Strategic Thinking

AN INTRODUCTION AND FAREWELL

Philip Windsor

edited by **Mats Berdal & Spyros Economides**

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An Introduction and Farewell

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Strategic Thinking

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Foreword

Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides

Of the many subjects that stimulated Philip Windsor's intellectual curiosity and fertile mind, war and military strategy in the nuclear age are perhaps the ones for which he is most widely remembered. In countless interviews and commentaries for the BBC, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, he brought clear and characteristically jargon-free analysis to bear on the vicissitudes of East-West relations. To gatherings of military officers and diplomats around the world, he placed the phenomenal increase in the destructive power of modern weaponry and the very real possibility of nuclear Armageddon into sharp historical, political, and philosophical relief. But it was during his tenure as a teacher at the London School of Economics from 1967 to 1997 that his reflections on the evolution of what he called "strategic thinking" reached their widest audience.

The principal setting for these reflections was an annual series of lectures titled "Strategic Aspects of International Relations." Philip's fluent and brilliant delivery, richly laced with wit and insights drawn from outside the narrow confines of the social sciences, captivated and enthralled undergraduate and graduate audiences. His flawless delivery aside, it was above all the content of Philip's lectures that proved so enriching and intellectually stimulating to new classes of students each year. Recognizing this, friends and colleagues persisted in encouraging Philip to bring his lectures and thoughts on modern strategy and war together in a single volume. After much prodding, he eventually obliged, and the result was *Strategic Thinking: An Introduction and Farewell.* The initial draft of the book was completed in 1995. But the long, drawn-out process of preparing a final draft for publication, combined with illness, meant that he was unable to complete the project before he

died in 2000. In preparing the manuscript for publication, we have made no substantive changes to the original save for some minor amendments, mostly of a technical nature.

Strategic Thinking traces the evolution of strategic thinking from its religious, legal, and political origins in medieval and modern Europe through to the demise of the Cold War. In particular, it examines the peculiar character and autonomy that strategy acquired in the nuclear age. From the dying Roman Empire to the nuclear era, the book is concerned with changes in the understanding of war and strategy resulting less from technological change per se than from the combined effects of technological, social, and political transformations, whose interactions over time contributed to major shifts in thinking about strategy and war. It was a process that culminated in the nuclear age when strategic considerations, in Windsor's own words, emerged as "the decisive force in the conduct of the politics of states and blocs."

It is highly appropriate that this book should be the first in a new series to be released by Lynne Rienner Publishers in association with the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Philip Windsor was closely associated with the IISS throughout his academic career, especially in the early years of the institute's history under the directorship of Alistair Buchan, with whom he also coauthored a book.[1] Between 1961 and 1965 he worked as a research fellow at the institute and in the 1970s and early 1980s he went on to serve on its council. He wrote frequently for the institute, including a characteristically incisive Adelphi Paper on Germany and the crises facing the Western alliance after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the breakdown of détente.[2]

But far more important than its author's association with the IISS, *Strategic Thinking* sets a standard by the quality of its analysis and the clarity and lucidity of its style. Substance and style, as Windsor knew well, are not unrelated. Indeed, in describing much of the writings on limited war as "needlessly complicated," he was in fact pointing to a wider problem with the "strategic studies" literature, one that fed into and reinforced what he saw as a distinguishing feature of strategic thinking in the nuclear age: its self-referring and self-legitimating character.[3] It is against this background that *Strategic Thinking* sets out to reexamine the influence and validity of the assumptions—the "forms of thought," as Windsor called them—that came to govern strategic thinking and that gradually came to be taken for granted during the Cold War (including, as Windsor readily admits, by himself). In an important sense, therefore, this book is a reminder of the need, not only for students

of international relations but also for policymakers and practitioners, constantly to question our mental assumptions about a given subject. As such, it raises questions and stimulates a mode of thinking about the role of force in international relations whose relevance goes far beyond the historical period with which this book is principally concerned.

This process of questioning, however, should never become a dry or clever intellectual exercise. The subject matter is far too important for that. And herein lies, perhaps, the deeper explanation for the appeal of Windsor's original lectures and the legendary status they acquired among a generation of students. It also explains why *Strategic Thinking* is such an absorbing read. Windsor was deeply and genuinely engaged by problems of war and peace in the nuclear age, and his passion shone through in his lectures and his interactions with students. The concluding paragraph in this book fittingly captures Windsor's appeal, and its inclusion here will hopefully stimulate the reader to start from the beginning, read through it all, and think afresh about the problems of war and peace:

> The trouble with strategic thinking is that it was too optimistic. Many of its proponents attempted to cling to that optimism even in the face of disaster. In U.S. political discourse, for example, the horrors of the Vietnam War have been treated not in the obvious terms of tragedy—hubris, retribution, and expiation—but as a "syndrome" that had to be "got over." The Gulf War, and the much-vaunted expectations of a "New World Order" that followed from it, provided indications enough that such optimism remained in place. But its opposite is increasingly necessary: not pessimism but a proper sense of the tragic—starting with the assumption not that war is abnormal but that peace is difficult to achieve. If that becomes the future orientation of strategic thought, strategic assumptions can no longer provide a quick-fix solution to the tragic nature of human existence in international society. Instead, the understanding of tragedy can still be what, from the composition of the very earliest tragedies, it was meant to be: an act of liberation.

