

Blinders, Blunders and Wars

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There are a few books every senior geopolitical leader ought to read. This book adds to that collection. It falls into the outstanding category because it demands thinking while and after reading. It does not require the reader to agree. It does require the reader to consider, contemplate, and evaluate—and especially for a senior geopolitician to determine whether a course of action actually will bring the consequences expected—or, alternatively, will be a blunder of dramatic proportions.

The book is built around the decision to go to war, and it builds on the well-established observation that many successful leaders have nonetheless led their nations into disastrous wars. It utilizes twelve case studies ranging

from Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia to the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq to describe how that has occurred. It offers an analytic framework to evaluate what went wrong and how better decisions could have been made, and then proposes that the use of the framework could help reduce the prospects of conflict between the United States and China in the 21st century. Not everyone will agree with the descriptions of the case studies; the accuracy and value of the analytic framework demands review; moreover whether it has real world relevance to the U.S.-China relationship is uncertain. But there are no more important issues for a nation than going to war, and by taking on the questions of how and when to do so effectively—and, as importantly, when to choose not to act—the authors, experienced policy-makers (and as a disclosure, friends and colleagues) – have put a key topic in front of decision-makers who will face such life and death decisions in the next decades.

The key thesis of the book is that those “who have blundered could have known better, for information seems to have been available at the time to have . . . supported better decisions. . . .” The important conclusion then is that “It follows that improvements are needed in how leaders and institutions use information....” As the authors say, though, while “simple in theory . . . implementing it is anything but.” The theory, nevertheless, is certainly worth considering.

The book proposes that bad decision-making arises from a series of factors, most often the following eight:

- “information is ignored, filtered, misconstrued, or manipulated to fit predispositions,”

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- “excessive reliance is placed on intuition and experience,”
- “arrogance, egotism, or hubris causes unwarranted confidence,”
- “a rigid but wrong strategic concept or vision prevails,”
- “contingencies are not considered,”
- “enemy will or capabilities are underestimated,”
- “operational difficulty or duration is underestimated,” and
- “dissent and debate are stifled.”

In the face of these problems, the authors have a three-fold prescription which they propose both the United States and China adopt: 1) establishing a new institution to provide independent policy advice (i.e. a type of red teaming); 2) better standards of analytic objectivity; and 3) more effective use of technology, particularly computer assisted analysis to evaluate contingencies. In addition to having both the United States and China use such approaches, they additionally recommend greater communications between the two countries, especially between the two presidents, national security institutions including the military, and nongovernmental connectivity especially think tanks, universities and the like (though it is fair to note that a great deal of dialogue, both structured and informal, already occurs).

Most who read the book likely will concur with the assessment that the leaders described in the eight case studies of failure (they offer four instances of good decision-making) badly overstepped—after all, history has proved that. The real question is whether, without the benefit of historical hindsight, those leaders would have made better decisions had they followed the authors’ recommendations.

The problem that all decision-makers face is that they are imperfect human beings operating in imperfect institutions who cannot predict the future. They must go forward based on usually imperfect information, dealing with their own biases and experiences, and trying hard to achieve best results in a complex environment. It is no wonder Napoleon is said to have wanted generals who were lucky.

The fundamental challenge the authors present to policy-makers is: be more rational. Make sure you actually consider available information. Spend some more time thinking about alternatives. That is a good set of recommendations, but will they work to result in better decision-making? I think the answer is “sometimes,” and that is a great virtue, but it is important to note that this is a prescription to avoid blunders, not necessarily to avoid war.

In developing national strategies, whether involving war or otherwise, leaders must consider, whether they realize it or not, the ends, ways, and means of the strategy as well as the risks involved in implementation. Overreaching ends, ineffective ways, under-resourced means, and improper risk analysis are pathways to failure. So, a rational view by the leader is critical. As Clausewitz has written, “No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.” And, as he also points out, it is critical to “discover how much of our resources must be mobilized.” The lesson that the authors underscore is that the initiator of a war will not necessarily make these decisions very well.

The authors’ specific recommendations—an alternative source of independent policy advice, high standards of analytic objectivity, and greater use of computer assisted

analysis—reflect their own strong backgrounds as outstanding policy analysts. Considering them in reverse order:

- Computer-assisted analysis should be welcomed, but in doing so, it will be very important to remember the dictum that “all models are wrong; some are useful.” There was a great deal of modeling analysis during the Cold War involving nuclear and conventional battle issues, but no senior policy-maker confused the models with real life. Greater modeling relating to the complexities of terrorism, insurgency, hybrid war, cyber-conflict, the implications of climate change, and other newer elements of the security landscape will be all to the good. While a decision-maker must avoid “paralysis by analysis,” recognizing that there can be alternative outcomes as a contingency is contemplated or develops is important. Modeling might be especially useful to help disclose unanticipated inclinations to escalation. However, as a colleague Melanie Teplinsky has pointed out, there is a great deal of judgment up front as to how to build the model – what factors to consider, and what inputs the model will deal with. These judgments are not necessarily made by professional decision-makers and may take place long before any decision-makers see output from the model. For this reason, decision-making based on computer modeling is not necessarily any more objective than ordinary decision-making, although it may seem so. Ultimately, then, while utilizing computers to help think through contingencies can be valuable, human judgment will necessarily be called upon.

