[24]

Coming Wars

> Well, at any rate, judging from this decision of yours, you seem to us to be quite unique in your ability to consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes, and to see uncertainties as realities, simply because you would like them to be so.
>
> **THUCYDIDES**, the Melian Dialogue[1]

'The least successful enterprise in Washington DC', observed Major General Bob Scales, was 'the one that places bets on the nature and character of tomorrow's wars.' It was a vast enterprise, involving 'the services, defense industries, and their supporting think tanks, along with Congress, academia, and the media'. Yet the success rate was poor. 'Virtually without exception, they get it wrong'.[2]

He identified five schools: 'Scenario Development', which simulated 'excuses for going to war with one of the usual suspects with serious military capabilities—China, Iran, North Korea', with Russia as the 'nostalgic favourite'. The 'Emerging Technology School' consisted of 'frightened and well-remunerated techno-warriors who constantly scan the threat horizon anxious to alert the security community to enemies who they sense are harnessing the diabolical genius of home-grown weapon makers'. They mistakenly assumed that enemies put the same trust in technologies as did the United States. The 'Capabilities-Based Assessment' school created a 'huge military toolbox from which weapons

and forces can be retrieved and tailored to meet unforeseen threats.' The 'New Concepts Masquerading as Strategy' school was after a new 'war-fighting concept'. He cited examples such as 'shock and awe',[3] 'Net-centric warfare', and 'Effects-based operations'. Lastly the 'Global Trends School' sought 'to launder politically and socially popular global concerns into future military threats. These included global water supplies, HIV epidemics, [and] urbanization' but without actually explaining why they all led to war.

Reviewing the various prospectuses for future war published since the end of the Cold War, the influence of all these schools was there to be seen. They revealed much about prevailing perceptions about international and sub-state conflict and likely sources of trouble in coming years. The scenarios tended to be based on conflicts which were active, or at least latent, but currently lacked the spark that would turn them into war. The effort to find that spark provided the impetus to the literary creativity that went into generating scenarios for future war.[4]

AFTER THE SOVIET UNION COLLAPSED, THOSE LOOKING FOR a suitable 'peer competitor' to fill the large gap left had to cast about. The struggle to find a compelling prospective enemy was exemplified by the reliance upon Japan as a candidate. At the time Japan's reputation and influence were at its post-war peak, buoyed by its spectacular recent economic performance, based on its manufacturing strength. In 1988 the historian Paul Kennedy had assumed Japan's growing importance when considering *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, especially when set against relative American weakness.[5] This importance could be reflected in trade and financial policy without turning into a power struggle. Japan had been at war with the United States in living memory, but that was unlikely to be an experience that it wished to repeat.

In *The Coming War with Japan*, however, George Friedman and Meredith Lebard warned that, without the Cold War framework holding the United States and Japan together, deep economic differences were developing.[6] These pointed to a trade war as Americans worked to squeeze Japanese exports, first out of the US and then elsewhere. As Europe followed this protectionist logic, Japan was bound to create its own

regional market, excluding the US. The US would push against this, leading to a military confrontation. This was the same logic that led to Pearl Harbor and the disaster of the last war, as if everything could be gambled in an effort to escape from dependence upon others for vital commodities. In a sympathetic review of Friedman and LeBard's book, James Fallows considered talk of war 'extreme' but still warned that 'there is sure to be more antagonism than we have seen in the last forty years'.[7] The expectation was reflected in fiction, with economic tension (and racist depictions of the Japanese) behind Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun*,[8] and Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor*, which involved combined military and economic action against the United States.[9]

