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Strategic Warning Time and the Importance of Thinking Ahead

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SYNOPSIS

How far off are we from midnight? What does midnight look like? Policymakers may question the usefulness of "strategic warning time" as an academic exercise that does not predict the future with sufficient accuracy. While precision may be illusive, the utility of strategic warning rests on the ability to identify the challenges that one should be preparing for, inform the development of plans and contingencies, and focus on the partnerships needed to reduce the risk of their occurrence.

COMMENTARY

The Australian National Security Strategy published in 2024 was unambiguous in stating that, from the country's perspective, "there is no longer a ten-year window of strategic warning time for conflict". Many within the national security communities around the world share — for different reasons — similar views. In the United Kingdom, the former defence secretary Grant Shapps suggested that the country had to behave in a fashion consistent with a "pre-war" time. In Japan, former prime minister Fumio Kishida in similarly unambiguous terms noted that today's Ukraine "may be the East Asia of tomorrow".

The above views suggest a degree of agreement among political leaders that we live in an age of greater volatility and danger in international affairs. Indeed, their vocabularies now regularly reflect the assumption that the return of state-on-state contestation, if not outright war, is the defining geopolitical feature to benchmark national security narratives.

A closer examination of these assessments reveals also that they are both the result of, and are driven by, increasing military spending and assertive uses of military power. The growing practice of military statecraft for the purpose of coercion and carried out by the use of increasingly sophisticated capabilities — from the Baltic and the Red Seas to the Taiwan Strait —reinforces the perception among security elites of an enhanced risk of major power crises, or indeed war. International events contribute to casting a dark shadow over the prospect of such occurrences. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, military operations in Gaza and the Middle East, and bellicose actions in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait are some of the most notable examples of a discernible pattern of international instability.

In this context, the increased use of hybrid or grey zone modalities of coercion — i.e., those designed to remain below the conventional threshold of military operations that would constitute an act of war — contribute to moving the needle closer to "midnight" too. When higher levels of military coercion are normalised, the notion of escalation ladders inevitably loses its significance. In a contested peacetime, moves such as large-scale deployment of militia, cyberattacks and disinformation, and sabotage of critical undersea infrastructure may sometimes be dismissed as coercive but not symptomatic of imminent existential threats. Yet, the more these actions are normalised, the harder it becomes to draw a distinction between a coercive act and a preliminary step to a planned initiation of combat operations.

The European Experience

Reduced warning times with indicators of threats that are more complex to predict necessitate higher levels of readiness, including accelerated capability building and stronger, more reliable partnerships and alliance systems. However, this imperative today faces the additional challenge of a new administration in Washington that prioritises America's (narrow) self-interest. The Trump administration's pronouncements questioning the need for reassurance commitments to allies and partners, and displaying clear disdain for multilateralism, suggest the risk of global reduction in the US military footprint rather than its shift from the West to the East. While indicators of such an approach were already in place during the first Trump administration, its recent behaviour has caught most allies by surprise.

With clear pronouncement for reduced commitments to Europe, Trump has essentially gutted NATO's deterrence and net warfighting capabilities, and Europe is now expected to shore up direct support to Ukraine where actual military and financial contributions have fallen short. Contributing reasons for the gap include the lack of a common strategy for sustaining military aid, the varying sense of urgency among European states, and political hesitation as some European leaders fear that over-arming Ukraine could provoke Russia. There is also concern that Europe's defence-industrial capacity is not robust enough to support long-term military operations, including difficulties in scaling up production of critical systems, limiting Europe's ability to mobilise its forces in responding to threats, or significantly augment Ukrainian defences.

Despite being at the front line, European states are grappling with the tension between addressing immediate security challenges (today's challenge is deterring Russian aggression in Eastern Europe) and planning for long-term shifts in the geostrategic and security landscape. While it is prudent to speak of needing to invest in both — a robust short-term deterrence capability and long-term technological and doctrinal innovation to keep pace with emerging threats of cyber and hybrid nature — the perennial limitation of resources, political will, and overall difference in priorities continues to put constraints on the speed at which change can be implemented. Without the United States underwriting NATO's immediate and long-term military solvency, are some in Europe reconsidering China as an attractive partner?

Lessons for Southeast Asia

In many ways, the European experience provides good lessons for those in Asia, and more so for Southeast Asia. First, the Russia-Ukraine war reminds all that war is not improbable. While strategic warning time is generally deemed to be longer in the South China Sea than in the Taiwan Strait, ASEAN and its member states are riddled with similar challenges to those of its European counterparts. With continued US commitment to the region in question, does ASEAN need to consider the premium it places on multilateral mechanisms? How can ASEAN delink its credibility from being reliant on major powers turning up to the party, so to speak?

As Southeast Asian countries work on ramping up their military modernisation programmes, many are still struggling to manage defence-industry relations. Of no less relevance, perennial budgetary constraints may limit options. As ASEAN is not a security bloc like NATO, there is no clear alignment on the threat perception, and it is often unclear what some ASEAN member states are planning for.

There are various indicators which signal an escalation towards hostilities in the South China Sea. These include large-scale Chinese maritime militia deployments, combat air unit activation on China's artificial islands, and heightened cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. The risk of isolated violent incidents remains higher than that of a full-scale war. But how far will the cumulative effect of isolated incidents move the warning time closer to midnight? And, what would midnight look like? The answers are far from certain, but one thing is certain. It is no longer prudent for Southeast Asia to continue to think that the low likelihood of an event justifies inaction in preparing for its potential occurrence.

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The 'Strategic Warning Time' workshop was co-hosted by King's College London and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in London on 4 March 2025.

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The above were key takeaways from a workshop in London on a similar title co-hosted by King's College London and RSIS on 4 March 2025. The next iteration of the Workshop will be held in Singapore at the sidelines of the 9th International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC 2025), which will be on 7 May 2025.