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Taking uncertainty seriously: Classical realism and national security

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Abstract

If we can't reliably predict the future, how can we be wise when preparing for it? Examining the UK's 'Strategic Defence and Security Review' of 2010, I demonstrate that though planners often rightly invoke uncertainty, they also imply a highly certain ideology about Western power and foresight. Modern 'national security states' describe the world as dangerously uncertain, yet fall prey to a misplaced confidence in their ability to anticipate and prevent threats. I argue that classical realism, especially that of Clausewitz and Morgenthau, is a valuable resource for handling uncertainty more reflexively. Classical realism counsels that governments should go beyond attempts to improve foresight. They should try to check against the fallibility of their assumptions, marshal their power more conservatively, insure against the likelihood of predictive failure by developing the intellectual capability to react to the unknown, and avoid misplaced confidence in their ability to bring order into chaos.

Keywords

Classical Realism; National Security; Carl von Clausewitz; Hans Morgenthau; Uncertainty

Those who make decisions about national security have to make forecasts, as best they can, even though forecasts are often wrong and life is full of surprises. While this problem is inevitable, policymakers do have control over the assumptions they bring to the task. As I argue, in recent years they have taken a troubling course. In a major recent strategic review in 2010, and again in 2015, British policymakers rightly affirmed the uncertainty of the world, but implicitly regarded their own state as a bringer of order into chaos, somehow transcending the nonlinearity of international life. The unintended consequences that interventions have sown suggest this confidence is misplaced. Classical realism is a useful corrective to this temptation. Modern social science focuses predominantly on finding patterns in order to reduce uncertainty and hone imperfect predictive powers. That is a reasonable and necessary project, even if agency, contingency, and the limits on knowledge mean that foresight can only modestly improve. Classical realism, however, counsels that governments should go beyond attempts to improve foresight. Those making decisions should insure against the fallibility of their assumptions, marshal their power more conservatively, and prepare for the likelihood of predictive failure by developing the intellectual capability to react to the unknown.

In the field of 'national security', practitioners and observers speak often of a dangerously uncertain and nonlinear world. If nonlinearity is 'a critical point at which expectations (predictions) induced by a prior trend suddenly confront alteration in that trend, indeed, an abrupt inversion',[1] then Western

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[1] Charles F. Doran, 'Why forecasts fail: the limits and potential of forecasting in International Relations and economics', *International Studies Review*, 1:2 (1999), pp. 11–41 (p. 11).

defence doctrines agree that a condition of 'nonlinearity' defines today's security environment. The apprehension of uncertainty[2] is a core part of the strategic doctrines of modern democracies in the West and beyond, such as the UK's National Security Strategy, the US's Quadrennial Defence Reviews, and in the official documents from European NATO states such as Germany, France and Spain and beyond, to Australia and Singapore.[3] In our dynamic, interdependent era, it is argued, where once security strategy was a response to specific and current adversaries, now the terrors are not yet fully realised. They can merge and metastasize in unforeseeable ways, and constitute the notorious 'unknown unknowns.' In place of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, we now allegedly face a more diffuse, kind of systemic turbulence, made brutally tangible by terrorist attacks, epidemics and the global financial crisis.

As well as being dominant within modern government, the concern with uncertainty is part of a wider intellectual account of today's sources of insecurity. This is reflected in the growing literature on 'risk', which regards the globalised complexity of things as a defining feature of 'late modernity'.[4] Likewise in security studies literature, shocks from revolutions to financial meltdowns bring renewed attention to uncertainty, its causes and consequences.[5]

Yet this is only one half of the equation. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld may be most renowned for his identification of the 'unknown unknowns'. But his attitude to uncertainty was selective. As he celebrated the power of a transformed US military in 2002, Rumsfeld argued that adaptability was critical 'in a world defined by surprise and uncertainty'. Yet months later, he advised categorically that the coming Gulf War would last 'Five days or five weeks or five months, but it certainly isn't going to last any longer than that.'[6]

Rumsfeld's attitude typifies a wider trend, where Western states aver that the world is uncertain while showing an unwarranted confidence in their own capacity to impose order on it. A reading of one of the most prominent and holistic security reviews of our time, the British 'Strategic Defence and Security Review' (SDSR) of 2010, demonstrates how and why the state takes this problematic attitude to the security environment.

[2] 'Uncertainty' has multiple meanings, but refers here non-pejoratively to ignorance over the capabilities and intentions of others.

[3] See Timothy Edmunds, 'British civil-military relations and the problem of risk', *International Affairs*, 88:2 (2012), pp. 265–82; Anne Hammerstad and Ingrid Boas, 'National security risks? Uncertainty, austerity and other logics of risk in the UK government's national security strategy', *Cooperation and Conflict* (2014), pp. 1–17.

[4] M. J. Williams, 'Insecurity studies, reflexive modernisation and the risk society', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43:1 (2008), pp. 57–9; Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* (New York: Polity, 2009); Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War: Terror, Technology and Strategy in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 203–6.

[5] Brian Rathbun, 'Uncertain about uncertainty: Understanding the multiple meanings of a concept in International Relations theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51:3 (2007), pp. 533–57; David M. Edelstein, 'Managing uncertainty: Beliefs about intentions and the rise of Great Powers', *Security Studies*, 12:1 (2002), pp. 1–40; John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Charles F. Parker and Eric K. Stern, 'Blindsided? September 11 and the origins of strategic surprise', *Political Psychology*, 23:3 (2002), pp. 601–30.

[6] Donald H. Rumsfeld, 'Transforming the military', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:3 (2002), pp. 20–32 (p. 22); 'Rumsfeld: It would be a short war', *CBS News* (15 November 2002).

SDSR is a salient case for several reasons. First, it was a major strategic reassessment that attracted a high volume of expert discussion of futurology and risk, attempting to institutionalise 'horizon scanning' through the creation of a National Security Council and a 'Risk Register'. It laid down the essential concepts and assumptions that would frame its successor, SDSR 2015. It is also an internationally representative case. SDSR represents the most pronounced articulation of a body of assumptions and methodologies around the concepts of risk and uncertainty that also appear in codified strategies published throughout the Western security community. This makes it instructive beyond the debate in Britain. The concepts of risk and uncertainty that underpin it also derive from a wider international dialogue within NATO. And finally, SDSR happened at a crisis moment that brought problems of strategy and chaos into focus, where the state was fearful of its financial position and the ambiguity about what might happen next. This came at a juncture that other states face, where the demand for predictive scientific guidance over the allocation of scarce resources collides with the perception that today's world is unforeseeable.

As I demonstrate, the same policymakers and official documents that invoke uncertainty also attempt to foist certainty onto the world through a self-assured vision of anticipatory action. Architects of 'national security strategy' describe international life as dangerously unpredictable. They then assume the capacity to prevent threats and control problems upstream in a world that is scientifically legible. They deploy techniques, like risk assessment methodologies, to anticipate the future and impose clarity onto their environment. They make use of social scientific hypotheses, such as 'democratic peace theory' in their ambition to promote peace by exporting market democracy. This is not a logical contradiction. One can view the world as unpredictable while still trying to predict. But it does represent a conflicting set of attitudes. Policymakers' fearful anticipation of uncertainty when talking about the world contrasts with their confident pronouncements when talking about their own states' role in shaping it, suggesting an implicit belief in their own prescience, an unexamined assumption that their actions are exempt from the chaos they identify in the international system. SDSR 2015 reaffirms this outlook, stating that the unexpected is increasingly likely, while giving the UK an anticipatory role as security provider and a force of benevolent prevention that spreads 'good governance'.[7]

How can we best explain this? This goes beyond Western governments reacting to the ever-more complex environment as it is. As a closer examination of a representative case reveals, a more ambitious – and dangerous – assumption frames security strategy. It is based on a coherent, though dangerous, ideological premise, that the West – by virtue of being the far-sighted guardian of world order – brings order into a chaotic world.

In making this move, policymakers exempt the West as a strategic actor from the very phenomenon they identify in the external environment: nonlinearity. In a truly nonlinear world, one's own actions are also implicated in the reproduction of uncertainty, and the West too can unwittingly be an agent of chaos. But contemporary visions of national security 'risk management' lose sight of this possibility.

We are left with a worldview that drives a specific logic for action. It underpins anticipatory security practice, from greater use of development as an instrument of security, to preventive 'upstream' engagement, to anticipatory war, and increased state surveillance. These initiatives flow from a common assumption, that radical uncertainty places a premium on action over inaction, the expenditure of power over restraint, the early forestalling of problems over the ability to react.