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Notes

1. Alistair Buchan and Philip Windsor, *Arms and Stability in Europe* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963).

2. Philip Windsor, *Germany and the Western Alliance: Lessons from the 1980 Crises,* Adelphi Paper no. 170 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

3. Set against the "strategic studies" literature to which *Strategic Thinking* directly or indirectly refers, one is reminded of Geoffrey Hawthorn's review of Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism,* which he considered to be "of a far finer quality than almost all of that with which it deals."

Preface

This book is intended to introduce those who wish to understand the development of strategic thought during the period of the Cold War to some of its principal features—whether its readers are students of international relations or interested members of the public who have no specialized knowledge of the subject. It seeks as far as possible to avoid the technicalities of deterrence theory, the arcana of arms control, and the details of political wrangling between East and West. Instead, it tries to examine, and in part account for, the evolution of an extraordinary set of forms of thought, which many people, including me, took for granted for a very long time. Perhaps the moment has come for one to be able to sit back, reexamine them, and question their influence and the validity of their assumptions. This is what I have tried to do.

I have been encouraged in this attempt by many friends and colleagues, three of whom in particular I would like to thank. Leon Mangassarian was exceptionally helpful in reminding me of what I had said when holding forth on previous occasions, and in tracking down allusions that I could no longer remember. Spyros Economides gave of his time and energy, even when very busy, in many friendly discussions and in helping me to ascertain sources.

My biggest debt is to Kim Gale. The old saying "without whose help this book could never have been written" is literally true in this case. Not only did she type the entire manuscript, but she also kept me going when I was inclined to flag. In the words of Robert Graves, she "sweated out the whole damned term, bowed stiffly and went free."

—Philip Windsor

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The Autonomy of Strategy in the Nuclear Age

There are two ways of bringing the nuclear age to an end. One is with a bang. The other is far from being a whimper. The first is to fight an all-out nuclear war, which would terminate history itself. The second is to make the possession of nuclear weapons irrelevant to the conduct of relations between states and peoples. It is just possible that this is beginning to happen—that humanity might be witnessing the beginning of the end of the nuclear age. It is a consideration that will be addressed later in this book. *Strategic Thinking* is being written, however, with one particular assumption in mind, which is that it is now possible to stand back and look at the nuclear age as a particular historical epoch with certain defining characteristics of its own. It was the age in which a particular mode of strategic thinking dominated the conduct of international affairs.

Three of the historical catchphrases of the nuclear age epitomize that dominance. First, "the Cold War." What this suggests is the reversal of the Clausewitzian dictum, that war was the continuation of politics by other means: politics had now become the continuation of war by all other means available. At the same time, however, politics conducted in such a manner depended on an incessant preparation for war itself, which helps to explain the second catchphrase: "the superpowers." What are superpowers? They are not necessarily empires: the Soviet Union was one, but the United States was not, in anything more than a metaphorical sense. They are not necessarily global powers: the United States was the preeminent global power at the end of World War II, but the Soviet Union did not develop any real global reach until nearly twenty years later; and indeed for much of that period Britain

and France were far more active global powers than the USSR, though superpowers they were not. Nor do superpowers need to possess advanced and sophisticated economies: it was apparent to most of the rest of the world long before it became obvious to the peoples of the Soviet Union that their state was, economically speaking, remarkably backward.

What distinguishes a superpower from the rest is its ability to destroy the society of an enemy state, and eventually perhaps to wipe out the world. It has no other attributes. Its role in history and in international society is based on its ability to negate both; it is dangerous. Yet it is on the relations between two such entities that other states were bound to depend when charting or modifying their own policies and their own relations with each other. As the commanders of ships might have to, when steering a course in a busy channel between two monstrous icebergs. And that raises the third catchphrase, though it is one more frequently found in academic writing than in popular speech: "bipolarity."

The multiple complications of the international system that had prevailed before World War II were now thought to have been brutally simplified by a structure in which there were only two poles of attraction or repulsion: Washington and Moscow. The fact that this wasn't true at all, that China (after 1958) explicitly rejected any part in such a system, that the Non-Aligned Movement represented precisely an attempt to provide an alternative framework of international activity, only seemed for many years to demonstrate the all-powerful embrace of the bipolarity from which weaker states were struggling (and failing) to secede. It is frequently the case, and not only in academic writing, that contrary evidence is taken as proof of the original contention. There is no limit to the capacity of people to believe what they know isn't true.

Phrases such as those mentioned here have become so familiar that it must appear banal in the extreme to discuss the nuclear age in such terms. But one might say in retrospect that they represent the most astonishing feature of international relations in the period since 1945: the emergence of strategic considerations as the decisive force in the conduct of the politics of states and blocs. In particular, the imperatives of nuclear deterrence seemed to acquire not only a political dynamic but also an apparent intellectual cohesion of their own, and to provide, as it were, a set of rules that came to dominate the conduct of strategy, which in turn set the agenda for the conduct of international politics.

Certainly there were intellectual figures who challenged such assumptions, as for example Karl Jaspers in Germany, Raymond Aron in France, and Bertrand Russell in Britain. The fact that they could all do