

"Strategic Shock: A Threat to National and Global Stability"

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Introduction

The 21st century has brought a wide range of strategic disruptions few would have predicted in advance. 9/11, and the financial crisis of 2008, the rise of ISIS, and the refugee crisis in Europe constitute examples of situations where strategists and decision-makers were taken by surprise and forced to restructure institutions and reorient capabilities and resources¹. Currently, we are arguably faced with the to-date greatest shock of all; the COVID-19 global pandemic. Gaining global awareness in early 2020, the pandemic has over the course of the past year caused substantial disruptions in politics, markets, the social fabric, while moreover reframing our common understanding of security.

To many of us, the pandemic came as lightning from clear skies and few will dispute the fact that it constituted a shock. Still, as researchers of security and strategy, we should allow ourselves to review this “shock” through a critical lens. First, this commentary will assess what causes “strategic shocks”. Here, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an excellent case for understanding the nexus between intelligence analysis, the formulation of strategy and decision making. Afterwards, some future sources of strategic shocks will be investigated through a brief scan of the horizon.

It will be argued that strategic shocks indeed cause major disruption, however, the question remains; are they foreseeable? And if they are not – why are they let to unfold?

What are strategic shocks?

Before moving to strategic shocks, it is important to know what a strategy is and what purpose it serves. A strategy in the context of security may be understood as a formal plan of action to manage risk and increase security by the conscious allocation of available resources².

¹ Nathan Freier, “Known Unknowns: Unconventional ‘Strategic Shocks’ in Defence Strategy Development” (US Army War College, 2008), <https://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/0811Freier.pdf>.

² Donald M Snow and Dennis M Drew, *Making Strategy : An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems* (Dulles, Va.: Brassey’s, 1988).

Essentially, it describes how available means will be employed to achieve policy ends³. “Strategic shocks” then, are to be understood as exceptional occurrences which force strategists, analysts and policymakers to either temporarily or permanently abandon their strategies to deal with the sudden disruption. Furthermore, disruptive occurrences are oftentimes treated as outliers, or deviations of the normal - it is implied that some unexpected force has moved the normal beyond what is commonly believed to exist as the “status quo”. In sum, these factors can cause strategic shocks to permanently flip the trajectory of both national and global stability.⁴

On the surface level, a strategic shock may be understood similarly to a rudimentary understanding of terrorism – “you know it when you see it”⁵. To the observer, they can look intuitive and yield strong emotions of exceptionality and alarmism. Judging how COVID-19 took the world by surprise in the early months of 2020, we may find a strange comfort in the labelling of it as a “shock”. “It was not our wrong doing” – “it just happened, nothing could be done”. Yet, the labelling of any event as a strategic shock should for the critical observer beg an obvious question; was it really unpredictable? With further reference to the examples mentioned in the introduction, ample evidence suggests they were either foreseeable, warned about or could even be mitigated or prevented with better strategic planning. Shocks rarely occur spontaneously without any indication, and they definitely do not spring out of vacuums – they more often emerge from clear and predictable trends. Nonetheless, shocks will be misrepresented as exceptional because their prior recognition is ignored for one reason or another⁶. What then causes this erroneous miscalculation of concerns?

Why COVID-19 became a “Strategic Shock”

The advent of a global pandemic should have come as a little surprise for most. Throughout history, infectious diseases, epidemics and pandemics remain the number one killer, outnumbering deaths in natural disasters and wars⁷. If the probability of a pandemic was known,

³ Owens, Mackubin Thomas (2007) "Strategy and the Strategic Way of Thinking," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 4 , Article 10. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol60/iss4/10>

⁴ Freier (2008)

⁵ Stephen Nathanson, “The Problem of Defining Terrorism,” *Terrorism and the Ethics of War*, 2012, 11–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511845215.002>.

⁶ Nathan Freier, Robert Hume, and John Schaus, “Special Commentary: Memorandum for SECDEF: Restore ‘Shock’ in Strategic Planning,” 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1104694.pdf>.

⁷ Glenn McGillivray, “Coronavirus Is Significant, but Is It a True Black Swan Event?,” *The Conversation*, April 30, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-is-significant-but-is-it-a-true-black-swan-event-136675>.

what explains the poor responses from governments around the world? To understand this the nexus between security communities and decision-makers need to be explained.

First, different institutional structures come to adopt unique behaviors⁸. This, in turn, may be referred to as a “strategic institutional culture”⁹. A strategic culture can be understood as the common ideas regarding strategy that exists within an institution. These can be categorized through traditions, values, attitudes, behaviours, achievements and the particular ways they interact with regards to problem-solving¹⁰. It comes as quite revealing that, at least traditionally speaking, national security communities have been more oriented towards a realist understanding of insecurity placing the state as the referent object of defence, and hence neglecting other potential sources of disruption e.g. public health, climate change etc.^{11 12}. This is outwardly explained by the fact that decision makers, strategists and intelligence gatherers tend to be more oriented towards domestic issues. As health and environmental issues are more global in scope, formulating comprehensive national prevention strategies can be disincentive if followed by weak international will.

