

9 Timothy Snyder, *On Freedom* (London: Bodley Head, 2024), p. 31.

10 Ibid., p. 23.

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Snyder's argument, is a world in which we collectively accept greater responsibility for each other because it is only with, and through, each other that we can realise freedom for our individual ourselves—in a society that functions because of the value it places on choice, opportunity, solidarity, and truth.

On Freedom is a wandering read, a complex weave of ideas expressed in bursts, pourings-out on paper after a wakeful night, which by its end constitutes Snyder's indictment of a world ever more controlled by forces that undermine human autonomy. Algorithms that 'stand in for thinking', 'mine our brains', and 'keep us from acting'.[11] Big money that postures as free speech in order to buy political power. The undoing of state institutions meant to ensure greater social equality and equity and leave less for the rich. Oligarchs who have more in common with the oligarchs of other countries than with their own people—at which point he converges with Applebaum and neatly encapsulates her thesis.

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I have lived through power shifts in three states. Two—in South Africa and Iraq—were in favour of democracy and human rights, although both remain very much works in progress. South Africa's was bittersweet. All those years of pain, all those tens of thousands of quickly forgotten dead, a triumphant apotheosis as Nelson Mandela walked free from prison and four years later took the presidential oath of office in front of the Union Buildings. At the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park, at 3 a.m. on a November morning in 1993, I had watched as Mandela and F.W. de Klerk signed the interim constitution, then because it was Cyril Ramaphosa's forty-first birthday we went downstairs and partied till dawn. The following April, from my office in the electoral commission, I watched as 20 million people went to the polls in an uncanny, magical peace to cast the first votes of their lives. Five years later, anticipating the disappointments that followed, I left South Africa—but I can never gainsay the justice of what happened in 1994.

11 Ibid., p. 223.

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Iraq was chaotic and lethal and morally hazardous. In the years 2004–09, from inside the fortress of a military base, I witnessed the hubris of American overreach, saw the destruction it brought to Baghdad, and learnt of the suffering Saddam had inflicted on the families of friends—Al'aah, Ammar, Haider, Hibba, Leila, Omar, Saad. Two bodyguards of mine, one Iraqi, one Frenchman, were killed in separate firefights. The Iraqi bled to death because he was Sunni, and a Shia hospital was too afraid to admit him. The Frenchman held out in his vehicle in a forty-five-minute gun battle with terrorists, while anguished colleagues listened helplessly over the radio until it went silent. But in Baghdad on a cool January day in 2005, at Iraq's first free election, I strapped myself into a Blackhawk, and sitting just aft of two .50 cal. machine guns as we circled above the city, watched Baghdadis walking in small groups to the polls to cast *their* first votes—in an iron but miraculous calm that doffed its helmet to the moral primacy of democratic government. For all the tragedy of that illegal, clumsy intervention, there was at least that shred of human dignity to rejoice in.

And now Georgia, where I have watched a suffocation. A billionaire-led, fraudulently elected bully-government holding a black pillow over the face of a small nation. A country gasping for breath. And the people holding the pillow? Just as Applebaum and Snyder describe: ruthless, truthless, corrupt.

It's one thing to have no illusions—in Georgia I lost mine early. It's another to dismiss the hopes of friends. Many nights I stood with them, among tens of thousands on the streets of Tbilisi—all buoyed by their solidarity, their songs, their ritual promises of 'victory', wrapped in their winter parkas, armed with their flags and firecrackers, their chants and anthems rising over the redundant edifice called 'parliament'. People imagined that my opinion as a foreigner with a little experience of such affairs might be worth hearing, and they would ask: 'What do you think will happen?' These were my 'Brian Stimpson' moments. It wasn't the despair I couldn't stand, it was the hope, and I just could not bring myself to say: 'This victory you speak of daily, this victory encased in the etymology of your

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greeting word, the one you say twenty times a day—*gamarjoba*—will *not* be yours. Not now. Not like this.' How, then, was I to reply? My thoughts were tethered by opposing ropes. One, my powerful desire to see this people I had come to know and love free—free of the Russians, free to join Europe, free in their own country. The other, what I knew of the grip the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party had extended over the apparatus of the state. Instead I would answer: 'Is what you're doing enough? Will it make a difference? Because it's no good being arrested in dozens and scores. You're going to have to be arrested in hundreds and thousands. But—if more were demanded of you, could you stomach it?'

It's a big 'but'. Time and again, I am drawn back to that question: *If more were demanded of you, could you stomach it?* The implications are disturbing—and in Georgia, seditious. But what happens, what choices are left, when a people, or at the least a significant majority of them, are denied every legitimate means of exercising their right to a say in national affairs? Resistance has different price points, depending on who you are and what there is to lose. How much is *enough*, or how many? What price is too high? How many are prepared to pay it? Resistance is a daunting and uncertain enterprise.

Even the briefest survey of recent non-violent popular revolt offers very different outcomes. What began in Leipzig on 4 September 1989 ended two months later in the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Ukrainians saw off Viktor Yanukovych twice, in 2005 and 2014. In 2024, says Freedom House, popular mobilisation did shift the democratic trajectory of some states.[12] The Bangladeshis, after two years of protest and riot, forced their prime minister into exile and ushered in a transitional government. Guatemalans mobilised to defend their choice for president. In Senegal, mass protest persuaded the highest court to force the president to hold an election he was trying to postpone, and he was voted out. The 2011 Arab Spring told a different story. Popular protest in Syria collapsed into civil war. Tunisia, then Egypt, saw off two dictators. But within two

12 Lara Shane and Houlton Dannenberg, '*Five Developments from 2024 That Give Us Hope for Democracy in 2025*', *Freedom House, Perspectives*, *20* December 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/article/five-developments-2024-give-us-hope-democracy-2025.

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years the Egyptian military had overthrown a popularly elected president and re-established a police state. In Tunisia over the next ten years, the country's experiment with democracy was progressively reversed, until a dodgy election in 2024 consolidated the power of a new authoritarian strongman. And Venezuela's Maduro has beaten, jailed, and stolen his way to re-election despite large public protests.

What determines success or failure? A 2011 study by Erica Chenoweth of the Harvard Kennedy School attracted particular attention. She and Maria Stephan co-authored *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, collecting data on all violent and non-violent campaigns from 1900 to 2006 that resulted in either overthrow of a government or territorial liberation. They reviewed 323 mass actions and analysed nearly 160 variables related to success criteria, participant categories, state capacity, and more.[13] The most eye-catching of their conclusions were that it takes a critical mass of 3.5 per cent of the population, actively participating in non-violent protest, to ensure serious political change, and that non-violent campaigns are twice as likely to achieve their goals as violent campaigns.[14] They also concluded that, in the aggregate, non-violent civil resistance was 'far more effective' in producing change.

Interviewed by the *Harvard Gazette*, Chenoweth identified four critical success factors.

> The first is a large and diverse participation that's sustained.
>
> The second thing is that [the movement] needs to elicit loyalty shifts among security forces in particular, but also other elites. Security forces are important because

13 Michelle Nicholasen, *'Nonviolent Resistance Proves Potent Weapon'*, *Harvard Gazette*, 4 February 2019, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/02/why-nonviolent-resistance-beats-violent-force-in-effecting-social-political-change/.

14 David Robson, 'The '3.5% Rule': How a Small Minority Can Change the World', *BBC Future*, 14 May 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world.

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> they ultimately are the agents of repression, and their actions largely decide how violent the confrontation with—and reaction to—the nonviolent campaign is going to be in the end. But there are other security elites, economic and business elites, state media. There are lots of different pillars that support the status quo, and if they can be disrupted or coerced into noncooperation, then that's a decisive factor.
>
> The third thing is that the campaigns need to be able to have more than just protests; there needs to be a lot of variation in the methods they use.
>
> The fourth thing is that when campaigns are repressed—which is basically inevitable for those calling for major changes—they don't either descend into chaos or opt for using violence themselves. If campaigns allow their repression to throw the movement into total disarray, or they use it as a pretext to militarize their campaign, then they're essentially co-signing what the regime wants—for the resisters to play on its own playing field. And they're probably going to get totally crushed.[15]

For Georgia, there's the rub. Its winter protests of 2024–25 probably hit that 3.5 per cent threshold at times, as they likely did during the country's Rose Revolution of 2003. But by the spring of 2025, the first three success factors—the sustainability of protest, the loyalty of the security forces, the variety in campaign methodology—had been either insufficient or absent. Throughout this past discontented winter, the cold, and economic jeopardy, stood shoulder to shoulder with the black, masked phalanxes of the state security service and its freelance bovver-boys, the *titushki*, while the army, which since its establishment as a force independent of the former Soviet military has leaned strongly westward and is not wholly trusted by the Ivanishvili regime, skulked

15 Nicholasen, *'Nonviolent Resistance'*.

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in its barracks. Nor did protest tactics evolve beyond marches, routine denunciations of the regime, a few days of two-hour work stoppages akin to a Spanish siesta, or an occasional mild mobbing of members of the ruling elite who risked being seen in public. I had observed much the same tactics each year for five years, and people were still wondering why they didn't work. But one could see why—no clear leadership, neither from the political parties, who don't trust each other and are not trusted by voters, nor from civil society, and thus no mechanism for the development of a cohesive, impactful strategy of civic resistance.