[7] *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* (TSO: London, 2015), p. 6.

Yet the 'preventive' ambition to tame a chaotic world back into order is at odds with the poor record of forecasting by all governments, Western ones included, despite efforts to 'predict better'; with the unintended consequences of 'early' intervention, and with the profound difficulties of strategic planning even over the medium term.

So if our efforts to forecast based on known patterns are likely to fall short, how can we wisely prepare? Classical realism, in particular the realism of Prussian general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) and German-American political scientist Hans Morgenthau (1904–80), offers a more promising resource for handling uncertainty, and an antidote to attempts to reduce strategic planning to an unreflective form of technocratic risk management. Where contemporary social science seeks to reduce uncertainty with new methods and tools, classical realists see it as a dilemma inherent to the limits on knowledge. Foresight can only be marginally improved. Shocks will come. Classical realism is sensitive to self-inflicted wounds that flow from responding with excessive *certainty* to ambiguous situations in an anarchic world.[8] If strategy requires concentration and limitation, failure to articulate limitations can lead a state to spread its resources thinly to hold down risks everywhere, exhausting itself and undermining the ability to react to the unexpected.

Confronted by nonlinearity, though, Clausewitz and Morgenthau did not throw their hands in the air. To prepare for the unknown, states should perform two tasks. They should educate the intuitive judgement of decision-makers in coping with the unforeseen. And they should approach national security as a public conversation over the orientation of the country, grounded in dialogue between expert and general will, to guide preparation and response.

This article proceeds in two parts. Firstly, I re-examine SDSR as a strategic review typical of a wider trend, demonstrating that it preaches uncertainty but presumes foreknowledge, amounting to an ideology of Western power. Secondly, I demonstrate that a fresh reading of the interventions of Clausewitz and Morgenthau in the defence debates of their time offers a more reflexive, prudent basis on which to prepare for the unknown.

Part I: The certainties of national security

The demands of major war in the twentieth century gave rise to the 'national security state', a complex bureaucratic apparatus designed to mobilise resources to generate capability in pursuit of security interests.[9] As well as generating material power, the security state attempts to develop the ability to forecast, through institutions like the US National Intelligence Council's 'Strategic Futures Group'. Today, the state's repertoires of prediction and risk management derive from multiple sources and inspirations beyond government, made possible by new data-intensive technologies. These range from 'political risk analysis' in business, election forecasting, and baseball 'sabermetrics'. To some, such innovations promise that international relations too can be demystified.[10]

[8] Jennifer Mitzen and Randall Schweller, 'Knowing the unknowns: Misplaced certainty and the onset of war', *Security Studies*, 20 (2011), pp. 2–35.

[9] Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 193–220; Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States Since the 1930s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 35.

[10] John Arquilla, 'Small cells vs. big data', *Foreign Policy* (22 April 2013); Kenneth Neil Kukier and Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger, 'The rise of big data: How its changing the way we think about the world', *Foreign Affairs*, 92:3 (2013), pp. 28–40.

Despite these efforts, it is still difficult to predict the time, place, and circumstances of future crises. It still involves 'deep uncertainty',[11] where one can neither weigh nor identify the variables confidently in advance. In the field of conflict, the problem is magnified. Lead times are long for generating weapons systems and personnel, while the pace of change can be rapid and crises sudden. This requires difficult trade-offs, balancing economic capacity with military preparedness, current conflicts with future ones.[12] Unsurprisingly, planners and experts have a poor record of forecasting. Expert predictions succeed at the approximate rate of chimps throwing darts at a dartboard.[13] Major systemic change, like the nature and timing of the Cold War's end, catches experts off guard.[14] Rare contingent 'shocks', like CBRN terrorist attacks, cannot be anticipated reliably.[15] Even proponents of 'better' prediction argue that once forecasts range beyond five years, chances of accuracy plunge.[16]

In 2010, the problem of 'uncertainty', endlessly recalled, confronted the architects of Britain's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). They had to plot the country's capabilities while constrained by financial austerity, clouded by an unsettled 'threat picture', dogged by rivalry between military services and with their attention split between current wars and future possible ones. Its successor review, SDSR 2015, was rightly commended for addressing capability gaps and legacy problems from 2010. But it, too, leant heavily on the notions of uncertainty and risk.

I trace SDSR through a family of declaratory documents that informed it. Four documents constituted the review itself, two preceding ones produced by the Ministry of Defence, 'The Future Character of Conflict' (FCOC) and the 'Green Paper' Adaptability and Partnership,[17] the main defence planning statement 'Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic and Security Defence Review' (SDSR),[18] and the guiding statement it serves, 'The National Security Strategy' (NSS).[19]

SDSR 2010 displeased observers across the spectrum.[20] Critics lamented its legacy of aircraft carriers without aircraft, the difficulties of meeting mounting training and equipment costs, a reduced escort

[11] Paul K. Davis, 'Defence planning and risk management in the presence of deep uncertainty', in Paul Bracken (ed.), *Managing Strategic Surprise: Lessons from Risk Management and Risk Assessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 170.
[12] Stephan Frühling, *Defence Planning and Uncertainty: Preparing for the Next Asia-Pacific War* (2014), p. 194.
[13] Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgement: How Good is it? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 20.
[14] John Lewis Gaddis, 'International Relations theory and the end of the Cold War', *International Security*, 17:3 (1992–3), pp. 5–58.
[15] JASON, Rare Events (McLean, VA: MITRE Corporation, 2007), p. 7.
[16] Michael C. Horowitz and Philip Tetlock, 'Trending upward: How the intelligence community can better see into the future', *Foreign Policy* (6 September 2012).
[17] Ministry of Defence, Development Concept and Doctrine Center, *The Future Character of Conflict* (Shrivenham: DCDC, 2010); Ministry of Defence, *Adaptability and Partnership: Issues for the Strategic Defence Review* (Cm 7794, February 2010).
[18] HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Cabinet Office, October 2010).
[19] *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy* (London: TSO, 2010); see also the recently published *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* (London: TSO, 2015).
[20] David Kirkpatrick, 'The next UK Defence Review must do better', *RUSI Defence Systems*, 14:2 (2011), pp. 14–15; House of Commons Defence Committee, *Towards the Next Defence and Security Review:* Part One – HC 197: Part 1, Seventh Report of Session 2013–14, Vol. 1: Report, Together with Formal Minutes and Oral Evidence, Volume 1, p. 12, para. 12.

fleet, an army being hollowed out, a reduced fast jet fleet, and nuclear-armed submarines deprived of the protective surveillance of maritime patrol aircraft.[21] What was less discussed, however, was its base assumptions.

This first major review in twelve years was partly an exercise in deficit reduction dominated by the Cabinet Office and Treasury,[22] conducted against the clock. In the spring of 2010, against a backdrop of a financial crisis sweeping the Euro-Atlantic world, the Conservative opposition promised 'a fundamental reappraisal of Britain's place in the world and how we operate within it as well as of the capabilities we need to protect our security'.[23] Observers saw SDSR as an opportunity for strategic adjustment, to reinvent Britain's international role to bring it into line with depleted resources.[24] But SDSR could not easily perform this balancing act, because of an underlying assumption made explicit before the review even began, namely that the question of retrenching commitments was off limits. Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague announced that there would be 'no strategic shrinkage' to harmonise national goals with a weakened economic base. Britain should not 'retreat' or manage 'decline', but remain an ambitious power with wide security horizons.[25] Narrowing Britain's horizons would betray the country's activist, global ambitions. That economic weight was shifting to East Asia demanded a 'more ambitious' role. There could be 'no suggestion' Britain's role could wither[26] as it 'always had global responsibilities and global ambitions'.[27] SDSR was unreceptive to public engagement, as the Ministry of Defence paid little attention to six thousand submissions from voters, 'a lost opportunity for Parliament and the wider public'.[28] Both rhetoric and process worked to foreclose debate, signalling that uncertainty would not intrude on the question of national commitments.

The blanket dismissal of retrenchment was abrupt. While it is possible to 'under balance' or retrench prematurely, the refocusing of commitments on core security interests can also be an effective way to conserve and refocus power, postpone, or reverse a precipitous fall.[29] There have been several, notably successful moments of retrenchment in British diplomatic history, such as the conceding of strategic space to the US in its hemisphere at the end of the nineteenth century, the handover to the

[21] On the problems encountered by the SDSR, see Andrew M. Dorman, 'Making 2 + 2 = 5: the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review', *Defence and Security Analysis*, 27:1 (2011), pp. 77–87.