As so often with predictive work of this sort, the trends were turning even as the books were published. Japan was entering into a long period of stagnation, and would struggle to hold on to its market position. Instead of aggressive economic policies, which tend to lead to market collapse, the Bush Senior and Clinton Administrations promoted the benefits of open trade. The scenarios also strained credibility by suggesting that Japan would think itself to be in a position to challenge the US militarily or that if it did this would be on a better basis than 1941. By 1998 the same team of Friedman and LeBard in a book on *The Future of War* had concluded that Japan would be 'loath to challenge American power' in the Pacific, although it could—unlike the Indians and Chinese who would never be able to find the resources to create a blue-water navy. Their core conclusion now was that, largely because of 'precision-guided munitions', this was 'a dramatically new global epoch in which the United States holds, and for the foreseeable future continues to hold, center stage'.[10] A decade later Friedman was still confident that the United States would remain the dominant global superpower through the twenty-first century but, in some flights of geopolitical fancy, the possibility of a Japanese-American war was revived, inevitably involving a 'sneak attack' (on Thanksgiving Day 2050). Japan was allied with Turkey, and eventually France and Germany, while on the American side was Britain, the 'Polish Bloc', India, and China. Friedman was less impressed with China than other forecasters. He predicted it would fragment in the 2010s.[11]

The most common reason to show how the United States might be in

more peril than commonly realised was to encourage a higher level of military preparedness. In 1998 the former US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger warned of 'victory disease', a complaint following success that meant the victims ignored the dangers they faced and so failed to make proper preparations. He offered a collection of complex scenarios combining fact and fiction, in a form somewhat derivative of Tom Clancy. Governments had to cope with more than one crisis at a time. While a full-scale war was raging on the Korean peninsula, escalating to nuclear use, China decided to seize Taiwan. Iran not only inspired Islamic fundamentalists to overthrow secular Arab governments but also organised terrorist attacks in the United States, and a nuclear weapon was exploded in Europe. Mexico might be invaded in 2003 to topple a corrupt regime dealing in drugs and propelling vast numbers of refugees across the border into the US. Weinberger also revisited old struggles as a resurgent Russia sought to conquer Europe using its nuclear power, while in his version of Japan picking up from 1945, 'cyberstrikes' were involved as well as chemical and nuclear weapons. The focus was still on dangerous states and classical forms of war, with the added complications of weapons of mass destruction, rather than irregular threats involving guerrilla warfare and terrorism. As the US could get into so much trouble in so many ways, the key message was that it must rebuild its conventional forces and continue its pursuit of effective missile defences.[12]

By this time China was emerging as the most serious long-term challenger to the United States. This was always a more credible prospect than Japan. China was a much larger country than the United States, with a massive population, and by the late 1990s its economic growth was staggering. Its government was authoritarian, notionally communist, and historically antagonistic to the United States, even though relations had been warmer since the early 1970s and there was considerable economic interdependence. Most importantly, China was a genuinely revisionist power. It was dissatisfied with its current borders, considering them relics from a period when it was weak and regularly humiliated. Lastly, its civil war, which had led to the Communists dominating the mainland, still left its old enemies, the Nationalists, in charge of the island of Taiwan. Much of its diplomatic activity went into denying that Taiwan had any

legitimacy as an independent entity.

Jed Babbin and Edward Timperlake, a conservative commentator and a former naval officer respectively, argued with a mixture of fact and fiction that as soon as China had a capability to strike the United States it would do so. They were not tied to any specific scenario, considering not only Taiwan but also the continued division of Korea (China had fought American troops in defence of North Korea in 1950) and its various claims around the Pacific Rim.[13] They imagined a President Hillary Clinton conceding most of Asia to China rather than have a fight, but also US nuclear use against North Korea and even Iran after they had used their nuclear weapons on other countries—Japan and Israel. Nonetheless, a nuclear exchange between China and the US was not in the plot. As with other such books the key themes depend on the rise of a new superpower, which it was assumed must come at the expense of the United States, an energy crisis of some sort which provided the trigger for conflict, and a conviction in Beijing that war was inevitable.

More than any of the other prospective threats the question of the rise of China acquired importance because it provided an occasion for a major debate on the future of naval power. Most scenarios for war inevitably involved the movement of forces on land, for wars were normally about the control of chunks of prized territory. The focus on civil wars had reinforced this preoccupation with land warfare. The naval consequences of the instability they represented tended to come down to the need to deal with piracy and people trafficking, as refugees took to dangerous boats to flee from violence in the Middle East to Europe.