As for the fourth factor, militarising their revolt, Georgians have eschewed violence despite the mounting repression. There is no appetite for armed conflict. The massacre on Rustaveli by Russian troops in 1989, the ravenings of armed militia in the chaotic post-Soviet nineties, and the Russian invasion and landgrab of 2008 are too fresh in the memory. Moreover, at the height of the street protests, the government did little to discourage or contradict periodic suggestions from the Kremlin that Russia would consider intervening militarily to protect the regime. There was one noteworthy change, however. This time around, the government, in calibrating its repression, was far less concerned about the opinion of the West than were its predecessors. And while its sense of necessity had hardened and its impunity grown, it had nonetheless learnt that brute force was counterproductive. There were better ways to break the resistance.

Even in retrospect it remains a curiosity that it wasn't the rigged elections of 26 October 2024 that brought people onto the streets. That theft had been an inadmissible truth from the outset of the campaign. The election had been stolen from the get-go via a plan meticulously prepared and executed over many months. GD had left nothing to chance: it would have known that on a level playing field, its time was up. Its billionaire leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, lazily admitted as much in an interview[16] four days before the election. 'People have probably grown tired of

16 'Ivanishvili on Banning Opposition Parties: One Who Is an Enemy of the People Should Be Banned', *Georgian News*, 22 October 2024, https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/ivanishvili-on-banning-opposition-parties-one-who-is-an-enemy-of-the-people-should-be-banned.

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the Georgian Dream over these 12 years,' he said. 'It's very difficult in democratic states to keep electing the same government. I myself have grown weary of hearing my own surname so frequently. People no longer want to hear the same names over and over, and you can understand them feeling this way.'[17]

For Ivanishvili this was a rare, brazen moment of truth which, however unintended, no longer mattered. He knew the whole grimy business was in hand. He was merely reflecting on what he knew to be the public mood, reading the same data as the opposition, who were pretty upbeat in the run-up. I remember the shrewd and indefatigable Tina Kidasheli, a former defence minister, telling me in July over coffee at Prospero's, a bookshop in its charming, shaded courtyard off Rustaveli Avenue, what she had seen 'out there' in the backwater villages beyond the wired freneticism of the capital. She'd been doing the rounds for months, working with local civic groups trying to figure out how to survive the predations of the foreign agents law.[18] 'The mood out there is different,' she said. 'Like it was in 2003. People want change.'

True enough, but any impulse to accomplish it was managed out through systematic intimidation or manipulation—ballot stuffing, multiple voting, unprecedented levels of voter bribery (Hans Gutbrod, a German academic and twenty-five-year resident of Tbilisi, estimates that GD spent GEL 45 m, a little less than $15 m at the time, buying up to 300,000 votes[19]), and the expulsion of observers from polling stations, as well as instances of mobilising voters outside polling stations, confiscation of identity documents, use of information on voters illegally obtained from state agencies, violence, and physical threats. All of it was documented by ISFED, the Georgia-based International Society for Fair Elections

17 Hans Gutbrod, *A Dozen Daggers: How Georgia's 2024 Elections Were Systematically Rigged*, 4 November 2024, https://civil.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A-Dozen-Daggers_-How-Georgias-2024-Elections-Were-Rigged_Gutbrod.pdf .

18 In 2024 the Georgian government introduced a new law, the so-called 'Russian law', requiring media civil society organisations which receive more than 20 per cent of their income from foreign donors to register as foreign agents, subjecting them to intrusive scrutiny, and imposing punitive fines for failure to comply.

19 Gutbrod, *A Dozen Daggers*.

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and Democracy.[20] Of course, there was no smoking gun. You need to be able to get your hands on a gun to see if it's smoking, and the courts weren't having any of that sort of malarkey. The polling available to GD would have shown its support in the low forties at best, so it would have calculated a margin of victory that would not seem entirely implausible. The result, announced in the evening some hours before the final returns, was 54 per cent, judiciously lower than the 60 per cent at which GD's campaign propaganda had set public expectations early on the campaign. There has even been a suggestion that GD officials were slightly worried they had overegged the pudding. Edison Research estimated the distortion at 13 per cent[21]—in effect, a win for the combined opposition of about 59 per cent, to GD's 41 per cent.

An eerie silence fell over the country. A miasma of disappointment settled among the 'losers' who, however optimistic before the election and indignant after it, showed no great sense of surprise. I myself had expected nothing less. The stakes had been far too high for GD to chance the outcome on a straight vote. (Yet still that damned hope; I am not that cynical that I did not feel sick on the night.) The air was thick with denunciation. Election observers reported, politicians issued statements, lawyers issued writs, Euro-legislators frothed, embassies hopped about on both feet. Journalists who had come from abroad to report the anticipated drama sat about expectantly in cafes, with a growing air of puzzlement. Everybody was waiting for something to happen, but nobody seemed to know what to do. The party leaders I spoke to really hadn't a clue. This went on for a month. There was some protest, but it did not amount to much. It was a dream-time, when one might begin to imagine things. Had GD's fire and brimstone—ban the 'warmonger' opposition, bash the gays, Europe is a degeneracy—just been 'sound and fury'? Did it all perhaps signify less than had been feared? No chance. One lesson we are learning from the autocrats is that they mean what they say.

20 ISFED, 'Summary Statement on Georgia's Parliamentary Election on October 26, 2024', 27 October 2024, https://isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/saqartvelos-parlamentis-2024-tslis-26-oqtombris-archevnebis-dghis-dakvirvebis-shemadjamebeli-gantskhadeba.

21 Civil.ge, '*Edison Research: 13-Percentage Point Difference between Exit Polls and Official Election Results Suggests Vote Manipulation*', 1 November 2024, https://civil.ge/archives/633142.

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On 28 November the government, which has mastered the art of maintaining two entirely opposing propositions in its supporters' heads at the same time, announced the suspension of EU accession talks until 2028, while nonetheless asserting that Georgia would join the EU by 2030. GD's anti-EU rhetoric, and its restrictive foreign-agents and anti-LGBTQ laws which had been sharply criticised by the Euro-Atlantic powers, had been telegraphing this move for months. But when it came, it was a thunderclap. The European dream had been pronounced dead.

Now it's one thing to tell your wife you think it might be time to take her mother's portrait off the bedroom wall; it's another to take it out into the yard and set fire to it. *That* brought the country onto the street.

For weeks they came out in their tens of thousands. Then they dispersed to different points around the city and marched in smaller numbers, by occupation or identity—students, lawyers, writers, mothers, fathers, basketballers, actors, 'creative workers', classical scholars, IT and tech workers, social workers, teachers, bankers and accountants, emigrants' families, cancer patients, citizens from 'the regions', chefs and bartenders, historians, tattooists—demanding fresh elections and the release of detainees. They blocked bridges, lobbed firecrackers, formed human chains, performed folk dances, sang carols, decorated a Christmas tree in front of parliament with defiant slogans. Several Georgian diplomats resigned. Eighteen judges signed a statement condemning the government for abandoning Georgia's constitutional commitment to Europe, as did employees from the Constitutional Court, more than 200 from the National Bank, 140 from the education ministry, and 120 from Tbilisi City Hall. Tech-wags managed to hack the intercom on Tbilisi's bus service and broadcast slogans to commuters for several hours until the municipality managed to shut it down. The Orthodox Church played both sides of the street, calling for restraint on all sides, and when the government offered to declare it the state church, said no thank you, we're doing fine. On New Year's Eve, activists prepared Rustaveli for a 'New Year's Magic Protest Night', setting it with a giant *supra* (festive table) that stretched down the length of the avenue, while musicians played and

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volunteers handed out food. Salome Zurabishvili, the president whose term had expired but was refusing to formally step down, joined the revels.[22] In January three GD MPs were arrested for beating up one of their compatriots in the breakfast room of a hotel in Abu Dhabi, after he challenged them over arrests in the coastal city of Batumi and called them 'slaves'—a now common refrain aimed at judges, police, officials. And when high court judges convened for a seasonal dinner at a restaurant in Tbilisi, crowds gathered on the pavement outside, taunting them.

Things were running hot and coverage of the protests was constant on opposition news media, until the money men started turning off the taps, putting pressure on the journalists and shutting down channels. The lead broadcaster, Ivanishvili's Imedi, reported government spokespersons dismissing the protests as either poorly attended or inspired by 'liberal fascists', 'the deep state', or 'orcs' bent on fomenting a Ukrainian-style colour revolution. From Russia, former Putin stand-in Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, piped up on Telegram: 'Formerly, they used to hang on lampposts for such things. We live in much more humane times now.'[23]

At first, the security response was aggressive—water cannons, chasings and beatings, arrests, night raids on apartments, and snatches off the street by mobs of black-garbed, brawling police. Face masks and the sale of fireworks were banned, and new penalties were introduced for blocking roads. But within three weeks the more public dispersals of protestors eased off, the government realising that the more it beat people in the streets, the more would be back the following night. There were better ways to wear people down, by emptying their pockets.