[22] The SDSR was launched in May and published in October 2010. The previous major review of 1998 took a year and was relatively open to external expert opinion: Rob Dover and Mark Pythian, 'The politics of the Strategic Defence and Security Review: Centralisation and cuts'.

[23] William Hague, 'Britain's foreign policy in a networked world', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, 1 July 2010, available at: {https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-s-foreign-policy-in-a-networked-world—2}.

[24] Hew Strachan, 'The strategic gap in British defence policy', *Survival*, 51:4 (2009), pp. 49–70; Trevor Taylor, 'The essential choice: Options for future British defence', *RUSI Journal*, 155:2 (2010), pp. 14–19 (p. 17).

[25] William Hague, 'The foreign policy framework of a new conservative government', *Royal United Services Institute* (10 March 2010).

[26] William Hague, 'Opening statement, foreign affairs and defence debate on the Queen's speech', *Hansard* (26 May 2010), col. 174.

[27] HM Government, 'Foreword', *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p. 3.

[28] James Blitz, Defence and Diplomatic Editor of the *Financial Times*, Oral Evidence, House of Commons Defence Committee, 16 February 2011, Ev. 3; this was revealed in a leaked report, *SDSR: Lessons Identified* (3 November 2010).

[29] Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, 'Graceful decline? The surprising success of Great Power retrenchment', *International Security*, 35:4 (2011), pp. 7–44.

US of military and financial commitments to Greece and Palestine from 1947–50, and the pullback from Britain's 'overextended chain of bases "East of Suez"' in 1966–8.[30]

The government, though, foreclosed this debate, preferring to reduce means in pursuit of fixed ends. Though the SDSR directed that the UK needed to be 'more strategic', it invited debate about the structure and quality of its armed forces, but rejected a review of the scale of British ambitions and how to rank the interests those capabilities must serve. To sympathisers, improvising while avoiding a revision of goals is a higher form of 'muddling through'.[31] But to critics, to retain global aspirations while making serious reductions in capacity was to unbalance means and ends,[32] and could not be sufficiently offset by limited allied collaboration or 'soft power'. To will the end while reducing the means, to sustain a vision of global expeditionary activism with a force structure ill-suited to it, was not 'muddling through' but sleepwalking.

To assist, the Defence Concept and Doctrine Centre offered FCOC, a document that accounts for the complexity of modern conflict while prescribing ways to anticipate it. It describes conflict's 'inherent unpredictability', the impossibility of anticipating the character of future conflict given its 'inherently volatile' nature that produced 'wicked problems' which lack a clear relationship between cause and effect, all taking place in the realm of 'friction and uncertainty'.[33] Yet despite these caveats, at both five and twenty-year points it forecasts drivers of conflict 'with confidence'. Affirming uncertainty, FCOC projects from the present into the future. It presupposes a fixed future set by the UK's current strategic role, with adaptation confined to improving 'agility'. Globalisation will accelerate change and interconnect conflict. The UK will be unable to avoid being drawn into operations in megacities and heavily populated littoral regions, and by 2020 multipolarity will be underway.[34] Success in Afghanistan is vital, defeat will undermine the credibility on which its deterrence rests, and Britain is 'likely' to fight adversaries armed with CBRN weapons.[35] FCOC also asserts that preventive measures by the UK will effectively mitigate the causes and consequences of state failure. Here the document is conflicted. Future prevention will be 'required', the UK should invest more in it, and it 'will build confidence and local capacity' while giving access and understanding. Yet 'even with hindsight, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of prevent activities', making it unclear how we can be confident in prevention in the first place.[36]

The NSS urges: 'We must do all we can, within the resources available, to predict, prevent and mitigate the risks to our security. For those risks that we can predict, we must act both to reduce the likelihood of their occurring, and develop the resilience to reduce their impact.' Yet 'we cannot

[30] Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 170–1; Paul Kennedy, 'A time to appease', *The National Interest*, 108 (2010), pp. 7–17.

[31] 'A retreat, but not a rout', *Economist* (21 October 2010); Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, 'Smart muddling through', *International Affairs*, 88:2 (2012), pp. 213–22 (p. 222).

[32] Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 'First Review of the National Security Strategy', HL Paper 265/HS 1384 (Session 2010–12), para. 30; House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy: Sixth Report of Session 2010–2012*, Volume I, para. 12; Professor Michael Clark and Professor Hew Strachan, Defence Committee Minutes of Evidence, The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy, 16 February 2011, Ev. 5; Robert Fry, 'Smart power and the strategic deficit', *RUSI Journal*, 159:6 (2014), pp. 28–32.

[33] 'The Future Character of Conflict' (FCOC), pp. 1, 6, 7, 38.

[34] FCOC, pp. 21, 29.

[35] Ibid., pp. 16, 11.

[36] Ibid., pp. 27, 36.

prevent every risk as they are inherently unpredictable'.[37] Are all risks inherently unpredictable, or only some of them, and how can the authors discriminate? Its National Security Risk Assessment 'is not a forecast' but goes on to state expectations (about Al-Qaeda, failed states, and Iranian nuclearisation), implicitly based on inferences about the future from current trends, based partly on probability, classifying threats into a hierarchy.[38]

There is a time-picture in NSS of ever-greater uncertainty, which is based on a corollary that things were once less uncertain. This draws on a mythologised memory of a simple Cold War, with 'brutal certainties' and 'predictable threats', 'an existential threat from a state adversary through largely predictable military or nuclear means'.[39] This is an odd portrait. The twilight struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States from 1947 to 1991 was pervaded by ambiguities, about threat definition (was the enemy a global monolith or a divisible set of rivals?) and whether and how the enemy would use its military.[40] But recalling a false past of clarity serves to accentuate perception of a more dangerous present, which in turn legitimises the *status quo* of a liberal, expeditionary, and activist West.

Wider debate played out the same contradictions. In his warning against belief in certainty, the Commandant General of the Royal Marines noted 'our inability to either predict or contain events'.[41] This did not stop him attempting 'crystal ball-gazing'. He claimed to know much about the future operating environment, prophesying that in the age of globalised connectivity, expeditionary special forces would have 'increasing value' as 'the logical force of choice', dictating the need to prioritise aircraft carriers and amphibious units over massed forces. Yet this confident claim ignored other possibilities. The coming of 'access-denial' military technologies, such as cheap sensors and munitions of greater range and precision could increase the vulnerability of amphibious forces attempting opposed landings.[42] In its critique of SDSR, the *Economist* wanted it both ways. The country had to organise smarter for 'a dangerous and unpredictable world'.[43] Yet this did not stop it claiming to know about the underlying probability distribution around likely threats. It faulted Britain for giving 'too high a priority' to the 'unlikely' prospect of fighting a 'sophisticated adversary', and too low a priority to the dangers spawned by 'failing states and religious and ethnic struggles'. This admitted risk – but not the uncertainty that 'unpredictability' implies

False confidence was apparent when Chancellor George Osborne dismissed the case for major legacy capabilities. 'We are going to have a bunch of kit that makes us extremely well prepared to fight the Russians on the north German plain. That's not a war we are likely to face.'[44] But if, as his own

[37] 'The National Security Strategy' (NSS), p. 25.
[38] Ibid., pp. 26–31.
[39] Ibid., pp. 3, 18.
[40] Jussi M. Hanhimäki, 'The (really) good war: Cold War nostalgia and American foreign policy', *Cold War History*, 14:4 (2014), pp. 673–83.
[41] Buster Howes, 'Vast Ills follow a belief in certainty', *RUSI Journal* 156:3 (12 May 2011), pp. 20–5.
[42] Zachary Keck, 'Why D-Day would fail today: Modern defence technology has made seaborne invasions all the more difficult', *The Diplomat* (7 June 2014); Sydney J. Freedberg, 'Marines seek new tech to get ashore against missiles: Reinventing Amphib assault', *Breaking Defence* (16 April 2014).
[43] 'Missing in action: Britain needs a strategy to make the best use of its shrinking military capabilities', *The Economist* (8 March 2014).
[44] 'Defence budget chaotic, says Chancellor George Osborne', *BBC News* (2 October 2010), available at: {http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11457956}.

government insists, the international system is increasingly 'uncertain', how could he be so sure? Even if he is right, historically remote contingencies happen and the penalties for presuming against them can be severe. On the eve of the First World War, the British Army focused more on policing the North West Frontier than fighting a continental land war against the *Kaiserreich*.