Secondly, mitigating shocks requires leaders to understand the connection between contingency trails and their possible strategic impacts. This necessitates the recognition of available foresight and acting on strategic warnings¹³. Oftentimes, very specific intelligence is needed before leaders can be reasonably expected to decide how and where to take action. It must neither be forgotten that analysts are concurrently faced with an array of threats¹⁴.

Finally, leaders can be incentivized to maintain a narrative of shock in order to reduce liability for his or her own actions. Indeed, leaders around the world may find comfort in the labelling COVID-19 as a shock as a “black swan” – an event that could not have been detected. The “black swan” metaphor has been heavily popularized in the past decade as a common

⁸ Edward Lock, “Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, September 26, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.320>.

⁹ Mary Kaldor, “Global Security Cultures: A Theoretical Framework for Analysing Security in Transition,” 2016, <http://www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Security-Cultures-Working-Paper-2016.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ken Booth, “The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed,” *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, 1990, 121–28, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20574-5_8.

¹¹ Freier, Hume and Schaus (2020)

¹² Kaldor (2016)

¹³ Freier, Hume and Schaus (2020)

¹⁴ Erik J. Dahl, “Was the Coronavirus Outbreak an Intelligence Failure?,” *The Conversation*, June 15, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/was-the-coronavirus-outbreak-an-intelligence-failure-139450>.

denominator of events with high impacts, but low probability¹⁵. However, we should always question and assess whether or not this is actually the case. Overall, the shocking narrative erects a comfortable shield against accountability¹⁶

We should therefore be careful in letting our strategists and policy-makers be scapegoated by the implications of fatalistic trajectories, as with the black swan metaphor. Further, the explanations of strategic institutional monocultures - as can be implied by a strategic culture - are generally inherited from myopic cold-war thinking. These remain too simplistic in explaining the complex phenomenon which often underscores failures to act. Today's security landscapes are better characterized by competing cultures, meaning there are numerous norms and ideals, existing along with a plurality of security narratives at any given time¹⁷. It is therefore difficult to assume that warnings about a disrupting pandemic ever appeared in strategic forecasts. The numerous warnings made in books, white papers and articles found in the run-up to the pandemic provide ample evidence that they probably were. For instance, in the United States (US), which is widely considered to have responded poorly to the pandemic, people of the federal government rightly predicted in 2019 that the US would be ill-prepared and disorganized if faced with a pandemic¹⁸. Moreover, the 2006 National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza formulated under the Bush administration proves the US sat with ample strategic warning before the pandemic¹⁹. Still, the United States has failed miserably in its execution. In sum, the vast impacts on national and global stability from COVID-19 cannot be attributed to the lack of knowledge, but rather be attributed to the lack of action.

To further illustrate this point, the following section will provide a scan of some posing themes which can become sources of the next strategic shock.

What is on the horizon?

What will be the next strategic shock emerge from, and how can we prepare? There are no clear and obvious answers to such questions as no one can accurately predict the future. However, through the conduct of a brief horizon foresight study we can get an idea of what might lie

¹⁵ McGillivray, (2020)

¹⁶ Freier, Hume and Schaus (2020).

¹⁷ Kaldor (2016)

¹⁸ Ailsa Chang, "What Last Year's Government Simulation Predicted About Today's Pandemic," NPR.org, March 20, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/20/819186528/what-last-years-government-simulation-predicted-about-todays-pandemic?t=1609347649804>.

¹⁹ Freier, Hume and Schaus, (2020)

ahead. This section will use open source intelligence (OSINT) to look for potential new themes, meta-issues or issues which may befall us in the future²⁰. The focus will be the emerging issues which contain features which can cause sudden and unexpected ruptures.

Economic decline and societal tension

The COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing has caused many businesses to go under - particularly in industries related to retail and travel. The overall economic consequences of COVID-19 are still hard to determine, and effects of magnitude may not surface until years into the future. Yet, downturns usually come with a profound impact on the structure of business and the future of political economy²¹. As governments will come to reduce aid to keep businesses alive, the true impacts of the pandemic will likely come to show. First and foremost, markets will likely become more oligopolistic with larger firms swallowing smaller businesses, either unable to cope with the impacts of the pandemic or receiving less fiscal support. In the longer term, this can have profound impacts on the rules of capitalism as governments around the world increasingly come under pressure to regulate the market²². Growing inequality accelerated by job losses to automation will likely also contribute to growing frustration among social groups. This can give rise to both political factions demanding structural change, or opportunistic populist movements seeking to benefit from the resentment.

Geopolitical tensions and arms race

Recent years have brought a progressive trend of countries preferring to act unilaterally. Alliance structures, and multilateral systems have gradually been undermined as countries peruse nationalistic interest. Leaders have seen cooperative frameworks as obstacles rather than opportunities, and as a consequence fragmenting the world order without no consensus as to which principles to follow²³. At the centre of future geopolitics will be the relationship between China and the US and their competition for power. Bearing in mind the dire consequences of direct confrontation, war is unlikely to occur. Yet, there are some developments concerning the development of weapon technology that we should be on the lookout for. Of these, hypersonic

²⁰ Dr Helene Lavoix, "Horizon Scanning and Monitoring for Warning: Definition and Practice," The Red Team Analysis Society, March 4, 2019, <https://www.redanalysis.org/2019/03/04/horizon-scanning-monitoring-definition-practice/>.