Throughout the winter there were regular reports of mass firings from state and municipal departments. Hundreds were sacked without warning or explanation, though clearly for any signs of disloyalty to the

22 Civil.ge, '*Protesters Celebrate New Year Arrival at Rustaveli Avenue', Liveblog: Resistance*, 31 December 2024, https://civil.ge/archives/638926.

23 Roman Petrenko, 'Medvedev Threatens Georgian President and Protestors', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 December 2024, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/12/1/7487110/.

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regime. Challenged on this at a press conference, the prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, said the state was 'self-cleansing' and that those fired had had problems with reading and comprehension.[24] Meanwhile the courts got to work, ordering the 'pre-trial detention' of scores of activists and protestors, and finding hundreds of others allegedly guilty of public order offences and damage to property. Just before New Year, the first duty of Ivanishvili's handpicked new president, ex-Manchester City footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili—'I'm your personal president,' he was heard to say to Ivanishvili when the oligarch congratulated him on his inauguration—was to sign into law new administrative regulations that raised the fine for road blockages from 500 to 5000 GEL (at least twice the average monthly wage), and from 5000 to 15,000 GEL for protest organisers.[25] Fines for wearing face masks at protests increased to 2000 GEL, while the fine for putting up protest posters increased from 50 to 1000 GEL. Few Georgians have that kind of money down the back of the sofa. Nino Lomjaria, a former public defender of Georgia, told a briefing in Tbilisi in late January: 'The intensity and unjustified nature of these fines indicate that their purpose is to intimidate protest participants, weaken the momentum of protests, and create financial difficulties for rally participants.'[26]

The protestors shifted ground. Inspired by the Hellenists among them, they staged public discussions they called *agora*, after the Greek tradition of debate in the marketplace. On a Sunday they massed on the edge of the city to block the highway to the west. They were met by hundreds of police, dressed in identical black jackets, blue jeans, and ski masks, who threatened and swore at them, arrested and assaulted more than thirty, and put four in hospital with concussion. For every modest protest innovation, the law was panting a step behind. The interior ministry rushed heavy increases in fines and sentences through parliament: stand on a highway and you're illegally blocking it; hit a cop, collide with them somehow,

24 Civil.ge, *'Kobakhidze Alludes to Purges, Says Civil Service is "Self-Cleansing"', 2 December 2024,* https://civil.ge/archives/640508.

25 1 GEL = $ 0.35.

26 Civil.ge, *'CSOs Condemn Repressive Use of Fines against Protesters in Georgia',* 23 January 2025, https://civil.ge/archives/655345.

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it's assault, their word against yours in a government-controlled court, and that will earn you up to seven years in prison. Lomjaria's assessment was right; the momentum was going. So was Ivanishvili's—people might be tiring of Georgian Dream, but their resistance was tiring them, as he knew it would. (Did he know his people better than they knew themselves?) All they could see was Georgia closing down. The daily journal *Civil Georgia* recalled the Georgian short film *Eight Minutes*—its conceit: the sun has gone out and in eight minutes darkness will cover the earth. The television commentary ploughs relentlessly towards apocalypse. 'We remind you that the sun is already out and that in a few minutes the light we see right now will disappear forever.'[27]

At time of writing, sitting now at an uncomfortable distance from Tbilisi, while the government continues its purge of the civil service and plans to effectively outlaw all but government-approved opposition parties, I speak to friends and hear of how their lives have been turned upside down by the events of the past few months. A pall has enveloped all sense of normal life; its quotidian routines are edged with new uncertainty. What was clear yesterday about tomorrow, however precarious, is much less knowable today. The mental strain has mounted, and simple pleasures seem suddenly obscene. A friend who loves to ski told me that this winter she just could not bring herself to go to the mountains—'not while people I know are in jail or have lost a job'. 'What I miss is the peace,' she said, 'the little time I once had only for myself. GD say they are keeping Georgia at peace but there is no peace in Georgia any more.' Another friend said: 'During the day I try to read, to get a few things done, but everything is focused on the night and going back out on the street.' Others cope by turning away. As Hans Gutbrod told me, and has written elsewhere:

> While most agree that the very existence of the country is under attack, many continue their life as if this was an abstract issue that someone else will fully commit to fixing. You can have dinner conversations

27 Civil.ge, '*Dispatch—February 5: Law-Abiding Citizens*', 5 February 2025, https://civil.ge/archives/659815.

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> with people who decry the existential threat to their country's future and just a little later will describe the trade-offs of the itinerary for their upcoming three-week overseas vacation.[28]

Others I know are heads-down because businesses and contracts that depend on state finance and patronage are at stake.

I could hear my friends were tired, struggling to put a face on their determination. I could hear the hope, and it was heartbreaking. Then, some weeks later, my skiing friend lost her consulting job when USAID was shuttered by the Trump Administration—a new blow that has fallen similarly on thousands whose livelihoods were supported by American and European development funding that has almost dried up in 2025.

Exhaustion is not the only price. The thing about Tbilisi is, it's so *intimate.* Everyone knows everyone. A year or two back, I was working on a project with a Georgian colleague who, on hearing that we were to be joined by a new person, a woman, was curious to know who she was. My colleague reported back: 'My friend's sister's daughter's husband's mother's brother's wife's niece is this N…' Family is everything, kinship a close second, and friendship is intense and densely interwoven across the city. Across this tight, volatile social fabric now flows a molten steel of dissent, confrontation, emotional and physical violence, disgust. Every cop who breaks a jaw, every judge who jails an activist, every official who toes a line or crosses it (because you're damned if you do and damned if you don't), every citizen who loses a job or gives up hope and quits the country is somehow linked—up, down, sideways, and through time—to someone on a receiving end. And nobody ever forgets a *thing*.

Georgia's domestic politics and geostrategic significance are surely fascinating to the representatives of great powers, but it is this banished peace, and the emotional violence being done and stored up at every

28 Hans Gutbrod, *Protesting for Democracy in Georgia—Midway Lessons,* March 2025. For Keseb, a US-based pro-democracy non-profit organisation.

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level of society, where the human cost of Georgia's plummet into autocracy has to be counted. Whether the fall of democracy here is irretrievable or it stumbles back into the light, the consequences of this time will reverberate throughout society for a generation and more, only compounding the difficulties for any progressive recovery. And what is so hard to understand about the autocrats imposing these miseries—however much they have hardened their hearts against condemnation and sanctions—is just how deeply flawed you have to be not to see it and recoil from your own ugliness.

Earlier this year, as I continued my vigil for Georgia's hopelessly hoping progressives, I read a piece in *The Atlantic* by U2's Bono, written on hearing he was to be awarded the US Presidential Medal of Freedom. It takes courage and bitter experience to controvert Martin Luther King Jr.'s assertion that 'the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice'. But, said Bono, 'I now know it does not. It has to be bent. And that's how the walls will finally come down.'[29]

It has to be bent. Can Georgia bend that arc? What will be enough? Bending means bodies—bodies beaten, bodies jailed, bodies starved, bodies stripped of joy, normality, money. Bodies numbered not in dozens and scores as they are now, but in overwhelming, irresistible thousands—for hope makes demands that are every bit as merciless and tyrannical as the punishing controls of autocracy. Can Georgians summon the will to put enough of their bodies on that same line where Snyder's *Leib* and *Körper* meet in service of a people's desire for *freedom to*? Do they have the stomach for it? The question is unanswerable. For now they simply do not know. The fog has come in. They hear the rattle of their own breathing but the detail has begun to blur, and the poetry has turned sour. This makes hope very hard to bear. Yet though the capture of their state has been a textbook illustration of Applebaum's thesis, one still hears distantly the tolling of Snyder's freedom bell. If Georgia's government thinks it can bludgeon the belief in Europe out of its citizens over time, it is mistaken. These people are irredeemably stubborn; it's one of their most maddening traits.

29 Bono, 'The Gorgeous, Unglamorous Work of Freedom', *The Atlantic*, 4 January 2025.

How China Uses Fentanyl and Mexico's Cartels to Subvert the USA: A Study in Strategic Communications

A Review Essay by James Farwell and Lt Col. Jahara 'Franky' Matisek

Narcostates: Civil War, Crime and the War on Drugs
William L. Marcy. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2023.

The Mexican Cartels, Islamism, and China
George Ross. 2nd edn. Independently published, 2023.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, China, Mexico, cartels, fentanyl, tariffs, drugs*

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Two milligrams of fentanyl powder—enough to cover merely the head of a pin—is sufficient to kill you. It is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine.[1] An epidemic of drug overdose deaths—nearly 60,000 reported in the year to August 2024 alone—is battering the United

1 Arda Akartuna, 'Fentanyl Dealers Are Bypassing Dark Web Restrictions to Sell Deadly Precursors Online: Here's How', *Elliptic*, 22 August 2023, https://www.elliptic.co/blog/how-fentanyl-dealers-are-bypassing-dark-web-restrictions-to-sell-deadly-precursors-online.

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States.[2] As Europe confronts a much smaller challenge, we focus our comments on the US. Mexican drug cartels, partnering with China, have made trafficking a clear and present danger to US citizens.