Yet a backdrop to all post-1945 international affairs had been US mastery of the seas, and its ability to reach distant lands and exert power around the world. It was US naval strength that had allowed it to forge alliances in both Europe and Asia, to reach out to them with military reserves and essential supplies at times of crisis, and to threaten enemies with bombardment from the sea, economic blockade, or an amphibious landing. This had been very much in evidence during the 1991 Gulf War.[14]

As China grew economically so did its navy as the most palpable manifestation of its strength, posing a short-term challenge to the US in terms of its ability to assert freedom of navigation and in the longer-term

to come the aid of its allies. The capability required by the Chinese if they were to get control of the seas close to their shores was described as 'Anti-Access/Area Denial', with its own acronym 'A2/AD'.[15] This focused debate on how far the Chinese military really had to go before they could challenge American naval predominance.[16] The A2/AD concept became too vague—either 'an impenetrable "keepout zone" that forces could enter only at extreme peril to themselves', a 'family of technologies' or a 'strategy.'[17] The issue pointed to a larger issue of whether the US could expect to continue to use its naval mastery to project power close to enemy shores, reflecting the problems of quality coming at the expense of quantity, so there were fewer platforms to go round, and how each expensive unit might be vulnerable to a variety of anti-ship weapons, including small, unmanned submarines. In this way the US-China strategic relationship came to be framed as a classic form of great-power rivalry—a developing contest for control of the Western Pacific, detached from the political considerations over whether there were other ways of managing their conflicts of interests or the extent to which the key factor would remain the extent of their economic inter-dependence.

IN 2007 ANDREW KREPINEVICH, WHO HAD BEEN ONE OF THE first to talk about the revolution in military affairs, offered his scenarios for the period up to 2016.[18] His hierarchy of enemies now had North Korea and China at the top. Iran was assumed to be behind most mischief in the Middle East. His book opened with Pearl Harbor and the blitzkrieg to show how surprise might happen. His scenarios included a collapse of Pakistan and a scramble to make sure its nuclear weapons did not fall into the wrong hands, a real worry at this time, while a multifaceted Islamist 'Wall of Fire' took to an extreme every fear about the worst terrorists could do. The most interesting scenario, in that it related to an actual development, was a US withdrawal from Iraq leading to chaos. Krepinevich assumed America's loss of resolve would lead to Russia and China coming to take responsibility for stabilising the Middle East. The problems with the scenario lay in the detail: the assumption that Prime Minister Maliki in Iraq would reach out to Kurds and Sunni (which he notably failed to do), the neglect of Syria (where Russia did take responsibility), overstating

Iran's role and President Obama's eventual recognition that he could not let ISIS overcome Iraq.

By 2015, following its invasion of Ukraine (including the annexation of Crimea), Russia had put itself back into the running as a threat to be taken seriously. That year, General Richard Shirreff, recently retired as Deputy SACEUR, published his account of a coming war with the explicit purpose of demonstrating the dangers of the decline in British defence spending, and the 'semi-pacifist' inclinations of the government, who had made an 'appalling gamble' that the international scene would remain benign. They had neglected the danger posed by Russian President Putin, determined to reunite 'ethnic Russian speakers under the banner of Mother Russia' and ready to grab the Baltic states that had been part of the Soviet Union up to 1991 but were now members of NATO. Shirreff did not try to invent a scenario for war. He took a contingency already being taken seriously by the alliance[19] to its most alarming conclusion. In doing so he followed the standard form of the genre. A cunning enemy, free from democratic constraints, surprises feckless Western countries that find themselves in a war for which they are unprepared.[20] The situation was only recovered because it turned out, perhaps surprisingly, that the West was better at cyberwar than the Russians.

Douglas Cohn, another retired officer, offered scenarios for World War 4 (assuming the Cold War was World War 3)[21] that also occurred because states inclined to aggression could barely help themselves when opportunities came their way. Any weakness and they would pounce, in order to revenge old defeats or achieve long-held ambitions. Compared with the scenarios from the early 1990s, Cohn's forward look was dominated by fragmentation—old NATO allies coming to blows, the collapse of the Eurozone and a Belgian civil war, Russia attempting to reverse its post-1990 losses, including a move into the Baltic states, China becoming expansionist or succumbing to its own civil war, and then conflicts developing because of a rush to colonise the polar regions or even the moon, or gain access to fresh water, as well as more familiar concerns related to nuclear terrorism, currency manipulation and cyberwar.