Both the SDSR and the NSS foretell nonlinearity, but project from the present into the future with assurance. Each assumes a prescience that is at odds with its claims that the world is radically complex. Despite protective clauses about the likelihood of surprise, each claims to know a great deal about the future, making contentious claims as though they are axiomatically true. Each elides two concepts, 'uncertainty' and 'risk', that are distinct. Uncertainty, in its classical conception, differs from the concept of 'risk' embedded in British defence planning. 'Risk' implies foreknowledge of underlying probability distribution, such as the 'Risk Register', which codes and weighs dangers before they materialise. 'Uncertainty', by contrast, represents unmeasurable 'unknowables', a state made more radical by the leap into the mutual escalating violence of war.[45]

For each claim about how the security environment 'is', security studies literature offers counter-claims, suggesting that the axioms of SDSR are less secure than policymakers assume. NSS assumes economic interconnectedness means that Britain's security is intimately tied to turbulence elsewhere, making conflict prevention vital. Yet there are arguments that even in times of economic interdependence, neutral third parties adapt and even benefit from others' conflicts.[46] FCOC asserts that success in Afghanistan is vital for the UK's deterrence reputation. This 'past performance' theory of credibility assumes failure somewhere threatens core interests everywhere. But scholarship is divided on this point: there are equally robust arguments that credibility derives more from practical capabilities and perceived interest in a crisis. Conflicts can be discrete, and willingness to act in peripheral wars does not necessarily deter direct aggression elsewhere.[47] In 1990-1 Britain joined an international coalition to halt aggression in the Gulf, but this did not deter Serbian aggression in Kosovo in 1999, and intervention there did not deter Al-Qaeda in 2001.

Each document assumes Britain must intervene because it has vital security interests at stake in preventing states failing and becoming incubators of terrorism. But this truism, expressed as though it were straightforwardly the case, is highly contested. There is a plausible alternative view, that violent vacuums of power are generally unsafe for most people in them, and are not reliable hosts for plotting complex large-scale attacks abroad. Terrorist groups need a baseline of political order, access to resources, and functioning infrastructure to operate securely from.[48] Most effective terrorists do not operate from 'failed states' but come from strongly governed states such as Saudi Arabia, or Afghanistan when it was a strongly governed theocracy, and most failed states do not host

[45] See Jonathan Kirshner, 'The economic sins of modern IR theory and the classical realist alternative', *World Politics*, 67:1 (2015), pp. 155–83 (p. 153, 178).

[46] Eugene Gholz, 'Assessing the "threat" of international tension to the U.S. economy', in Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller (eds), *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2014), pp. 209–21; Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, 'Why it doesn't pay to preserve the peace', *Security Studies*, 10:4 (2001), pp. 1–57.

[47] Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[48] Stewart Patrick, *Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats and International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 62.

organisations that back terrorism.[49] The role of benign 'prevention' also presumes foreknowledge about which cases will fail. Yet scholars working with data-rich models and collaborative expert groups to make 'point predictions' about specific crises report that 'for every high-risk case that suffers a crisis, there is usually at least a handful of them that don't, and occasionally a supposedly low-risk case that just plain surprises us'.[50]

Visions of the UK as a prescient intervening force fly in the face of the decidedly mixed record of interventions to remake foreign societies. Interventions can achieve their goals at acceptable cost. But a sizeable share of them lengthen rather than shorten civil wars, make them more bloody rather than less, and only rarely promote stable democratic evolution.[51] External support for rebel groups in civil wars can be counter-productive, arms transfers are difficult to channel to the 'right' targets, and the complexities of finding and vetting 'moderate' rebel groups are considerable.[52] The UK recently donated millions of pounds to Rwanda, in a joint commitment 'to the promotion of peace and stability in the Great Lakes Region', funds that were misspent to support M23 rebels in the Congo.[53] SDSR's agenda of preventing state failure assumes, as a liberal assumption, that injecting more resources, elections and markets will forestall conflict. Yet the opposite can be the case. The actions of 'global cops' are subject to the very disorder they identify in unruly neighbourhoods.

SDSR makes heroic assumptions about the harmony of interests between interveners and those they seek to help. It assumes that in helping host governments defeat forces of rebellion and disorder, both share an interest in providing legitimate, representative, and disinterested governance, and that this can be provided through 'capacity building', overseeing the creation of services, training personnel, and the building of institutions, while securing the population. This ultimately was not the case in Iraq and Afghanistan. Host governments can operate as patronage networks or sectarian regimes extracting resources from their population to benefit their clients.[54] Resources flowing in to bolster governance can fuel corruption and implicate the occupier, stoking resistance and hardening division. If a host government is predatory on its population, for instance, this can undermine security sector reform. In Iraq, because a Shiite regime governed in sectarian ways to alienate Sunni communities, $26 billion of investment in the military, police, and justice system (including about $12 billion on supplying the Iraqi army)[55] over a decade created a force that collapsed and fled in the face of the Islamic State's offensive.

[49] Anna Simons and David Tucker, 'The misleading problem of failed states: a "socio-geography" of terrorism in the post-9/11 era', *Third World Quarterly*, 28:2 (2007), pp. 387–401 (pp. 388–9); Edward Newman, 'Weak states, state failure and terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19:4 (2007), pp. 463–88 (pp. 481, 483); Michael Mazarr, 'The rise and fall of the state failure paradigm: Requiem for a decade of distraction', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:1 (2014), pp. 113–22 (p. 116).

[50] Jay Ulfelder, 'Why the world can't have a Nate Silver', *Foreign Policy* (8 November 2012).

[51] Patrick Regan, 'Third-party interventions and the duration of intrastate conflicts', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46:1 (2002), pp. 55–73; Reed M. Wood, Jacob Kathman, and Stephen E. Gent, 'Armed intervention and civilian victimization in intrastate conflicts', *Journal of Peace Research*, 49:5 (2012), pp. 647–60; Jonathan Monten and Alexander Downes, 'Forced to be free? Why foreign-imposed regime change rarely leads to democratization', *International Security*, 37:4 (2013), pp. 90–131.

[52] Aysegul Aydin, 'Networks of third-party interveners and Civil War duration', *European Journal of International Relations* 18:3 (2012), pp. 573–97.

[53] 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Rwanda' (Revised 2012), § 2.1.

[54] On the misalignment of interests problem, see Stephen Biddle, 'Afghanistan's legacy: Emerging lessons of an ongoing war', *The Washington Quarterly*, 37:2 (2014), pp. 73–86 (pp. 80–1).

[55] Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), *Learning From Iraq: A Final Report From the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: 2013), pp. 90–105.

The criticism is not that the SDSR should have solved the insoluble problem of unpredictability and unintended consequences. Rather, it spoke of uncertainty while carrying an ideology replete with confident predictions. SDSR predicted a certain, inexorable process of globalisation that will make the international security environment ever more unpredictable. It predicted, nevertheless, that the disciplining hand of Western power would be needed to prevent unforeseeable dangers, exempting British actions from the nonlinearities of the international system.

To anticipate an objection, it could be countered that SDSR was not primarily the result of an ideology of Western power, but of bureaucratic politics. It could be argued that SDSR jumbled ideas in a problematic way because it was mainly an imperfect, compromised bi-product of political wrangling between various constituencies within the Ministry of Defence, the newly formed National Security Council (NSC) in the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury. Were this the case, however, we would expect to see greater ideological plurality before the SDSR began and imposed its pressures. What we actually see, however, is that the problematic vision of uncertainty *predated* SDSR, and the government that conducted it. That the civilian and military leaders of the defence community had already absorbed the ideology is demonstrated by the content of the Ministry of Defence 'Green Paper' published beforehand in February 2010. Like the SDSR it anticipated, the paper identified a world of radical uncertainty, anticipating that it will get harder to predict, with the greater turbulence of the environment placing a limitation on the capacity to identify future challenges and foresee the types of military operations needed. Yet it reported that conflict prevention had contributed to a 'stable rules based international order', foresaw that Al-Qaeda and its associates were likely to remain the main threat to the UK, (a claim that is becoming harder to sustain), and called for more effective horizon scanning. This reflected the same ideological construct that informed SDSR: when talking about the external environment, the Green Paper described an unstable and unpredictable world. When talking about British action in that world, it exuded confidence in British capacity for foresight.[56] Moreover, prior strategic documents anticipated SDSR's anticipatory and preventive logic, from the 1998 Strategic Defence Review to the Cabinet Office's National Security Strategy of 2008 to the FCO's adaptation plan for Climate Change earlier in 2010.[57] The chronology, in other words, suggests that SDSR cannot have been the mere product of an immediate, internal bureaucratic struggle in an ideological vacuum. As critiques of bureaucratic politics suggests, even people committed to 'where they sit' within government bring with them prior beliefs and cognitive maps.[58] To make his or her case, each stakeholder had to appeal to an already-formed, cross-government consensus. Bureaucrats fought, but within strong ideological parameters. Although accelerated, SDSR carried assumptions long in the making.