- In making such judgments, no one will dispute the value of highly professional objective analysis, the second of the authors’

recommendations. The real issue will be who will determine whether such objective analysis is being provided. The case of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq likely will remain the exemplar of the difficulties. The intelligence community did not cover itself with glory nor did the policy community. As the authors show, neither appears to have been as objective as one would have wished. Saddam Hussein was a bad man and he ran a despicable regime. But the rationale for the war was an overhyped series of claims regarding weapons of mass destruction. Iraq raises the always critical issue of who guards the guardians?

- The authors’ answer to the guardians question is their third recommendation—to create a new body of independent policy analysis. Of course, there have been times when the President has sought assistance of this sort—generally in the form of Presidential commissions (sometimes with Congressional involvement), and there are existing bodies such as the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board or the Defense Policy Board. Asking for a second opinion can enlarge the debate—and especially for those who want to slow things down – that can be useful. But after all is said and done, it is precisely the job of the President and his National Security Council (NSC), along with the Congress, to evaluate the circumstances and make the policy decisions. A key reform for better decision-making would be if the President stopped making the National Security Council an implementing body and instead used it precisely to ensure that the departments are thoroughly analyzing and offering considered judgments for critical questions. To do so would require the end of “small group

thinking” where it is not “good form” to break with the consensus, and instead recognize that differences of opinion are often useful and not to be beaten down by turf battles and other bureaucratic maneuvers. An NSC with a mandate to ensure considered decision could be significantly smaller and much more valuable by operating to generate precisely the type of analysis the authors seek.

It is worth recognizing, however, that even the most rational and well-intentioned decision-makers can sometimes find themselves in deep difficulty. Consider the U.S., and subsequently NATO/coalition, war in Afghanistan. The original end was clear enough—retaliating against al-Qaeda in response to September 11. The original way was quite effective—war via special operations combined with the forces of the Northern Alliance. The original means were sufficient including supporting airpower and CIA funding. But war has a logic of its own, and as Clausewitz states, the “original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war.” That certainly happened in Afghanistan, as the original retaliation transmuted into a nation-building exercise, mainly influenced by the lessons after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, when the subsequent descent into disorder arguably led to the sanctuary and growth of al-Qaeda. Seeking to avoid such a result was a rational enough end, and as the original Bonn conference showed, there was a great deal of worldwide support for the nation-building approach. As it turned out, despite the understandable end, ways and means have been less than adequate. There was too high a degree of optimism on many levels. The difficulties of building an effective Afghan government are numerous, including issues of

Afghan human capital and whether the West actually had the capabilities to help create key institutions, such as effective ministries or police forces; the problems that Pakistan would present, including sanctuary and double-dealing; the issues of drugs, crime, and corruption; the interactions of culture and modernity; and the impact of the Iraq conflict, to name only a few. Could some of these issues have been better resolved if a new institution offered its ideas? Perhaps. Would thinking through contingencies have made a difference? Maybe. But it would be hard to say the effort was not rationally considered—it just has not turned out particularly well.

Would the lessons be valuable in the U.S.-China context? After all, that is the reason the authors say they wrote the book. There are grounds to be positive about the value of a highly rational approach. To begin with, American and Chinese interests coincide in certain important ways. Most clearly, each government is focused on enhancing its country’s prosperity. In a global world, that requires interdependence. Moreover, at least some critical challenges facing each country – including energy, environment and climate change, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism – can significantly benefit from a common approach.

But not all interests are in common between the two countries. Even in the economic area, there are serious differences regarding key issues such as intellectual property protection. The most obvious ongoing area of conflict is in the cyber realm, where there appears little likelihood of resolution. At the current level, cyber probably is not a flash point, but it does have escalatory potential. Moreover, the maritime claims that China has aggressively asserted in the East and South

China Seas have the potential to pull the United States into a conflict, as does the long-standing issue of Taiwan.

It would be easy to say that it is important not to overly escalate these disputes. But not only do the disputes involve third parties, so they are not entirely under the control of the U.S. or China, but they involve concepts and interests that, not only have rational content, but also have strong emotional aspects. The Chinese seem to have a penchant for periodically raising the levels of tension as, for example, drilling in waters contested with Vietnam. Moreover, especially on the Chinese side, there are additional emotional factors bearing on the relationship that may add to the difficulties of rationally limiting disputes. In particular, China has built as one of the pillars of its educational system the concept of “Never forget national humiliation,” and it more recently has directly rejected what it deems to be “western values,” even barring their teaching and discussion in schools. These emotional factors should not of themselves precipitate conflict, but they could cause it more easily to escalate in the event of a flash point. At that point, rationality would be at once most necessary and most difficult to achieve. The United States has thus far taken a measured and sensible approach to supporting its commitments without inflaming the overall situation. China, while more aggressive, has periodically backed off certain of its most problematic behavior, although its decision-making process remains opaque—and it is therefore far from clear whether it would consider a process approach along the lines suggested by the authors, and what freedom any group would have to make objective recommendations. Whether in a more dangerous situation, emotion might outrun calculation is, of course, always uncertain.

The authors’ fundamental point of the value of rationality certainly would have critical value under such circumstances.

Indeed, this is the fundamental challenge that the authors raise—can rationality overcome emotion? In geopolitics, historically that has not always been the case. The great value of the book is that it is a cautionary tale designed to help generate that rationality.

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