There is some debate about China's role, but the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Congress are persuaded China is playing a key role in supplying precursors for fentanyl to Mexican drug cartels. Are they motivated by profits, or is China engaging in hybrid warfare against the US by providing deadly drugs that could challenge society's stability? Our answer is that China seeks to achieve both goals.[3]

Two excellent publications offer analyses of the history and challenge, and proposals to surmount the latter. In *The Mexican Cartels, Islamism, and China*, Retired USMC Lt Col. George Ross offers a provocative plan to do so. William L. Marcy's *Narcostates: Civil War, Crime and the War on Drugs* traces the history of the cartels as they gained power in Mexico.

Marcy, a distinguished scholar from Buffalo State University, provides a detailed history of how the cartels took root and gained power, of state dysfunction, and of international drug policy. It is exceptionally well researched and provides an insightful overview of how cartels grew. Ross focuses on a plan to combat the cartels using the US military. It is a concise, provocative point of view that merits comment. Ross's views should be read in the context of a broader historical view to that which Marcy's insights might offer. He proposes a somewhat unconventional view of how immigration has affected the problem. When Bill Clinton deported illegal immigrants who were criminals, Ross argues they created problems in their home countries and triggered migration among people who wanted to escape a criminal environment.

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2 Ed Gresser, 'U.S. Drug Overdose Deaths Down 21.7% from 2023 to 2024', *Progressive Policy Institute*, 29 January 2025, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/u-s-drug-overdose-deaths-down-21-7-from-2023-to-2024. The decline is almost entirely from September 2023 to August 2024.

3 Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, *The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis*, 16 April 2024, https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/The%20CCP%27s%20Role%20in%20the%20Fentanyl%20Crisis%204.16.24%20%281%29.pdf.

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China's drug trafficking is pernicious.[4] Many Chinese criminal groups traffic in fentanyl, although it's the smaller ones who mainly traffic it to Mexico.[5] Also important is the expanding role that the Chinese play in money laundering for the cartels. Ironically, China tries to project an image as the world's toughest cop. It is tough on drugs at home. But globally, it uses its posture as leverage in international relations.[6] One thing the US has done well is to call out China's failure to crack down on drug trafficking—a useful tactic, as China prizes highly its reputation for fighting drugs. The tactic forced China into 'scheduling'—outlawing—at least three fentanyl precursors, although it indicts and prosecutes few criminals.

What motivates China? Clearly high profits provide a motivator. Manufacturing fentanyl precursor drugs is profitable and creates jobs for the Chinese, rendering the industry popular at home. The House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party has made important findings that reveal China's integral role in drug trafficking.[7] China subsidises the manufacturing and export of illicit fentanyl materials through tax rebates. Provincial PRC government officials make site visits to manufacturers and compliment them on their impact on the local economy. PRC companies are tied to drug trafficking. Instead of prosecuting manufacturers, their security services have notified targets of US investigations when they received requests for assistance. The Committee identified 31,000 instances of PRC companies selling illicit chemicals with obvious ties to drug trafficking. It also identified China's increasing role in money laundering in league with Mexican cartels.

4 Ben Westoff, *Fentanyl, Inc*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2019); Nicholas Dockery, *The Domestic Fentanyl Crisis in Strategic Context: Part I,* Modern War Institute, December 2024, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Domestic-Fentanyl-Crisis-Strategic-Context_Prescription-National-Security-Epidemic.pdf; Drug Enforcement Administration, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2024*, May 2024, https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/NDTA_2024.pdf; and Vanda Felbab-Brown and Fred Dews (interview), 'The Fentanyl Pipelines and China's Role in the US Opioid Crisis', *Brookings*, 1 October 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-fentanyl-pipeline-and-chinas-role-in-the-us-opioid-crisis/.

5 Felbab-Brown and Fred Dews, 'Fentanyl Pipelines'.

6 Ibid.

7 Select Committee, *CCP's Role*.

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The Select Committee concluded that China's support of fentanyl forms a key aspect of its efforts to supplant the liberal democratic, Westphalian system by constructing a new world order led by China. It cites People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategists Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui—credited with articulating China's notion of *unrestricted warfare*[8]—who view 'drug warfare' as important in causing disasters in other countries. The Committee declared: 'The PRC-sourced, illicit fentanyl and fentanyl precursors have indeed "spread disaster" in the United States,' and while costing the American people $1.5 trillion dollars, fentanyl 'impacts force readiness' and 'provides […] diplomatic leverage'.[9]

Nicholas Dockery characterises China's involvement in Mexican 'drug warfare' as using alliances with 'criminal proxies' to advance China's anti-American agenda:[10]

> The PRC engages the United States in a form of asymmetric warfare through the illicit drug trade, bypassing conventional armed conflict. While this strategy does not involve direct military confrontation, it leads to widespread harm by causing substantial fatalities, destabilizing communities, draining federal and local resources, overburdening healthcare systems and diverting attention from law enforcement and regulatory priorities.

He observes:

> While the CCP may never explicitly admit to these asymmetric strategies, the alignment and catastrophic

8 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Albatross, 2020).

9 Select Committee, *CCP's Role,* p. 37.

10 Nicholas Dockery, *The Domestic Fentanyl Crisis in Strategic Context: Part III,* Modern War Institute, April 2025, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Domestic-Fentanyl-Crisis-Strategic-Context_Responding-China-Drug-Warfare.pdf, pp. 6, 8. Dockery cites also Liam Kennedy and Madelaine Coelho, '"Absolutely the Worst Drug I've Ever Seen": Risk, Governance, and the Construction of the Illicit Fentanyl "Crisis",' *Theoretical Criminology* 24 Nº 4 (2020): 612–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619841907, and Ken Itakura, 'Evaluating the Impact of the US–China Trade War', *Asian Economic Policy Review,* 2020, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/aepr.12286.

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> consequences irrefutably point to a deliberate, albeit undeclared, act of aggression.[11]

The notion of unrestricted warfare must be understood in the context of the Three Warfares doctrine, officially promulgated in 2003 by the PLA.[12] The US Office of Net Assessment, a Department of Defense division that assessed emerging threats, concluded that the doctrine constituted a 'dynamic three dimensional war-fighting process that constitutes war by other means'.[13]

There appears little doubt that Chinese involvement in fentanyl trafficking comprises a deliberate tool of asymmetric warfare. Dockery notes that this is supported by the PRC's reluctance to curb fentanyl distribution, its connections to organised crime syndicates, and its obfuscation of international law-enforcement efforts. Drug trafficking provides a way to confront the US without direct military engagement.[14] Strategic communications is central to China's approach, which employs disinformation to create 'a veil of confusion that hinders international cooperation and the effectiveness of counternarcotics operations'.[15] China's involvement in fentanyl helps bolster its pharmaceutical production and integrate it into a broader strategy where the industry can be used as a tool for coercion and leverage.

China positions itself as a leader in fighting drugs. This is propaganda. Despite anti-drug posturing, China's top leadership refuses to take decisive action to shut down fentanyl manufacturing. Unless something changes, it's never going to take such action. The financial and political rewards are too high. Instead, it hides behind a rationale echoing Mexican traffickers: the fentanyl trade thrives because Americans want the product and they are simply business people fulfilling demand. The argument is

11 Dockery, *Domestic Fentanyl Crisis, Part III*, pp. 6–7.

12 Itakura, 'Evaluating the Impact'.

13 Stefan A. Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, United States Office of the Secretary of Defense for Net Assessment, 14 May 2013.

14 Dockery, *Domestic Fentanyl Crisis, Part III*, pp. 11–12.

15 Ibid., p. 14.

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disingenuous, especially for China, which understands how deadly and destabilising fentanyl is to society.

That conclusion is reinforced by China's vigorous enforcement of its laws outlawing certain 'listed' drugs. Chinese manufacturers are smart. They know what Chinese law permits and prohibits, and within China they respect the law. If China schedules a drug, manufacturers change the formula slightly and market the new drugs. Profits are one reason why President Xi Jinping and his government don't crack down, despite knowing the deadly impact fentanyl has. But the reality is that Xi turns a blind eye to the export of fentanyl and its precursors. China's attitude poses a threat to the US, and action to reshape the existing dynamics is essential.

What is fentanyl? Created by Paul Janssen,[16] it is a synthetic drug derived naturally from the resin of the opium poppy. It has important uses in medicine, but by 1964 its deadly properties caused nations to ban it for recreational use. In the 1970s it appeared on the streets under the label 'China White'. Dealers touted it as heroin. But it contained no heroin. It was made from a fentanyl analogue comprised of alpha-Methylfentanyl—*almost* the same but with a molecular design that was not quite fentanyl, and therefore legal. The ability of traffickers to create new analogues with unique molecular designs enabled them to keep a jump ahead of regulators. Hence the term *designer drugs* emerged, defined by pharmacology professor Gary Henderson as substances 'where the psychoactive properties of a drug are retained, but the molecular structure has been altered to avoid prosecution'.[17]

China White is sold on the Dark Web as alpha-Methylfentanyl.[18] Elliptic has identified ninety suppliers who sell fentanyl to vendors.[19] Other

16 Westoff, *Fentanyl*, p. 34. The factual description of fentanyl and its related drugs is drawn from Westoff.

17 Ibid., pp. 41–42.

18 Akartuna, 'Fentanyl Dealers'.

19 Elliptic Research, 'Chinese Businesses Fueling the Fentanyl Epidemic Receive Tens of Millions in Crypto Payments', *Elliptic,* 23 May 2023, https://www.elliptic.co/blog/chinese-businesses-fueling-the-fentanyl-epidemic-receive-millions-in-cryptocurrency-payments.