The theme of all these books was that the improbable could always

happen and so, in effect, it was essential to be prepared for everything. This was Cohn's conclusion. National defence could not be 'predicated upon easily defined threats' and so the United States must be prepared 'for the whole gamut of possibilities'. His worry appeared to be less that the US government lacked the capabilities to deal with these challenges than, in a common lament, it would lack the will to do so.[22] But in practice governments needed to set priorities, and to accept that there were some problems that could not be addressed adequately and the national interest would not be served by trying to do so.

There were some forecasters who were not making a point about looming dangers but were attempting to develop methodologies for forward planning. A book such as *Inevitable Surprises* by Peter Schwartz, published in 2003, sought to identify 'pre-determined elements' that were bound to shape the future. In this category he mentioned refugee movements, the impact of Islam on European societies, and an aging population. He also exaggerated economic growth and productivity gains, doubted that worries about globalisation would gain much traction, and assumed that financial regulation would work. His optimism extended to a rather muddled view of strategic defences as providing 'American military dominance of the planet, in near perpetuity'. In addition 'willingly or not the US will be drawn into the role of high-tech global policeman'. He was even optimistic on Europe's behalf forecasting stability for the EU and success for the Euro. Russia might even eventually join the EU. While all this was positive, elsewhere there would be trouble. The Saudis might succumb to an Islamic rebellion, Pakistan and Egypt to coups, Indonesia to ethnic conflict, Mexico to drug wars. Much of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East could be almost written off. [23]

These books, with their range of speculations and contingencies, were of little value to policymakers in terms of deciding how to allocate their energies and resources. If the aim was to push for policy responses then it was to keep the focus sharp. How to do this could be seen in two books by Graham Allison, the Dean of the Belfer Center at Harvard University. The first concerned the nightmare of a non-state group getting hold of some sort of nuclear device and carrying it into a city centre. This concern gained credibility after 9/11. Al-Qaeda was clearly keen on killing as

many people as possible and there was evidence that it had explored the possibility of building its own weapon or buying one on the open market, perhaps taking advantage of the disarray in the former Soviet Union that created risks of pilfering of poorly secured nuclear materials or even devices—the so-called 'loose nukes'. Then there was the shock of the discovery of the A. Q. Khan network in Pakistan which had been selling relevant technologies to Iran, North Korea and Libya.[24]

In 2004 Allison explored the possible ways in which terrorist groups might be able to get hold of a nuclear device or build their own and then use it to cause carnage. He reported experts from within government who considered such an attack as being a matter of 'when not if'. This was classic 'worst case' for no other act of terrorism could compare with a nuclear explosion. Even those next in the list had a nuclear element, such as crashing aircraft into a nuclear power station or creating a 'dirty bomb' using radioactive materials, although this would be more disruptive than destructive. Though these were the worst forms of terrorism imaginable there were others, using for example chemical or biological weapons that could cause great panic. They were far easier for non-state groups to construct. Chemical weapons had been used by states and terrorists had tried biological attacks. There had been a scare after 9/11 in the US when five people died from posted anthrax spores. So there was no reason to suppose that an attack with these weapons was either less likely or needing of prevention.

Allison kept his focus on the most dire case:

> Given the number of actors with serious intent, the accessibility of weapons or nuclear materials from which elementary weapons could be constructed, and the almost limitless ways in which terrorists could smuggle a weapon through American borders…. In my own considered judgment, on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not.[25]

Without determined action, largely to make sure that weapons and fissionable material were kept secure, a disaster was almost certain.