SDSR functioned partly as a revision of defence spending in response to shifting material conditions. But it was also the occasion for the articulation of ideas about British power in the world, identifying chaos as an externality 'out there' needing to be tamed into order by a benign, prescient guardian. As Rory Stewart MP defined it, this was a problem not of resources but of thought, a refusal to

[56] Ministry of Defence, *Adaptability and Partnership: Issues for the Strategic Defence Review* (Cm 7794, February 2010), pp. 17–22, 14, 28, 30.

[57] MOD, *Strategic Defence Review* (London, 1998); Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World* (London, 2008); FCO, *Preparing for Global Climate Change: An Adaptation Plan for the FCO* (London, 2010).

[58] On the 'prior beliefs' critique of bureaucratic politics models, see James M. Goldgeier, 'Psychology and security', *Security Studies*, 6 (1997), pp. 137–66; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

recognise that defence planning is at root a political process that should engage difficult questions about the national interest, to 'decide where we are prepared to be involved, and what, fundamentally, our national interests should be'.[59]

The problematic approach to uncertainty in SDSR is part of a wider problem in national security bureaucracies on both sides of the Atlantic. Successive presidents in Washington stress uncertainty but criticise intelligence agencies for failing to forecast highly contingent events. President Barack Obama pronounced on unpredictability,[60] yet criticised the Central Intelligence Agency for failing to foresee one of the most unpredictable phenomena in politics, revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Iraq.[61] Revolutions are difficult to forecast because the political will of crowds is fluid and 'triggering events' by definition cannot be foretold. Bush Administration memoirs too invoke 'uncertainty' but blame intelligence agencies for failing to forecast the 9/11 attacks, implying there was enough certainty after all to distinguish the signal from the noise.[62] Yet failure to anticipate surprise attacks is caused mostly not by imperfections in intelligence-gathering, but in *prior political disbelief* and misinterpretation of ambiguous information,[63] brought on by the desensitising effects of false alarms, the reluctance to acknowledge inconvenient possibilities, or fear of escalating a crisis. Because surprise is rooted not in systems but in politics, ever-greater volumes of data cannot eradicate it.

Attempts to eliminate uncertainty can be pernicious. In 2002–3, despite tentative and conflicting evidence, the British government decided it 'knew' Iraq possessed a growing WMD programme and, despite warnings, underestimated the costs and complexities of war, foisting certainty on an uncertain environment by relying ultimately on overconfident assumptions about the shape of things to come.

Part II: Realism and nonlinearity

Given the difficulties within the contemporary movement to place 'risk management' at the heart of national security, I now argue that classical realism is a valuable resource, both as a check on the ideology of bringing order into chaos, and as a positive route to pursuing prudence beyond 'predicting better'. I ground this argument in the writings of two realists who hammered out theories through their own political commitments: Clausewitz as a reformist agitator in nineteenth-century

[59] Rory Stewart, *Hansard* (26 Jan 2012), col. 500.

[60] Obama referred to 'our inability to predict the future'. *Defence Strategic Guidance: Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence* (January 2012), p. 6; on 'danger and uncertainty', President Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony' (28 May 2014); 'American leadership is the one constant in an uncertain world' in 'Statement by the President on ISIL' (10 September 2014).

[61] 'Obama "disappointed by intel on Arab unrest"', *CBS News* (4 February 2011); Bill Gertz, 'CIA blew it in Iraq, blamed for failing to warn about rise of Islamic State', *Washington Times* (1 July 2014).

[62] Melvyn P. Leffler, 'The foreign policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, history, legacy', *Diplomatic History*, 37:2 (2013), pp. 190–216; George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: the CIA During America's Time of Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 239, 234, 237, 269; George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 153, 159; John Ashcroft, *Never Again: Securing America and Restoring Justice* (New York: Center Street, 2006), p. 125.

[63] Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 1982); Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 64–5.

Prussia and Morgenthau as an 'uneasy realist' in America during the Cold War. Both aimed at the cultivation of practical wisdom, or sensitivity to the dilemmas and consequences of action.

Uncertainty is at the core of the classical realist tradition that stretches from Thucydides to Hans Morgenthau.[64] For all realists, life is insecure and defined by the possibility of war because the world is anarchic, lacking a supreme, supranational sovereign.[65] Without a Leviathan to keep the peace, anarchy places a premium on self-help. Uncertainty breeds insecurity by creating the problem of 'other minds'.[66] While new technology and refinement of method may yield modest improvements in forecasting, uncertainty is an irreducible feature of politics that has more profound causes than the crudity of our forecasting instruments. As this fog is inescapable, planners should prepare 'for the high probability of predictive failure'.[67] How?

Classical realism, more than its 'neo' realist descendants, is attentive to the need to go beyond prediction and develop prudence within the limitations of foreknowledge. It begins not from 'a rejection of the scientific study of politics but a conservative regard for what social science can hope to achieve'.[68] It seeks to fuse power politics with 'principles of agency, prudence and the recognition of limitations',[69] and takes 'the political' seriously, noting that choice and contingency play havoc with elegant systems that look for determined regularity. In this tradition, there is no technocratic escape from the dilemma of uncertainty. Thus we should be wary of the pursuit of 'agility', a pervasive concept in current debate.[70] Agility sharpens the sword, but don't define the purpose, or hierarchy of interests, for which the sword should be used.[71] Alternatively, the appeal for a 'balanced force' implies political choices without addressing them, increasing flexibility but sacrificing the 'weight' that can be applied.[72] Decisions about hedging, risk, or efficiency ultimately must confront a political argument, about what is worth bleeding for.

Classical realism, like all realism, begins in pessimism from acknowledgement of the reality of power and the enduring insecurity of the world. But it is distinctive in three regards. It sees systemic pressures as constraining but indeterminate; recognises the force of ideas and domestic politics in

[64] Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[65] On anarchy in realist traditions, see Joseph M. Parent and Joshua M. Baron, 'Elder abuse: How the moderns mistreat classical realism', *International Studies Review*, 13 (2011), pp. 193–213.

[66] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 171–6.

[67] Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions about Prediction and National Security* (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2011), p. 9.

[68] Kirshner, 'Economic sins', p. 178.

[69] Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Open horizons: the temporal visions of reflexive realism', *International Studies Review*, 12:2 (2010), pp. 271–300 (p. 271).

[70] According to US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, American forces must embrace agility because they have 'never once gotten it right' about the nature and location of future wars: Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defence Speech, Westpoint, 25 February 2011, available at: {http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1539}; for a similarly technocratic emphasis on flexibility, see Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft (eds), *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning Under Uncertainty* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 249–61.

[71] On this point see Colin S. Gray, *Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 203.

[72] Hugh White, 'The new defence White Paper: Why we need it and what it needs to do', Lowy Institute Paper (April 2008), pp. 3–4.

driving state behaviour; and treats politics as uncertain, contingent, and subject to the will of agents. Where 'structural' realists treat the system as its own autonomous thing that disposes and constrains unit behaviour, classical realists regard power 'balancing' and equilibrium as normative commitments reliant on the will of actors.[73] In common with 'chaos' theorists,[74] classical realists are sceptical about the predictive promise of universal theories, reject the notion that willed human behaviour can be diagnosed with the precision of the natural sciences, and are historicist in their emphasis on the peculiarities of situations. They seek possibilities through historical comparison, but are modest about what social science can yield. Actors may be mostly 'rational', but there are many rationalities. Calculating minds can draw conflicting lessons from the same information. What causes or provokes war in one setting can prevent or deter it in another. There is no sure way of fixing which 'lessons' apply, or when. Agents have discretion, some of whom are entrepreneurial and can recognise and alter patterns. Even if we had a complete theory of the causes of war, actors could recursively break the pattern. The future is 'largely unwritten'.[75]

Prussian general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz is a useful point of contrast with the logic of contemporary strategic planning. Contrary to some interpretations, he was neither a prototypical 'chaos' theorist surrendering to 'nonlinearity', nor a rigid statist married to the instrumentality of war. As with SDSR, both chaos and control featured centrally in his writing, but unlike SDSR, Clausewitz was consciously conflicted by the opposing realities of both.