²¹ Patrick Foulis, "Shock and Awe," *The Economist: The World in 2021*, 2020.

²² Ibid.

²³ Samuel Brennan, "Four Scenarios for Geopolitical Order in 2025-2030: What Will Great Power Competition Look Like?," [www.csis.org](https://www.csis.org/analysis/four-scenarios-geopolitical-order-2025-2030-what-will-great-power-competition-look), September 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/four-scenarios-geopolitical-order-2025-2030-what-will-great-power-competition-look>.

weapons have become a prevailing talking point. Hypersonic weapons have the ability to travel at 5 times that of the speed of sound, are more agile, and overall much more difficult to defend in comparison to conventional missiles. It is predicted that hypersonic weapons can serve quick and decisive tactical shocks, paralyzing the target before it is able to mobilize²⁴. The US, China and Russia have all invested heavily in hypersonic technology that can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. A combination factors such as the failure to renegotiate the New Start treaty, combined with growing antagonism between great powers and spontaneous leaders, substantiates the case of hypersonic weapons and its potential as the source of the next strategic shock²⁵.

Outer space confrontation

In April 2020, Iran became the latest to successfully launch a military reconnaissance satellite into space²⁶. As ever more states and non-state actors gain access to space there is a growing risk of confrontation. Most of the current confrontations include jamming and spoofing of competing systems, both within a grey-zone below the threshold for conflict. However, as such activity coincides with technological proliferation and continues unabated through the lack of comprehensive regulative treaties – also encapsulated in an increasingly hostile international environment, the probability of a sudden skirmish should not be disregarded²⁷.

The Kessler syndrome

In October 2020 two disused spacecrafts narrowly avoided collision which would have caused catastrophic impacts²⁸. Had the two spacecrafts collided it would have caused an extremely dangerous chain reaction, better known as the “Kessler Syndrome”. The Kessler syndrome explains a chain reaction where the collision of two pieces of space debris fragments and gives rise to more debris which damages more satellites, which further fragments and produce more

²⁴ Alan Cummings, “Hypersonic Weapons: Tactical Uses and Strategic Goals,” War on the Rocks, November 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/hypersonic-weapons-tactical-uses-and-strategic-goals/>.

²⁵ Carnegie endowment, “Hypersonic Missile Arms Race: What You Need to Know,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 9, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/09/hypersonic-missile-arms-race-what-you-need-to-know-pub-82026>.

²⁶ Ramin Skibba Undark, “The Ripple Effects of a Space Skirmish,” The Atlantic, July 12, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/07/space-warfare-unregulated/614059/>.

²⁷ Todd Harrison et al., “Space Threat Assessment 2020,” March 2020, https://aerospace.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Harrison_SpaceThreatAssessment20_WEB_FINAL-min.pdf.

²⁸ Leah Crane, “Two Old Spacecraft Just Avoided Catastrophically Colliding in Orbit,” New Scientist, October 15, 2020, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2257525-two-old-spacecraft-just-avoided-catastrophically-colliding-in-orbit/>.

debris²⁹ ³⁰. The consequences of space collisions can be disastrous. In the worst case, they can render space activity in some orbital zones impracticable for generations³¹. The scope of implications connected to the Kessler syndrome is debated, however, at the current standing very little is being done for prevention. As the interest in space-activity grows unabated, both within governments and the public sector, this issue is certainly one to keep an eye on.

Conclusion

No one knows when the next strategic shock will occur. Yet, we have a probable idea of potential sources. We know that strategic shocks certainly do not happen “out of the blue. Besides, our intuitive understanding of “strategic shocks” rarely, if ever constitute “black swans”, more specifically, exceptionally rare events that only become predictable through hindsight. Despite this, strategic shocks will continue to happen. That can be through one of the themes mentioned here, or it may not. Either way, we can be quite certain about one thing; the driver, or underlying theme is likely known. We should therefore be diligent towards managing the known proximate causes. Strategic shocks may still occur, however, we will be much better positioned to deal with ensuing threats to stability.

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²⁹ European Space Agency, “The Kessler Effect and How to Stop It,” www.esa.int, n.d., http://www.esa.int/Enabling_Support/Space_Engineering_Technology/The_Kessler_Effect_and_how_to_stop_it

³⁰ Marcia Smith, “Growth of Space Threats Detailed in Two New Reports,” Space Policy Online, March 30, 2020, <https://spacepolicyonline.com/news/growth-of-space-threats-detailed-in-two-new-reports/#:~:text=The%20four%20types%20of%20counterspace>.

³¹ Paul Ratner, “How the Kessler Syndrome Can End All Space Exploration and Destroy Modern Life,” Big Think (Big Think, August 29, 2018), <https://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/how-the-kessler-syndrome-can-end-all-space-exploration-and-destroy-modern-life>.

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