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vendors, notably Chinese, also deal over the Dark Web, whose markets facilitate the trade.

A key value for traffickers is that a single gram of any very potent drug can be synthesised at one location, transported globally, and formulated into doses ranging from a thousand to a million doses. Chinese criminals manufacture most illicit fentanyl or its analogues, which are sold over the Dark Web or shipped to Mexican cartels that 'press it into counterfeit pills, cut it into heroin, coke, or meth, or package it as powder and bring it into the United States. […] One of the most treacherous features is that many fentanyl users don't even realize they are taking it.'[20]

The Chinese–cartel partnership is profitable for both parties. The manufacture of fentanyl and its precursors serves two important strategic goals for China. Immensely profitable, it creates jobs in China. And as a tool of hybrid warfare, it weakens American society. Mexican cartels find that trafficking in fentanyl is equally profitable. Mexico supplies 90 per cent of the heroin that comes into America. China supplies most of the fentanyl that Mexico traffics into the US. That includes fentanyl and precursors. The cartels bump up profits by cutting fentanyl with other powders. There is no quality control, rendering use of the drug—which Westhoff notes has ingredients probably unknown to purchasers—even more dangerous.

The cartels are invaluable to China. They provide access to sophisticated distribution networks, centred in New York. They provide money laundering and support schemes that involve cryptocurrency. They support illegal mining and clothing resale operations. The result is a multibillion-dollar business for cartels and China, rooted in funds paid by US users.

Statistics for both the US and Mexico show the deadly impact of the evolving drug trade. As noted, fentanyl killed nearly 60,000 Americans

20 Westoff, *Fentanyl*, p. 53.

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in 2023–24.[21] Since President Felipe declared war on the cartels, Mexico has seen 460,000 homicides.[22] Colombia provides most of the cocaine that traffickers smuggle into the US. Mexico produces most of the heroin. But China's role is in enabling fentanyl to rise to the fore. Gun violence causes 90 per cent of deaths in Mexico, and 80 per cent of the guns are smuggled in from the US. The US government has spent over a trillion dollars fighting drug abuse and made little progress in reducing demand. In 2017 alone, Americans spent $ 153 billion on illegal drugs.

Ross focuses on countering the cartels. In his view the cartels drive illegal immigration, which prompts him to call for finishing the wall between the US and Mexico, a mission that will 'require a military incursion' as law enforcement and the Mexican government cannot handle the cartels. He argues that the US military can. He sees the victims as the young girls and boys whom the cartels traffic, and not just the drug users. While the US Posse Comitatus Act limits military activities in civilian affairs, Ross argues it applies only to the army and air force, not the marines, navy, or coast guard.

Ross advocates treating drug trafficking as an invasion and act of war, and responding to it as warfare. His approach would direct intelligence agencies to identify the homes, estates, processing plants, and headquarters of the cartels' leadership and personnel, then use air power to target and destroy them. Special operations should follow on from air strikes. Ross's goal is to kill the cartel members and destroy their property. His plan raises interesting questions for the use of strategic communications.

21 Gresser, 'U.S. Drug Overdose Deaths Down'.

22 CFR.org, 'Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 21 February 2025, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels.

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The Central Role of Strategic Communications in the Drug Wars

Strategic communications has played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of the drug wars and drug trafficking. This commentary examines (i) how strategic communications has reshaped their dynamics over the last two decades; (ii) how the Mexican government's inept strategic communications shifted power in favour of cartels; (iii) how cartels have employed it to define an identity and to advance their interests; and (iv) how strategic communications can counter the Chinese/Mexican cartel alliance.

Clarity requires defining strategic communications. National security circles in Washington and the Pentagon have a habit of wrapping themselves around the axle with endless variations of bureaucratic definitions that have little or no practical use. A definition is useless unless one can apply the concept defined operationally.

What is Strategic Communications?

We define strategic communications as the use of language, action, images, or symbols to mould or shape attitudes or opinions of target audiences to influence or shape behaviour in order to achieve a desired end-state or objective. Similar definitions are available, but all of them recognise that the notion applies to the cognitive domain: the domain of the brain. It embraces cognitive influence campaigns, information warfare, information operations, and communications aimed at influencing the behaviour of target audiences. In a political or military context, it is not for public relations or advertising to build an image profile or sell a commercial product.

Very broadly, strategic communications entails certain characteristics. It aims at a specific target audience. It presupposes a rationale rooted in

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credible story, narrative, themes, and messages. It recognises that while reason persuades, emotion motivates and targets emotional intelligence. It requires a picture of success (or definition of winning), a strategy, a plan, an operation, and a metric for assessing success. It defines the stakes, to show audiences why a communication matters to them and how it affects them beneficially. It must be credible, claim and retain the moral high ground, espouse a cause or idea, and use narrative, themes, and messages to tell a story.

Strategic Communications and the Power Shift in the Drug Wars

Drug trafficking is warfare. The notion of *war* itself has never been satisfactorily defined, but one can define warfare as armed conflict between opposing forces, generally to achieve political objectives. Differing descriptions of warfare have given rise to a lively debate as to whether drug trafficking is high-intensity crime alone, or also low-intensity warfare. The debate matters, because if it's warfare, parties like the US government could—and under President Donald J. Trump, it has done so—designate cartels as foreign terrorist organisations.[23] Designation unleashes additional resources to combat cartels.

How Strategic Communications Changed the Drug Wars

Strategic communications has driven major shifts in the drug wars. The first shift occurred in 2006, when the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) candidate Felix Calderón won the Mexican presidency. He succeeded Vicente Fox, the PAN candidate who won in 1990. But Fox

23 The White House, 'Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists', 20 January 2025, www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/.

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didn't shake up the drug wars. Calderón did, and was responsible for two historic evolutions.

First, PAN's 1990 victory broke the grip that the Partido Revolucionara Institucional (PRI) had over the cartels. Until then, PRI-led governments could make or break cartels, and cartels sought government consent for their actions. After 1990, power began shifting to the cartels, which bribed public officials, much of the military (except for the marines), and other influentials, and in so doing achieved unprecedented dominance in Mexican law enforcement and political affairs. Commentators widely agree that while the people around Calderón were corrupt, Calderón himself was arguably the only president of Mexico to escape cartel tentacles. The jury is out on the new president, Claudia Sheinbaum—some people feel optimistic that she will adopt a tougher line in dealing with cartels—but her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, still controls her Morena party. She postures herself as anti-cartel, but in politics, talk is cheap. Let's see what happens over her six-year term. Critics charge that López Obrador accepted millions to enable Morena's 2018 victory.

Second, Calderón was the first (and still only) president to seriously challenge the cartels. His campaign against them transformed law enforcement into outright war with the cartels, increasing violence and cartel power. He waged an aggressive campaign, targeting thirty-seven drug kingpins. His team nabbed twenty-five of them. The arrests did not halt the flow of drug traffic. The organisations simply fractured and new leaders appeared.

Strategic communications played a pivotal role because of Calderón's *failure* to employ it. Carl von Clausewitz wrote that victors in war arouse the will of the people behind a cause. Calderón failed to understand that. The violence alienated Mexicans: he ignited a bloody war without rallying Mexicans behind him. He left office a failure, and violence and disruption in his wake have proven a clear and present danger to both Mexico and the US. The cartels projected an air of invincibility and intimidation that seized control of the narrative about the drug wars.

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The lesson is that in combating violent enemies, three factors that Clausewitz understood in 1832 continue to govern the nature of warfare. Victors (i) arouse the will of the people, (ii) do so in support of a political cause, and (iii) take into account the frictions—unpredictability—of war. Calderón's strategic communications to Mexicans failed on all three counts, and his presidency foundered.

Drug trafficking is immensely profitable. Cartels don't file financial reports. Estimates of its annual profits range between $ 13.8 billion (National Drug Intelligence Center in 2006)[24] and, while the number varies, up to $ 39 billion a year (US Department of Justice and Brookings Institution).[25] The cash produced the second major evolution in the wars. Cartels employed their riches to suborn the Mexican government at every level, and in every way, from its political and military leaders to law enforcement and judges to influentials. Although some observers contend that the goal of cartels is enrichment, in achieving that they have asserted control over vast swathes of the government and Mexican business.

Cartels are proud of their wealth. They view themselves as business people, as noted, not criminals, fulfilling a demand for drugs generated within the US by Americans. They wage a war of ideas in which strategic communications forms a critical front. Cartels have developed an emotional appeal rooted in a *narcocultura* (narcoculture).

The culture exudes vitality in the music people listen to, how its members dress, and a sense of social hierarchy that suggests cartels are the people with power. They employ cultural strategic communications to intimidate, frighten, romanticise, and warn. Cartel music—*narcocorridos*—targets a public that reads few newspapers. Rooted in a century-old tradition,

24 Cited in analysis by Salvador Rizzo, 'Do Mexican Drug Cartels Make $500 Billion a Year?', *Washington Post,* 24 June 2019.