On the one hand, the experience of shock was fundamental to his career. 'In the next great battle we will be the winner', he advised his future wife Marie, before Napoleon smashed Prussia in 1806.[76] Clausewitz's theory was the product of the shocks of experience, in particular the failure of the 'god of war' Napoleon. As a young officer, he was awed by the commander who harnessed the power of the French Revolution to unleash 'all its raw violence'.[77] But what worked for Napoleon at one time failed later. His 'puzzle' was that 'the same principles and strategies that were the decisive foundation of Napoleon's initial successes proved inadequate' in the different contexts of the Russian campaign and at Waterloo.[78] This variation in outcome from the same 'input' did not lead him to create a predictive model, but to an unresolved attempt to reconcile war's contradictory patterns. Initially impressed by the radical expansion of violence and the principle of destruction, the warlike spirit unleashed from political conditions by adroit states, he later stressed the need to limit violence and subordinate it to policy.

Dynamic interactions – 'the collision of two living forces' – put events into motion that are hard to foresee, and the drive to escalation deprives both of control.[79] Uncertainty also fed on the uniqueness

[73] See Marc Trachtenberg, 'The question of realism: an historian's view', *Security Studies*, 13:1 (2003), pp. 156–94; Jonathan Kirshner, 'The tragedy of offensive realism: Classical realism and the rise of China', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:1 (2010), pp. 53–75 (pp. 66–9).

[74] James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro, *International-Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1989); Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[75] Jonathan Kirshner, 'The tragedy of offensive realism: Classical realism and the rise of China', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:1 (2010), pp. 53–75 (p. 54).

[76] Clausewitz to Marie, 29 September 1806, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz: Ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebuchblättern*, ed. Karl Linnebach (Berlin: Warneck, 1916), p. 64.

[77] Clausewitz, 'On the life and character of Scharnhorst', in Paret, *Political and Historical Writings* (1817).

[78] Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 2.

[79] Clausewitz, *On War*, 1:1, p. 77.

of each situation, the variation of context that precluded certain foreknowledge and made a mockery of efforts to reduce war to systematic formulas. A commander had to navigate 'in the dark', through an uncharted sea full of unseen reefs.[80] If war is an imprecise craft, he doubted attempts at systemic control. On this basis he attacked 'system builders' attempts to convert campaigning into a detailed prescriptive system 'like an external law or an algebraic formula' he assailed Bulow's geometrical system of envelopment, Dumas' geological formula of victory via higher ground, Jomini's engineering model of a system of internal lines, and Henry Lloyd's use of mathematical calculations and rules to predict behaviour. To Clausewitz, they overlooked the singularity of each context, lost sight of cognitive and emotional variables, as well as chance, and failed to account for the general unreliability of information.[81] Both the acquisition and exploitation of information, like wartime intelligence, was elusive. Information deficiency was a cause of war. Would Prussia in 1806 'have risked war with France with 100,000 men, if she had suspected that the first shot would set off a mine that was to blow her to the skies?'[82] In this, he anticipated theories that conflict is rooted in a lack of clarity and disagreement about relative strength.[83]

For all this, Clausewitz did not give up on the possibility of exerting some control. He did anticipate 'nonlinearity' in his picture of the dynamic uncertainty of war.[84] But had he believed preparation a waste of time, he hardly would have identified the intellectual qualities a commander would need to plan operations.[85] Some claim Clausewitz was the source of the aphorism of Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, that 'no plan survives contact with the enemy'.[86] But the Moltkean tradition towards planning, like Clausewitz's, was consciously torn. Moltke's statement translates as '[n]o plan of operations extends *with any certainty* beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.'[87] Inherent to warfare were the vicissitudes generated by weather, accident or misperception, and the collision of independent wills, making it a conceit to suppose that one 'can see in the course of the campaign the consequent execution of an original idea with all details thought out in advance and adhered to until the very end'.[88] Strategic wisdom did not counsel the abandonment of plans, but 'the continued development *of the original leading thought* in accordance with the constantly changed circumstances.'[89]

[80] Ibid., 2:2, p. 139.
[81] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 168, on unreliable information p. 140; 'On the life and character of Scharnhorst', *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 103–4; Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz & Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 30.
[82] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 581.
[83] Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988), pp. 109–14.
[84] Alan J. Beyerchen, 'Clausewitz, nonlinearity and the unpredictability of war', *International Security*, 17:3 (1992), pp. 59–90.
[85] Terence M. Holmes, 'Planning versus chaos in Clausewitz's *On War*', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30:1 (2007), pp. 129–51.
[86] Moltke is attributed with this statement in Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 16; Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 104.
[87] Helmuth von Moltke, 'Ueber Strategie', *Militataerische Werke*, ed. Großer Generalstab, Abteilung fuer Kriegsgeschichte I, Vol. II, 2, *Moltkes taktischstrategische Aufsatze aus den Jahren 1857 bis 1871* (Berlin: Mittler, 1900), pp. 291–2.
[88] Helmuth von Moltke, 'Operationsplan-Kriegsobjekt und Operationsobjekt [Plan of operations]', cited and translated in Daniel J. Hughes, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1993), pp. 91–4 (p. 92).
[89] Helmut von Moltke, 'On Strategy', from *Militaerische Werke*, translated in Hughes, *Moltke*, pp. 44–7 (p. 47).

Clausewitz also promoted the aspiration for a rational intelligence approximating control and exploiting contingency. Planning should encompass calculations of essential political objectives, and the overall relation between different parts, but should allow for friction, leaving room for adjustment. War plans were needed to determine the character of the conflict, 'on the basis of probabilities'.[90] Small things undermined campaigns only in the absence of a coherent overall strategic aim. Clausewitz framed planning not as an inflexible sequencing of moves, but as the attempt to comprehend the possibilities in particular situations. Qualities of planners mattered as much as the planning, both the intellectual capacity to synthesise elements of conflict and the emotional capacity to drive a vision. Preparation was hard but not futile. To frame Clausewitz as a nineteenth-century Romantic framing war as 'a game of chance outside the bounds of rational control'[91] does violence to his evolving comprehension.

Clausewitz's theory of war was also a theory of pedagogy, or how decision-makers should educate themselves. He believed his method of *Kritik*, or tracing cause-and-effect relationships towards coherent theory, was the kind of thought-system that thinking commanders needed in wartime, with theory helping to identify and exploit the unexpected.[92] He emphasised that studying past campaigns had an indirect value as an aid to judgement. Its value lay not in the pursuit of systemic 'lessons learned' prescriptions, as this would ignore the historicity of war and the singularity of each war. It was to cultivate the mind of the commander. Through experiential rather than abstract learning, education should produce decision-makers with a 'rational will'. Thus his analysis of the 1814 campaign in France was supposed to help 'form the practical man' and 'educate his judgement, rather than to assist him directly in the execution of his tasks'.[93] At the lower level, routine and systems were valuable ways to reduce friction. But to routinise the higher level of strategic planning threatened to impoverish the imagination. This is precisely what happened at Jena-Auerstedt in 1806, where Prussia's attempt to recreate Frederick the Great's oblique order of battle met disaster.[94] If a commander brought to experience 'ready-made ideas' more than an educated intellect, 'the flow of events will simply tear down his house before it is finished'.[95]

The same approach drove Clausewitz's efforts to reform the curriculum at the Prussian War College (*Allgemeine Kriegsschule*) for advanced study for officers. In March 1819, Clausewitz wrote a memorandum arguing that the College should de-emphasise rote learning and formal lectures, in favour of more practical classes that made students interact as active participants.[96] For instance, instead of presenting geography and campaigning in an abstract or arithmetical way, students should make a 'model of the earth's surface' as a more engaging approach than 'dry and empty speculation'.[97] In contemporary terms, it flowed from the ideal of *Bildung*, or education as the cultivation of character and intellect with theory as a contemplative basis for guidance rather than