Michael Levi did not dismiss the concerns or the need for robust policies but did challenge the methodology of adding worst case upon

worst case to produce the most alarming conclusion. He doubted that there was a 'nuclear black market', or that building a nuclear weapon was 'as simple as surfing the Internet', or that smuggling nuclear materials was 'the same as smuggling drugs'. The best test of defences, he suggested, would be not so much against 'an infallible ten foot tall enemy' but against a 'possible failure-averse, conservative, resource-limited five-foot tall nuclear terrorist'.[26] A decade later, with fortunately no nuclear incident, and some limited progress on defensive measures, the concerns had not gone away. One analyst expressed surprise that there had not yet been any nuclear terrorism, and took little comfort from that absence for the future.[27]

By this time Allison had moved on. In 2017 he published another book, focusing on another looming tragedy that was also preventable so long as the right measures were taken. In this case it was a war between the United States and China. The method was similar with authoritative figures being quoted to underline the gravity of the situation, and the same layering of worst case assessments, until a series of recommendations explained how to keep the peace between the two great powers. 'On the current trajectory', Allison warned, 'war between the US and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized'. It was not, however, 'inevitable'. [28] China would soon overtake the United States in economic, and then potentially, military power. Huntington was invoked to explain the clash of cultures between the two. There were also the real points of tension over Taiwan, the South China Sea, North Korea, and trade, from which Allison could generate plausible scenarios for conflict.

Allison's 'big idea' was to frame this moment as part of a recurring historical pattern, when predominant powers saw their positions threatened. This he called the 'Thucydides Trap', referring to the Greek historian's famous explanation for the Peloponnesian War: 'It was the rise of Athens and the fear that it instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable'. Allison provided many examples of this trap in action over the centuries, including the rivalry between Germany and Great Britain which led to the Great War. Leaving aside the question of whether this really was a good explanation for the war between Athens and Sparta, there were other

difficulties with this formulation. China's rise unsettled a whole region. There were lots of great-power interactions in play.

Until 1990 China's most likely antagonist was the Soviet Union. In 1983 Edward Luttwak had forecast a major war between the two. For two decades Soviet military power had grown spectacularly—'the product of an armament effort of entirely unprecedented dimensions'—which enabled Moscow to cope with NATO countries that in every measure other than the military were much more powerful. Now it would take down an enemy that the Soviet leadership clearly feared, despite their shared ideology, so that it did not grow into a major threat.[29] To take another example, in 2014 China's claims over the Japanese Senkaku Islands (which it knew as the Diaoyu Islands), led Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to wonder aloud about the disturbing similarities between the situation a hundred years earlier in Europe and the current position in Asia.[30]

The Chinese leadership might also look to India. This was a country with which it had gone to war in 1962, over a disputed border, which was in constant dispute with China's ally, Pakistan, and which also had a massive population and had moved into a higher economic gear.[31] The issue for China was not its struggle for power with the United States so much as its potential struggle with most of the other big players in the region. Returning to the China question in 2012, Luttwak saw the danger facing China as an almost autistic tendency for self-aggrandizement, common to great powers, that was bound to 'evoke adversarial reaction'. The real challenge for China, if it did not want its neighbours to gang up on it, was to learn humility and restraint. If it did, and managed to avoid an unnecessary war, then this suggested its rise could be irresistible.[32]

THE MOST SYSTEMATIC ATTEMPT TO ANTICIPATE HOW THE world might develop in the future and the potential security implications was the US National Intelligence Council's quadrennial assessment of global trends, published after a presidential election but before the inauguration. The series began in 1997. The first looked forward to 2010: the one after the 2012 election to 2030. The most recent, published in January 2017, did not restrict itself by a timeframe. The issues covered did not change very

much, with consideration of demographic trends, the impact of climate change, developments in the world economy, the rise of Asia, the violence in Africa, and turmoil in the Middle East. There were always questions to be asked about how Russia was coping with its reduced circumstances and the meaning of China's ascent. Because this was a series it was possible to comment on what had been missed and the implications for the methodology. It was not surprising that the council was caught out by specific events that in principle might have been foreseeable (the 1998 financial crash was an early example), but each successive edition considered how they might do better in anticipating a discontinuity, something that was not a trend at the time of writing, or a 'black swan', a rare event that seemed to come from nowhere yet changed everything.[33]

