

# Strategic Thinking in Complex Security Environments

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# Strategic Thinking vs. Tactical Thinking

<b>TACTICAL THINKING</b>	<b>STRATEGIC THINKING</b>
Doing Things Right	Doing the Right Things
Short-term actions	Long-term vision
Sees the trees	Sees the forest
Focuses on the plan	Scans the horizon for future trends
Thinks sequentially	Thinks holistically
Precise decision-making	Agile decision-making

# Strategic Thinking vs. Strategic Planning

STRATEGIC PLANNING	STRATEGIC THINKING
Blueprint	Direction
How	What & When
Gives voice, action, structure	Informs
Analysis of data	Synthesis of data

But there is no commonly  
accepted definition of  
“strategic thinking”

# Key Features of Complex Security Environments

- Open system → Dynamic → **Continual Change**
  - 1<sup>st</sup>-order, 2<sup>nd</sup>-order, 3<sup>rd</sup>-order, ..., n<sup>th</sup>-order effects → Non-linearity
- **Multi-mindedness** → Agency of the “weak” and the “small” also matters
  - People’ agency reflects their ambitions, historical experiences, and societal dynamics
- **Interdependence:**
  - Symmetric: Ties that bind
  - Asymmetric: Can be used as a leverage

The image shows a top-down view of a highly complex, swirling environment. The dominant colors are various shades of blue, ranging from light, almost white, to deep, dark blue. The patterns are intricate, consisting of numerous small, concentric swirls and larger, more chaotic eddies that create a sense of intense, turbulent motion. On the left side of the frame, a portion of a green, textured landmass is visible, suggesting the swirling area might be a body of water or a specific type of terrain. The overall appearance is that of a complex, dynamic system, possibly related to fluid dynamics or environmental science.

# A Complex Environment

# Strategic Thinking in a Complex Environment

- The art of getting what you want, knowing that
  - others are also trying to get what they want,
  - the environment is continually changing, and
  - almost everything and everyone is interdependent.
- A multidimensional mindset
  - with 7 critical dimensions

# Key Dimensions of Strategic Thinking

- **Persist** with an ultimate end but be **flexible** in terms of the ways, means, and intermediate goals to achieve the end,
- Always keep the **big picture** in mind,
- Take the **long view**,
- Embrace **systems** thinking,
- Espouse **critical** thinking,
- Be **creative**,
- Be highly **adaptive**.

# Is Strategy a Plan?

- Most dictionaries say yes, but this popular understanding is useless, even dangerous, for strategists. Why?
- No plan survives first contact with the enemy. (Helmuth von Moltke)
- “The best generals are those who arrive at the results of planning without being tied to plans.” (Winston Churchill)

Strategy is a Process and a Framework



# Strategy as a Process

- Strategy is “the process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources.” (John Lewis Gaddis)
- Strategy is a process of maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means.
- A plan supposes a sequence of events ...
- Strategy is required when others might frustrate one’s plans ... (Lawrence Freedman)

# Strategy as a Framework

- A framework is not a master plan.
- Framing = Giving Perspectives =  
Coherent View of the World +  
Logic for Making Choices and Prioritizing

# Case Study #1: China's strategy in SCS: The goal and its challenges

- **Goal** is to gain control of SCS
  - “Lost territories”, “national shame”
  - “First island chain”
  - Resources
- **Challenges:**
  - Stronger rival (US)
  - Large number of rivals
  - Main trade routes



# China's strategy in the SCS

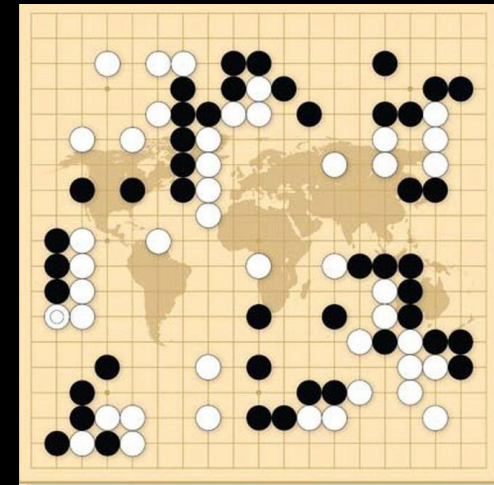


- **End:** Gain dominance/control of SCS
- **Ways:** Gradually **shift the propensity of things** (勢 *shi*) in favor of Chinese dominance through **opportunistic** and “**gray-zone**” **expansion** rather than major battles