[90] Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 8, p. 584
[91] Christopher Bassford, 'John Keegan and the grand tradition of trashing Clausewitz: a polemic', *War in History*, 1:3 (1994), pp. 319–36.
[92] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 168.
[93] Clausewitz, 'Strategic critique of the campaign of 1814 in France', in Paret, *Political and Historical Writings*, pp. 205–35 (p. 208).
[94] Clausewitz, *On War*, 2:4, p. 155.
[95] Clausewitz, 'Der Feldzug von 1812 in Russland', *Hinterlassene Werke*, vol. 7, p. 48, cited in Otte, 'Educating Bellona', p. 25.
[96] Ludwig von Scharfenort, *Die Koniglich Preussische Kriegsakademi, 1810–1910* (Berlin: Mittler, 1910), pp. 30–41; Paret, *Clausewitz,* pp. 272–9.
[97] Memorandum, cited in Scharfenort, p. 41.

mechanical prescription.[98] In today's terms, he recommended the 'applicatory method' of experiential learning. This was to restore Scharnhorst's ambition for the *Kriegsschule*, not to pass on knowledge with authority but 'to train intelligence and development judgement'.[99] Invoking Clausewitz, contemporary officers argue for making friction central to military exercises, inserting 'imperfect information, rushed timelines, conflicting reports, rapid changes in operations, loss of key leadership, sleep deprivation, ethical decisions, and maintenance and logistical issues'.[100] Ultimately, learning should form intuitive, situational judgement to cope with war's singularity, developing what Michael Howard called 'the capacity to adapt oneself to the utterly unpredictable, the entirely unknown'.[101]

Defence planning in Clausewitz was inextricable from political struggle, as military power in his view derived from the social cohesion and civic unity of the nation. Clausewitz was politically active, belonging to the Prussian *Militärische Gesellschaft* established by his mentor Scharnhorst in 1801 and the *Tugendbund*, a patriotic circle of Berlin intellectuals founded in 1808 to revive the national spirit. At the higher political level, to engage in defence planning was inescapably to confront the existential political choices of the nation-state. His 1819 memorandum defending the continuation of the reformed army addressed a central policy dilemma, whether to arm the people, and the problem of judging whether the state was more imperilled by invasion or revolution. The *Landwehr* or supplementary people's army was both affordable and represented the harmonisation of politics and military policy, and alone was capable of 'harnessing the raw, element power of war'.[102] But perpetuating it meant arming the people. Against the argument that the *Landwehr* increased the danger of revolution, he argued that in fact it brought army and people closer together to support an emerging nation. The government, as a constitutional monarchy, should enact liberal reforms to gathering around it 'representatives of the people' to generate political consent.

In contrast to modern conceptions of contingency as a destabilising and threatening unknown, Clausewitz stressed the positive exploitation of fortune. It made sense to postpone some decisions. In trying to discern the future, Clausewitz divined from current political conditions what could and could not be known. Consider his agitations regarding the debate over the proposed German Federal Army in 1818. On one level, he argued that the multiple sovereign states of the federation should distinguish between military strength and unified command. In line with his view that military institutions should reflect as accurately as possible the political forces that animate and direct them, he proposed that they work for an agreed ratio of armed forces and fortresses and their populations, to be reviewed by a Commission under the authority of a Federal Diet. At the same time, he resisted the call for a pre-arranged federal army that would be at odds with the political reality that different states would have distinct interests in the event of a war. At this point he argued against *too much* planning, suggesting it would be wiser to wait until war broke out to judge its distinctive context, only then making arrangements for forces' 'disposition and combination'. So long as adequate ratios of military power were sustained, he argued German states should 'abandon to the force of circumstances, the interests of the moment, the innumerable constellations of chance under whose

[98] T. G. Otte, 'Educating Bellona: Carl von Clausewitz and Military Education', in Keith Nelson and Greg Kennedy (eds), *Military Education: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Praeger, 2002), pp. 13–33 (pp. 14, 21).
[99] Paret, *Clausewitz*, p. 273.
[100] Lt Col. Jonathan Due, Maj. Nathan Finney, Maj. Joe Byerly, 'Preparing Soldiers for Uncertainty', *Military Review* (Jan–Feb 2015), pp. 26–30 (p. 28).
[101] Michael Howard, 'Military science in an age of peace', *RUSI*, 119 (1974), pp. 3–9.
[102] Clausewitz, 'Unsere Kriegsverfassung', *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, pp. 142–53.

every act of human history is made and accomplished … to abandon to these living and active forces the formulation of plans, the choice of means, and the assembly of the various parts that go into the great machine of war'.[103] Prudent preparation meant balancing the need for sufficient force with the capacity to adapt to the play of circumstances. It meant making some decisions and delaying others, to lessen the dangers of unpredictability by pushing choices closer to the future, when there would be more information about evolving alliances.

Unlike Clausewitz, who intellectually was foremost a theorist of the nature of war, Hans Morgenthau was a theorist of international politics. But Morgenthau also grounded his scepticism about predictive science in an account of the limitations of knowledge, and in a concern for the pedagogical purpose of political science in public life. Like Clausewitz, he was an educator with a strong sense of vocation, an active citizen conscious of how civil society shaped and was shaped by his country's diplomacy.[104] He evolved a theory of international politics through a textbook that he regularly updated, *Politics Among Nations*.[105] In laying out the role of the political theorist, Morgenthau decried 'scientific man' or the emerging positivist social science of the behavioural revolution, with its removal of human agency from political life and its mechanistic conception of politics itself. The proper purpose of academics was not to prescribe neat predictive solutions but offer a 'higher practicality' to public life, deepening understanding of problems.[106] The 'first lesson' of international politics was 'the ambiguity of the facts', which denied 'trustworthy prophecies' to makers of strategy.[107] Practitioners were therefore more gamblers than scientists.[108]

Morgenthau's critique of America's war in Vietnam was an assault on the attempt to 'scientise' national security planning. He cautioned against the Pentagon's adaptation of Thomas Schelling's theories of game-theoretic bargaining to the coercive bombardment of North Vietnam. Morgenthau overstated his case, attributing failure in Vietnam directly to a 'dogmatic outlook in modern political science'[109] But for Morgenthau, the war reopened the divide between economistic paradigms that modelled actors as agents rationally pursuing material things and classical theories of power politics. The scientistic treatment of the social and natural worlds as equivalent subjects of investigation could not comprehend the historicity of war. War's primarily political nature with its intangible forces of morale and ideas meant that it was hard to subject to systematic knowledge in advance. Solutions to conflict could only be 'temporary and precarious', with peace subject to ever-changing conditions. History raged 'in the realm of the accidental, the contingent, the unpredictable'.[110] In the schemas of game theorists, Vietnam appeared not as a real historical entity but as a rational abstraction whose

[103] Clausewitz, 'On the German Federal Army', 1818, cited in Paret, *Clausewitz: Political and Historical Writings*, pp. 304–12 (pp. 308, 309).

[104] Morgenthau was a member of the Academic Committee on Soviet Jewry, the Kurdish-American Society, Americans for Democratic Action, Council for a Liveable World, the National Council for Civic Responsibility, and Turn Toward Peace. Lebow, *Tragic Vision*, p. 255, fn. 157.

[105] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948).

[106] Hans Morgenthau, 'The purpose of political science', in James C. Charlesworth (ed.), *A Design for Political Science: Scope, Objectives and Methods* (American Academy of Political Science, 1966), pp. 63–79.

[107] Morgenthau, *Politics Among the Nations*, p. 22.

[108] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 221.

[109] See Lorenzo Zambernardi, 'The impotence of power: Morgenthau's critique of American intervention in Vietnam', *Review of International Studies*, 37:3 (2011), pp. 1335–56 (pp. 1347–8).

[110] Hans J. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (1969), pp. 141, 142.

every move was quantifiable in advance. Political success was not reducible to physical metrics like 'bodycounts' or where village chiefs slept at night. He faulted military technicians for their apolitical conception of counterinsurgency, 'as though it were just another branch of warfare, to be taught in special schools and applied with technical proficiency'.[111] This anticipated critiques of 'high modernism', designs of social order to master nature, that discount possibilities of resistance.[112]

Morgenthau didn't always take his own advice. Testifying to Congress between 1973–5, he prematurely announced that collaborative moves of *Detente* and *Ostpolitik* had liquidated the Cold War by relaxing ideological hostility and recognising the *status quo*.[113] He also shifted his stance on nuclear weapons. Their inception, and the end of America's nuclear monopoly in 1949, was a site of 'utter uncertainty' making only hunches possible. Because a nuclear war had never been fought, it was unclear how humanity would respond. Morgenthau first argued that nukes made war between nuclear states futile, then advocated preparing for graduated atomic war to offset Soviet conventional superiority, finally arguing that the prospect of nuclear death seemed to call for the creation of a world state to replace outmoded nation-states, a project he despaired as unlikely to succeed.[114] His struggle to settle a position, and his falling back to the combination of a strong military combined with accommodating diplomacy, supports his judgement that the ambiguity of international life makes it hard to project unknowns beyond articulating interests, assessing competing possibilities, and settling for unsatisfactory compromise.