25 See Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Addressing Mexico's Role in the U.S. Fentanyl Epidemic', *Brookings*, 19 July 2023, and Lanny A. Breur, William Hoover, and Anthony P. Placido, 'Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform—"The Rise of Mexican Cartels and U.S. National Security"', 9 July 2009, https://www.justice.gov/file/486066/dl.

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its songs extol murder, cocaine, and AK-47s. Recently, officials have begun cracking down on these songs.[26]

Funded by cartel bosses, *narcocinema* includes thousands of movies and clunky videos. The movies won't win an Academy Award. But filled with violence and sexy women, shoot-outs, sex, drug deals, and big trucks, they excite targeted audiences who identify with the characters and action. Not all videos are romantic. One seven-minute video shows masked men in military-style clothing standing with a man hung by his feet, castrated while he is still alive. Music plays in the background as he is beheaded. The videos usually originate in digital form and are disseminated through the Internet.

Distinctive narco-fashion provides visual cues that extol cartels as distinctive, hip, and powerful. One sees it in the cowboy hats, ostrich-skin boots, sneakers, brightly coloured baseball hats, tight dresses, and loud jewellery. Cartel leaders live in expensive, flashy homes. They define a cohesive culture that enables cartels to recruit as many members as they need.[27]

These narco-genres champion cartel power, choke off freedom of the press, recruit and mobilise, and give the cartels social legitimacy. Membership appeals to impoverished young men looking for a way up in society.

Cartels use cyberspace for strategic communications, socialisation, and support for operations. They conduct public relations in cyberspace. Well funded and technically sophisticated, they issue public information announcements, use intimidation, and exercise direct and indirect censorship (killing online bloggers). X, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram connect a broader online community that centres on *narcocultura* to

26 James Wagner, 'Odes to Mexican Drug Lords Are Pop Hits, but the Law Is Turning against Them', *New York Times*, 24 April 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/world/americas/mexico-narcocorridos-ban.html.

27 Cartel gangs vary between countries. In El Salvador, two gangs dominate the drug trade: the Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 (the 18th Street Gang). The defining feature of El Salvador's young *mareros* is head-to-toe tattoos. The body art declares allegiance to either of the two gangs. See Tom Wainwright, *Narconomics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), pp. 44–45.

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encourage supporters and recruit foot soldiers. They enable money laundering, intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of police, soldiers, and rivals.

The recruiting declaration of the notorious Los Zetas cartel summarises the cartel pitch. Banners—*narcomantas*—declared: 'Why be poor? Come work for us!' Another states that 'Operative Group "the Zetas" wants you, soldier or ex-soldier. We offer a good salary, food, and benefits for your family.' The pitch is a fraud. Sinaloan youth survive on average three and a half years, then go to jail or are killed. But the Mexican poor respond to sign up.

Narcomensajes complement *narcomantas*. Often laid over or near the body of a murder victim, they are a postscript note to a violent event, written on cardboard, paper, or cloth, or perhaps painted onto a vehicle. They purport to explain carnage, warning that such violent death is what happens when a person works with a rival cartel.

The adroit use by cartels of different forms of strategic communications has complemented their use of violence and bribery to seize power and to suborn law enforcement and the Mexican government. The essential thing to understand about cartel culture and its use of violence is that they constitute powerful strategic communications. They provide a narrative, theme, and message for an event, justifying an action and registering its symbolic value to influence behaviour.

Violence may eliminate rivals, but its employment also sends a message to intimidate rivals or adversaries and strengthen the cartel's power. Hanging corpses beneath overpasses with signs bearing messages from cartels asserts dominance and power. Narcoculture—music, fashion, videos, the ostentatious swagger inherent in luxury homes, expensive cars, lavish lifestyles—establishes identity, helps to boost and consolidate power, and recruits new cartel members. The use of bribery is partly a tactic of dominance: accept the silver or receive a bullet.

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These tactics have had a powerful impact. The power of cartels exceeds that of the government in many parts of Mexico. Serious drug prosecutions are virtually unheard of. Strategic communications has enabled cartels—there seem to be about 200 of them, although a dozen have by far the most power—to suborn law enforcement, the judiciary, police, the military (except for the marines), and influentials. Huge profits fuel cartel business, which increases their power.

Today, partnerships with China have increased profits and cartel power. One might look to Mexico's government to weigh in against cartels. Instead, as the popular President López Obrador's term drew to a close, he ignored the vast number of murders committed and the reality that millions of Mexicans live in areas that cartels dominate, routinely demanding protection payments and killing or kidnapping those who refuse to pay. Instead, he called them 'respectful people' who 'respect the citizenry' and mostly just kill each other.[28]

It bears noting that journalists have claimed that López Obrador had accepted millions in cartel bribes. One can perhaps see the impact even on US law enforcement. US prosecution of Mexico's former public security secretary Genaro García Luna and former defence secretary General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda provoked a furore. Indeed, political pressure forced the US Justice Department to dismiss the charges against Cienfuegos and send him home to Mexico.[29]

Mexican cartels and China work together in drug trafficking, earning billions, while posing a clear and present danger to the safety of US citizens and to social stability. Mexico pays lip service to countering cartels. Its efforts are ineffective. The government bans mainstream media from sharing cartel communiqués in the news, yet cartel violence has compelled the media, in which courageous journalists have given their

28 'U.S. Examined Allegations of Cartel Ties to Allies of Mexico's President', *New York Times*, 22 February 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/world/americas/mexico-president-drug-cartel.html.

29 Ibid.

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lives, to self-censor. Cartels aggressively target and murder journalists who criticise them or merely incur their displeasure.

The government has weakly tried to counter narco-videos with its own anti-cartel videos. There's no evidence these have had much impact. An essential problem is that no Mexican government has mounted a well-planned and executed information warfare campaign to discredit and delegitimise the cartels. None has had a comprehensive strategy to degrade cartel power, reduce violence and intimidation, or forge a cohesive strategy to contain or defeat the cartels. It is not a winning approach.

Countering China–Cartel Trafficking

Four precepts govern how we should think about fighting the traffickers.

First, the traditional whack-a-mole approach has not worked and will not work. Billions have been spent targeting kingpins, intercepting smuggled drugs, and prosecuting individual cartel members. Little has been done to stop China from supplying precursor drugs for fentanyl. That approach overlooks the essential dynamics that drive drug trafficking.

Second, law enforcement treats drug trafficking as high-intensity crime. It is that, but this approach is too narrow. Trafficking is low-intensity warfare. The Pentagon and China both consider it to involve military operations that fall short of a full-scale conventional war. Years ago Colonel John Waghelstein offered a useful description after serving as chief of the US Military Group in El Salvador.[30] He calls it 'total war at the grassroots level', which combines political, psychological, and military means.[31] Others echo that view. Low-intensity warfare is said

30 Jared Rader, 'Former Army Col. Discusses Operations in El Salvador', *OU Daily*, 9 September 2009, https://www.oudaily.com/news/former-army-col-discusses-operations-in-el-salvador/article_52e62dbf-f758-5944-95fa-cf8bad7587e6.html.

31 Jochen Hippler, 'Low-Intensity Warfare', *Middle East Report* Nº 144 (January/February 1987), https://merip.org/1987/01/low-intensity-warfare/.

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to be mostly localised conflict that 'ranges from subversion to the use of force. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational and military instruments.'[32]

Third, too often people see drug trafficking as only a crime because, in their view, warfare requires a political goal. The notions are not mutually exclusive. Drug trafficking is criminal. But traffickers have political objectives. For China, drug trafficking comprises an element of hybrid warfare against the US. Killing nearly 60,000 Americans with a drug manufactured for American consumption—with full knowledge of its lethal consequences—and disrupting the stability of communities is a political act aimed at achieving political goals. Mexican cartels traffic in the US to earn illicit profits, but they employ their tactics and wealth to establish a recognisable societal culture, and to gain power over Mexican government, military, and business—all political goals.

Fourth, law enforcement and most commentators think of cartels mainly as criminal enterprises. While that is true, their essential characteristic is that they are business enterprises. Journalist Tom Wainwright points out that the drug trade is a 'global, highly organized business. Its products are designed, manufactured, transported, marketed, and sold' to consumers around the world.[33] Cartel leaders require vast sums of money to operate. They have to recruit, house, train, transport, and feed members. The Jalisco New Generation Cartel reportedly spends $ 400 million a year on security to protect its members *from rival cartels.* Then they have the large cost of trafficking drugs.

The cartels are not modern versions of hole-in-the-wall gangs. They are sophisticated global enterprises. Wainwright found that the most ruthless outlaws confront the same challenges as other entrepreneurs: managing personnel, navigating government regulations, finding reliable suppliers, and dealing with competitors. Clients make the same demands as other

32 *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, FM 100-20/AFP 3-20, 5 December 1990, ch. 1, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/100-20/10020ch1.htm.

33 Wainwright, *Narconomics*, p. 2. We draw heavily upon Wainwright for descriptions of drug trafficking.

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consumers. 'They seek out reviews of new products, increasingly prefer to shop online, and even demand a certain level of "corporate social responsibility" from suppliers.'[34]

The bottom line is that the most effective approach to countering cartels is to treat them as businesses. We need to interrupt their operations and undermine their ability to operate. We need to attack their finances, for without money they could not operate.