When the series started, the document picked up on the key themes of the 1990s—the impact of globalisation, that most conflicts were internal to states rather than between them, that precision-guided munitions and information technologies would 'continue to be the hallmarks of the revolution in military affairs' and the likelihood that adversaries would attempt to blunt this US advantage using 'asymmetric means—ranging from the increased use of terrorism to the possible use of weapons of mass destruction'. 'Increasingly, the national security agendas of policymakers will be dominated by five questions: whether to intervene, when, with whom, with what tools, and to what end?'[34] By December 2000, the relationships of states to criminal and terrorist groups had more focus, including the observation that 'asymmetric approaches—whether undertaken by states or nonstate actors—will become the dominant characteristic of most threats to the US homeland'.[35] By December 2004, after the dramas of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, the authors dressed up their scenarios as works of fiction set in 2020. Thus a continuing Pax Americana was illuminated by a UN Secretary-General's diary entry noting the US still exercising leadership but in 'an increasingly diverse, complex, and fast-paced world', a letter by a grandson of Osama Bin Laden recounting an attempt to establish a 'New Caliphate', and an exchange of text messages between two arms dealers exploring a WMD deal as states intensified security measures.[36]

The 2008 document was published just as the international economy

was reeling under the shock of another financial crisis, which was barely reflected in its pages. It saw considerable continuity with little expectation of a great-power war, but problems arising in an arc of instability 'spanning Middle East, Asia, Africa'. The uncertainties revolved around the possibility of 'precipitating events leading to overthrow of regimes' and the 'ability to manage flashpoints and competition for resources'. This was a 'story with no clear outcome'.[37] The 'shape and nature of international alignments' were in a 'state of flux'. The world described showed an increased tendency for internal conflict, in which some states would fail, causing more grief and disrupting neighbourhoods, while even the more prosperous and stable states were finding it difficult to control national agendas because of globalisation. It also recognised that American policies were 'an important variable in how the world is shaped, influencing the path that states and nonstate actors choose to follow'. This was both obvious yet an important insight—the world is unpredictable because it depends on choices that your country must make.

By 2012 the US role was more under question. Aware of the optimism engendered by the idea that war was in decline, the document accepted that 'the disincentives will remain strong against great-power conflict: too much would be at stake'. But it urged caution 'about the prospects for further declines in the number and intensity of intrastate conflicts', while noting how the shifts in the international system were increasing the risks of interstate conflict:

> The underpinnings of the post-Cold War equilibrium are beginning to shift. During the next 15–20 years, the US will be grappling with the degree to which it can continue to play the role of systemic guardian and guarantor of the global order. A declining US unwillingness and/or slipping capacity to serve as a global security provider would be a key factor contributing to instability, particularly in Asia and the Middle East.[38]

The next document, published a few weeks after the 2016 election, was bleaker than those that had gone before. Since 2012 there had been Russian interventions in Ukraine and Syria and growing tensions over Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. It noted the mood of 'anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment' in the core Western democracies.

Nationalism was being employed in countries where ‘leaders seek to consolidate political control by eliminating domestic political alternatives while painting international relations in existential terms’. It warned of ‘rising tensions within and between countries’ over the coming five years, with ‘an ever-widening range of states, organizations, and empowered individuals’ shaping geopolitics.

> For better and worse, the emerging global landscape is drawing to a close an era of American dominance following the Cold War. So, too, perhaps is the rules-based international order that emerged after World War II. It will be much harder to cooperate internationally and govern in ways publics expect. Veto players will threaten to block collaboration at every turn, while information “echo chambers” will reinforce countless competing realities, undermining shared understandings of world events.

Despite temptations to ‘impose order on this apparent chaos’ this would ‘ultimately would be too costly in the short run and would fail in the long.’ The lessons of the past century were summoned to note how difficult it would be to overcome less powerful adversaries. It warned of Russia and China being emboldened, curtailed international cooperation, and a tendency towards the revival of ‘spheres of influence’.[39] Donald Trump was inaugurated as 45th president of the United States on 20 January 2017.