At the heart of Morgenthau's critique of scientism was a concept of prudence. For him, the 'supreme virtue' is to weigh the consequences of competing choices in concrete situations, negotiating the conflicting demands of interest and principle, and knowing that all choices are bound to produce unexpected results.[115] Some allege Morgenthau's prudence was coldly instrumental. Cold War realists like Morgenthau were nostalgia for elite guardians in the vein of nineteenth-century European diplomats who made strategy in cold blood standing above the herd. This earned him a reputation as continental reactionary.[116] He called for the 'decontamination' of America's ideological statecraft as the doctrine of containment became an indiscriminate commitment. But to bring power and commitments into harmony required a 'restatement of national purpose'[117] with goals ranked according to their essentiality and achievability. Arguing that 'a dissenting minority performs a vital function for the political and moral welfare of the Republic',[118] he taught that government must both carry and shape opinion, avoiding the pitfalls of short-sighted populism or rigid inflexibility.[119] Power was not a neatly measurable thing – the ability of the weak to challenge the strong

[111] Hans Morgenthau, 'Are we deluding ourselves in Vietnam?', *The New York Times Magazine* (18 April 1965).
[112] James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4.
[113] Jaap W. Nobel, 'Morgenthau's struggle with power: the theory of power politics and the Cold War', *Review of International Studies*, 21:1 (1995), pp. 61–85 (p. 78).
[114] See Daniel J. Levine, 'Why Hans Morgenthau was not a critical theorist', *International Relations*, 27:1 (2012), pp. 95–118 (pp. 101–4).
[115] Robert Harriman, *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 12.
[116] The first version of his textbook praised the supranational quality of the shared understanding of politics by the international aristocracy, see *Politics Among Nations*, p. 186, pp. 199–200; see also Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), pp. 32–6, pp. 121ff.
[117] Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy*, p. 140.
[118] Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade 1960–1970* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 44.
[119] Morgenthau, *Politics Among the Nations* (1993 edn), pp. 163–4.

demonstrated that – and drew on intangibles like morale and cohesion, relying on diplomacy to give material components 'direction and weight'. A realistic purpose should be worked out not through a Weberian charismatic autocrat, nor through a Schmittian politics of enmity, but through democratic and pluralist contestation. Grand strategy needed grand politics.[120] Like Clausewitz, Morgenthau saw the state not as unitary but as a conflicted thing, shaped by internal sources of equilibrium. This followed the Aristotelian tradition, wherein a prudent agent moderates their desires in interacting within a political community, both domestically and internationally, in a neverending struggle to negotiate their interest.[121] Without a negotiated purpose, the polity's constitutive parts could disaggregate, or fall prey to demagoguery.

Clausewitz and Morgenthau argued that there is no scientific or technocratic escape from the problems of uncertainty. Insofar as international politics is clouded in ambiguity, Western beholders themselves cannot transcend it. It might be objected that their critique cannot stand in a contemporary policy world that places high demand on scientific technology as the remedy for uncertainty, where polities expect their officials to process data in order to optimise policy choices.[122] The target of these two classical realists, though, was not science but scientism, the conceit of technology-driven anticipatory security. Clausewitz mocked attempts to systematise warfare into a series of prescriptive rules. Morgenthau did likewise in the arena of international politics. For both, preparation was vital, but must balance restraint and activity, insure against one's own capacity for inducing disorder, and must take the form of a political contest over the nature of the polity's interests.

Conclusion

In contemporary security debate, there is something more profound going on than a fear of the unknown. As I have demonstrated, in the major review of 2010, even while policymakers and practitioners articulated 'uncertainty' and emphasised that the present can be punctuated by sudden change, their vision was premised on an unexamined certainty, that the West brings order into chaos and is exempt from the nonlinearity around it. In the name of planning for uncertainty, governments do not fully address how uncertainty affects the purpose and utility of their power.

Governments have little choice but to recognise uncertainty while making predictions. This is inevitable, and policymakers should still chance their arm. The difficulty lies in the misplaced confidence in one's own knowledge, the failure to scrutinise assumptions being made, and the failure to insure against the unpredictability of one's own actions and their consequences. In a time of botched interventions, development efforts gone wrong, and financial crisis, states should confront the problem that they themselves are implicated in their nonlinearity that they perceive in the world around them.

[120] On Morgenthau's increasing stress on the need for dissenting politics to define the national interest, see Vibeke Schou Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 97–133.

[121] Anthony F. Lang, 'Morgenthau, agency, and Aristotle', in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 42–62.

[122] On the rise of scientism in modern governance, see Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: the Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003); see also Bernard Brodie, 'Strategy as Science', *World Politics*, 4:1 (1949), pp. 467–88.

There are three ways states can take uncertainty more seriously.[123] Firstly, as both Clausewitz and Morgenthau argued, they should develop the intellectual capability to think the unthinkable. One technique is to use dynamic simulation exercises against active adversaries to imagine the failure of current policy and the assumptions that underpin it from a 'shadow national security strategy' at the top, all the way down to crisis scenario simulation. States do 'war game' scenarios, but are too politically constrained. More robust exercises introduce the unpalatable (such as an Iranian nuclear bomb, a plot line that offends the UK-US current stance of nonproliferation).[124] The goal of simulation is not primarily to 'dress rehearse' hypothetical crises, as we can't know what future ones will be and are bound to forecast badly. Its value is to condition policymakers through thought experimentation to make informed choices under pressure, to accelerate inter-department and interagency cohesion, to spot overlooked potentialities, and to test and probe assumptions.

Secondly, given the limits of forecasting even in the era of 'big data' and refined risk-assessment techniques, states should retain 'worse case' capabilities to deter and, if needed, scale up to fight. In an era of resource scarcity and downward pressure on budgets, they should attend first to 'vital' interests (that is, necessary for life) above what is merely desirable, putting major war capabilities over those designed for lesser missions. This would anticipate the abrupt breaking of trends, like the shift from years focussed on counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency, to the recent and more dangerous resurgence of geopolitical competition between states. Contrary to the repeated logic of prevention being better than cure, states' abilities to prevent problems without blowback are limited, meaning that it is equally vital to husband the ability to react with reserve 'surplus' power.

Finally, states can choose to engage the difficult debate about the 'national interest' before sudden crises force them to. Planning wisely means building the capacity to interpret and respond to contingency. If anticipatory thinking is intrinsic to preparation, states cannot do without it, and need 'a coherent framework of purpose and direction' where the unexpected 'can be interpreted, given meaning and responded to'.[125] Classical realism locates that effort in the struggle over the national interest. Strategy is not a technical instrumental exercise by unitary states responding to structural forces, but is embedded in political contestation. Building the ability to respond to contingency is part of a wider debate over what is worth bleeding for. Arguments about defence should not be divorced from arguments over national purpose, ultimately about the kind of polity a community wants to be. In classical realism, defence is not a technical specialism practised by a professional class but part of the struggle to define the common good. Preparation rests on a balance between shaping the environment and building the capacity to react, through a shared account of what is valued and achievable. Attention to classical traditions cannot enhance prediction, but can help go beyond it.

[123] These recommendations draw upon the joint submission to the House of Commons Defence Select Committee with General Professor Sir Paul Newton and Dr David Blagden: 'Memorandum submitted by the Strategy and Security Institute, University of Exeter' (7 October 2015), available at: {http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/an-sdsr-checklist-of-potential-threats/written/22550.html}.

[124] As Paul Bracken notes, 'Some officials fight the scenario for a reason. What, they ask, is the point of wasting time over something that isn't going to happen? Better, they argue, to focus on stopping Iran from getting the bomb than gaming out what happens if it does.' Paul Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger and the New Power Politics* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2012), pp. 18–19.

[125] Gary Hart, *The Fourth Power: Grand Strategy for the United States in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 33; on balancing planning with friction, see Hew Strachan, 'Strategy and Contingency', *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 235–53 (p. 238).

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