Action That Has Not Worked

Fentanyl has emerged as the drug traffickers' first choice. It's highly profitable and logistically easier to deal with. But it's worth noting that past efforts to stop traffic in cocaine and heroin have failed.

Authorities believed that eradicating growing fields would drive scarcity, drive up prices, and reduce demand. The flaw, as Wainwright found, is that lowering drug supply did not affect consumer price. The cartels comprise the single market to whom growers can sell. They set the purchase price and do not want to raise retail consumer prices. Eradication hurt growers but did not constrain supply. The approach did not work.

A logical alternative was persuading growers to switch crops. In Mexico, tortillas made from corn form a national staple. The price of corn did affect the willingness of farmers to try alternative crops to opium-poppy production. The flaw was that growing conditions made the price of corn uncertain, and cartels used technology to enable competitive pricing for opium. Even trebling the price of cocaine's raw ingredient only raised the retail price of cocaine in the US by 0.6 per cent. The cartels can match the market, and efforts to increase the cost of drug supply produced minimal benefit. In short, persuading growers to switch to alternative products is not a successful strategy to stop drug trafficking.

34 Ibid.

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Law enforcement has ended up trying to defeat cartels by making the border harder to cross. The drug trade uses only forty-seven crossing points into the US. The largest half-dozen are essential. Wainwright observes that a cartel must control at least one of them. The flaw here is that the overall perspective of this approach won't work. It is a whack-a-mole strategy. The traffickers have overwhelmed and will overwhelm law enforcement.

A current mantra apparently favoured by the Trump Administration is a 'kingpin' strategy—identify cartel leaders and eliminate them. A cartel may find itself smaller, but new kingpins emerge.[35] Calderón's strategy hardly dented the drug trade. Eliminating kingpins is a desirable goal merely as strategic communications, by sending the message that no cartel leader is safe. It does intimidate the leaders.[36] But we need to be realistic about the limited impact. This strategy is not the answer.

Action That Might Work

What might work? We emphasise that solutions to big problems require big ideas, some of them risky. Action can be strategic communications. It can send a powerful message to cartels, rally support to combat them, and strengthen law enforcement.

Tariffs? We are not economists and express no opinion on the collateral impact of new tariffs. But tariffs comprise a means of strategic communications in the drug wars. Trump is correct that the only way to force China to crack down on fentanyl manufacturing is to make the cost of tolerating it higher than cracking down on it. President Xi promised President Joe Biden that China would crack down. He lied.

35 International Crisis Group, 'Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's War on Drugs Explained', 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/crime-pieces-effects-mexicos-war-drugs-explained.

36 Natalie Kitroeff and Paulina Villegas, 'Trump's Threats and Mexico Crackdown Threaten Drug Cartel', *New York Times*, 2 March 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/02/world/americas/mexico-cartel-fentanyl-trump-tariffs.html.

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Manufacturing fentanyl or its precursors is popular among the Chinese and profitable. They see no current reason to stop it. China views fentanyl as an effective tool of hybrid warfare against the US, and it is profitable. The Trump Administration has to weigh the costs–benefits of tariffs. But if the goal is to persuade Xi to take action against fentanyl, tariffs may be the only way to get a desired result.

Tariffs may also force the Mexican government to act. This strategy also requires a cost–benefit analysis. The Sheinbaum government's ability to fight cartels is unclear. López Obrador, who is said to be sympathetic to cartels and reportedly took campaign money from them, controls the Morena party. Cartel infiltration and bribery of the government is extensive. Do not underestimate that obstacle. Mexico's president is the central powerhouse in Mexican politics. But it does not have dictatorial authority.

Potential Mexican Government Action

We see ways in which Sheinbaum could make a difference.

First, work with the US on intelligence collection, especially in identifying the location of cartel assets that might be frozen or seized, as well as cartel organisation, distribution networks, and operations.

Technology plays a crucial role in this evolving battle. US law enforcement and intelligence agencies are leveraging advanced data analytics to track financial transactions and identify money-laundering patterns. AI-powered predictive algorithms are being developed to anticipate drug-trafficking routes and methods. Improved border surveillance technologies, including next-generation sensors and autonomous systems, are being deployed to monitor vast stretches of the US–Mexico border. This, alongside boots along the borders, will be needed to identify and disrupt drug movements

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via drones and tunnels. Taking these actions will send a powerful message to both traffickers and those who do business with them.

Second, provide consent and cooperation to targeted special operations measures against cartels. The US should give the DEA, which has a Tier One Special Operations capability, the lead in such strikes, as law enforcement does not arouse the same nationalistic, anti-American anger among Mexicans as would military action. Such action should, if possible, employ both Mexican and US assets. Military action without—or against—such assets would probably arouse active hostility among the Mexican population, government, and military. One should bear in mind that the US State Department and a Yahoo finance report both estimate that 1.6 million Americans reside in Mexico.[37] That represents a formidable pool of potential targets for retaliation.

Colonel Ross favours using strikes to eliminate kingpins. Aside from the limited potential of such strikes, we note another obstacle that American authorities might consider before launching a campaign of kingpin assassinations. Cartels are rich, sophisticated, and ruthless. A favoured tactic they employ against adversaries is assassination. American officials who sponsor and approve such a campaign might note that cartels are capable of retaliating in kind, within US borders.

What would backfire is action that amounts to a military invasion. Mexico would resist that, and such action would create a long-term disruption in Mexican–US relations. Mexico views the US seizure of Texas and the south-west United States about the same way that Ukrainians view Putin's effort to seize their country. It's a key reason a lot of Mexicans believe there should be no border between the two nations. Americans obviously hold the opposite view. Our point is that an invasion could

37 Heather Sullivan, 'More Americans Moving to Mexico for Lower Cost of Living, Scenery, Culture', *Fox 26 Houston*, 21 February 2025, citing State Department, https://www.fox26houston.com/news/more-u-s-citizens-moving-mexico-lower-cost-living-scenery-culture, and David Nadelle, '7 Reasons So Many Americans Are Moving to Mexico City, Starting with Cheap Rent', *Yahoo Finance*, 29 May 2024, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/7-reasons-many-americans-moving-180139202.html.

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trigger a long-term war—perhaps a guerrilla war that spills across the border into the US—that benefits neither nation.

Third, mount strong strategic communications to turn the Mexican public against cartels. Felix Calderón's failure on this front cost him his war.

Freezing or Seizing Cartel Assets

Operating a cartel is expensive. They have to recruit and pay members, house and feed them, train and arm them, transport them, take care of families. Recruitment is a challenge. Violence and turnover—the mortality rate is high—are big problems, especially since cartels, as Wainwright observes, 'must recruit in an industry that operates under secrecy, where jobs cannot be advertised and total trust is required'.[38] Security is expensive. And then there is the cost of trafficking.

In his book *Treasure Islands*,[39] journalist Nicholas Swanson asserts that cartels hide trillions of dollars offshore in places like the Cayman Islands. No one knows how much is there, but say it's only a trillion: why not freeze or seize these funds held by banks? The US will freeze but probably not seize funds. A cyber operation is required. Mexico may lack the ability to do that, but it could arguably find a partner—perhaps Israel—or possibly find a contractor like Constellis (formerly Blackwater) that might be able to help. Depriving cartels of these funds would inflict a body blow to their operations.

In the meantime, cartels possess substantial assets apart from those held in banks. Mexico and the US should work strenuously to identify and seize those funds.

38 Wainwright, *Narconomics*, p. 54.

39 Nicholas Swanson, *Treasure Islands* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

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The Home Front

The US must confront the reality that American consumption of drugs is a wicked problem. A detailed discussion lies outside this commentary. We note two points. First, we reject the suggestion that legalising drugs is the solution. A small, cohesive nation like Switzerland has successfully legalised fentanyl, but legalising drugs in most of Europe or the US would aggravate, not solve, the problem. Second, the US *must* devise a strategy in which strategic communications would play an essential role in persuading citizens to avoid using drugs. As already noted, the cartel answer to the trade is that they are business people fulfilling demand. It is a serious point and we need to deal with it.

Select Committee recommendations: the House Select Committee articulated a series of recommendations that rely upon stronger law-enforcement cooperation, resourcing the intelligence community, sanctions, tariffs, increased fines, and a crackdown on money laundering. These entail a mixture of strategic communications and other actions. We embrace the Committee's recommendations.

Conclusion

That illicit drugs and China's exploitation of the market for fentanyl, and its role in providing money-laundering services to Mexican drug cartels, pose a clear and present danger to US stability seems incontrovertible. The US must adopt a realistic perspective. Action to counter drugs presents a significant challenge. There are no easy fixes, no overnight solutions. But by thinking big and acting boldly, action can bring a lot of the problem under control.