圍棋 (*weiqi*, game of encirclement), fill in a vacuum, salami slicing, people's war at sea, “cabbage” (military, law enforcement, militia)

- **Means:** Everything can be weaponized (e.g., “three warfares”: media, psycho, law)



# Four Imperatives of PRC Strategy in SCS

1. **Avoid war.** Initiate clashes only to **exploit favorable circumstances.**
2. Control the most **strategically located territories.** Seize them stealthily if possible, in limited conflict if necessary.
3. Develop them into **hubs of logistics, forward and staging bases,** from which to dominate the waters and skies of the SCS.
4. Spread a **narrative** of China's **historical rights** in the SCS and China being **reactive** to, but **fearless** of, others' provocations.

# Case Study #2: Are DIME or DIMEFIL the major instruments of grand strategy?

- *Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, Law Enforcement*
- Strategic thinking is the art of outsmarting others, knowing that others are also trying to do the same to you → It's imperative not to chain yourself to a limited view of the ways and means you can use to achieve success.
- Strategic thinking requires creativity, innovation, and ingenuity. When developing a strategy, keep in mind that anything can be utilized in ways that are aligned with the changing circumstances in order to achieve the ultimate goal.
- DIME, DIMEFIL, and their grandchildren won't help you to think creatively and to create power with human ingenuity.
- "Strategy is the art of creating power" – Lawrence Freedman.

# Case Study #3: Is the Ukraine War the West's Fault?

- *Argument by Mearsheimer, Kissinger, (Putin), et al.*
- Western expansion into Russia's traditional sphere of influence makes Russia feel highly insecure.
- Russia has no choice but to use military force to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and EU.
- If the West had not expanded into Eastern Europe, Russia would not have invaded Ukraine.

# But History Suggests Otherwise

- Eastern Europeans, incl. Ukrainians, have a strong agency, contributed significantly to historic changes:
  - demise of Soviet bloc; end of Cold War; disintegration of USSR;
  - enlargement of NATO, EU after Cold War;
  - 2004 Orange Revolution; 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine;
  - Ukrainian resistance to Russian invasion, 2022.
- NATO's policy of restraint during Cold War, respect of Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe did not prevent:
  - Soviet invasion of Hungary, 1956;
  - Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968.



# Lessons

- Big picture: Agency of the “small” also matters.
- Systems thinking: Non-linearity of Russian behavior
- Think creatively: about Ukraine’s position between Russia and the West
- Any realism that is true to its name must
  - Take into account people’s aspirations and historical experiences,
  - Treat the powers of actors as historical variables that are subject to context.

# Case Study #4: Russian Invasion of Ukraine

- *Assumptions underlying the war decision by Russia.*
- Ukrainian resistance will crumble under Russia's overwhelming force.
- Western responses will stay weak as in 2014 (when Russia annexed Crimea and intervened militarily in the Donbas).
- Russia's fait accompli will create a "new normal".

# But Reality Shows Otherwise

- Ukrainian resistance is very strong.
- Western responses are very strong.
- Russian fait accompli is impossible.
- The conflict may last for years, even decades.
- And the future of Russia is ...

# Lessons

- Don't underestimate people's will to defend their own land.
- Non-linearity (regarding Western responses).
- Think critically (about your own beliefs & assumptions).
- Think about the 2<sup>nd</sup>-order, 3<sup>rd</sup>-order, ..., effects of your action.
- Take the long view.
- Don't confuse your intermediate goals with the ultimate ends.

# How to Think Strategically