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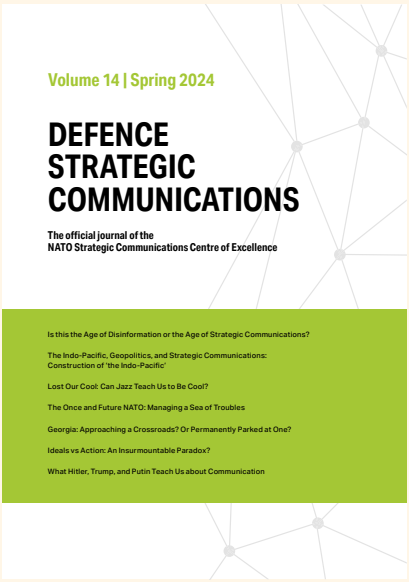

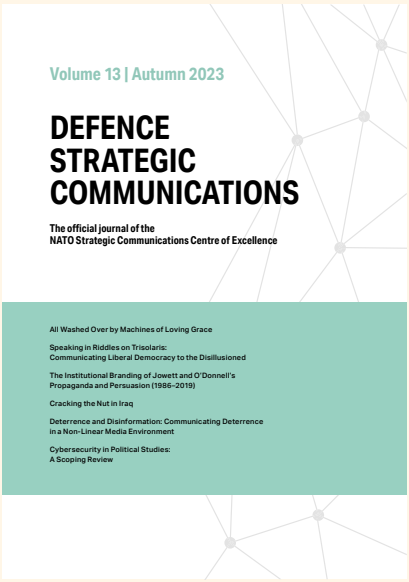

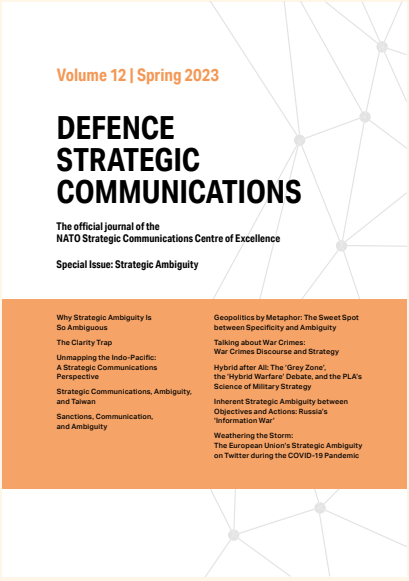

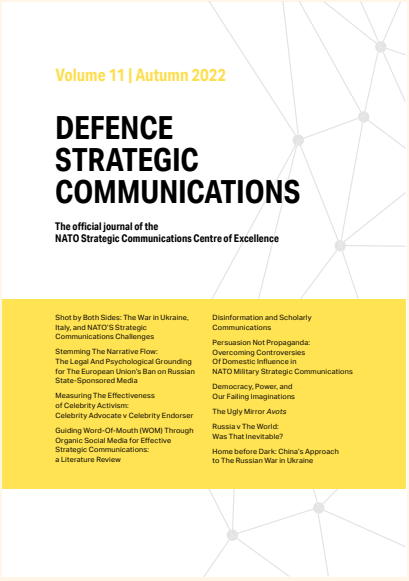

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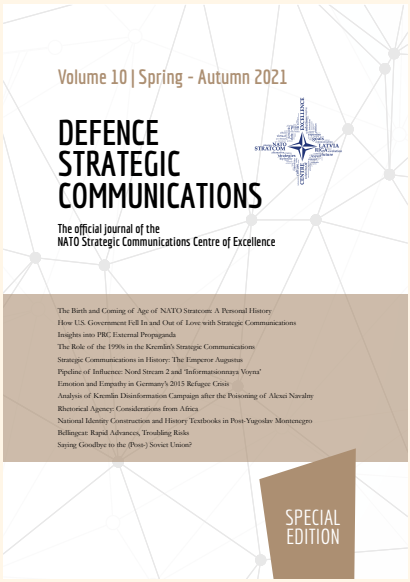

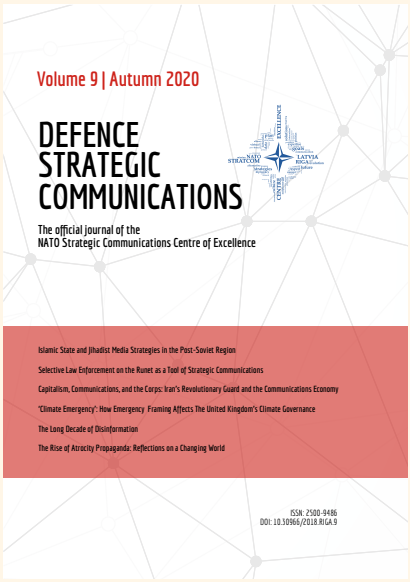

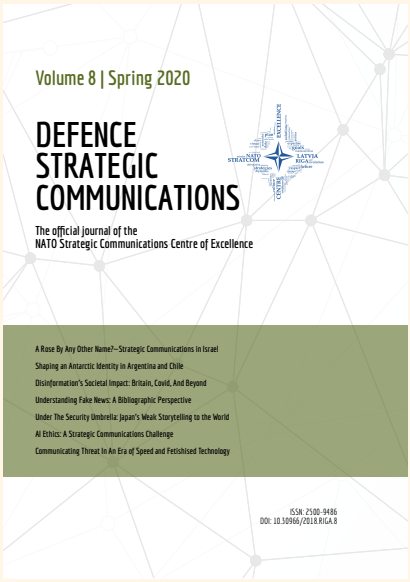

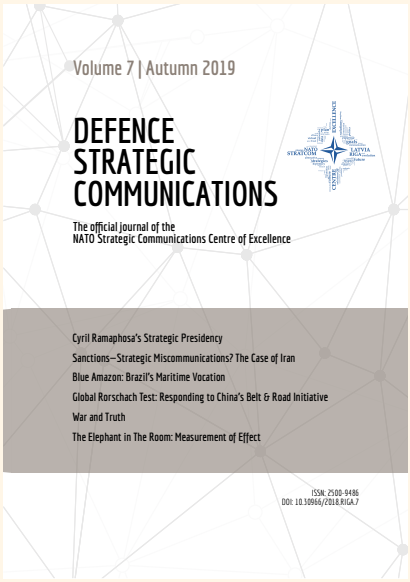

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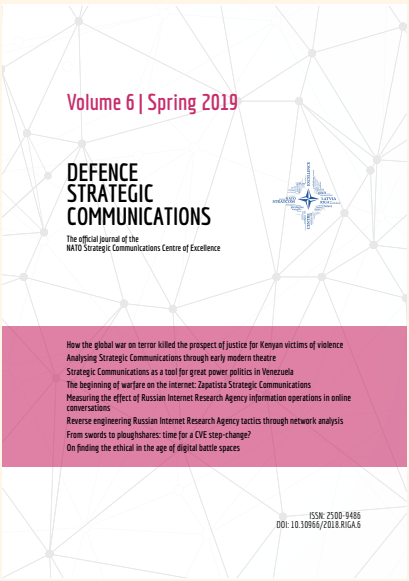

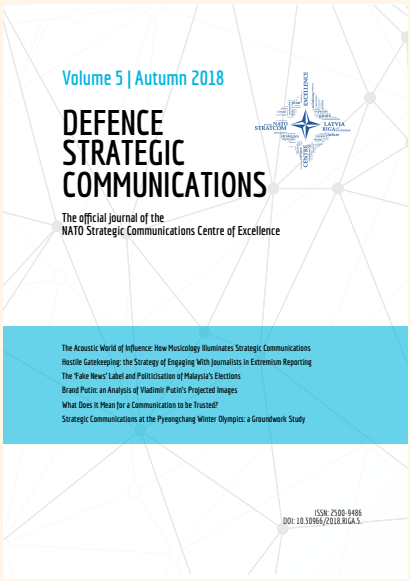

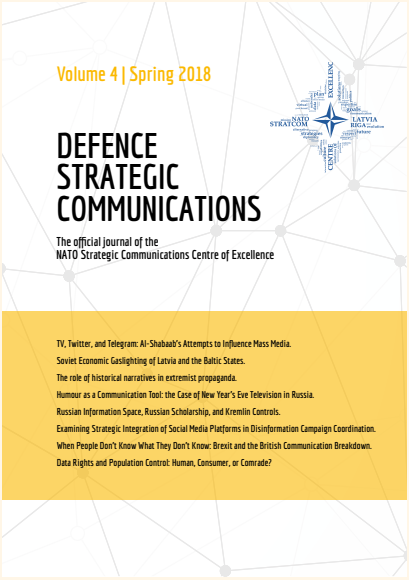

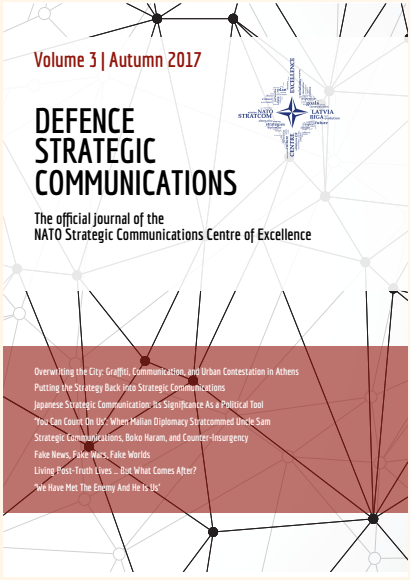

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