



jeder militärische Triumph erweist
sich in Wahrheit als Niederlage aller Beteiligten.

- Carl von Clausewitz -

Strategic Surprise and the Geopolitical Future of the World

military-Earth thinking notebook

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To achieve strategic surprise, Clausewitz insists on the importance of speed and discretion. Faced with the opacity of future events, we have to admit that not only do we know little about what is going to happen, but also that no one really knows what is happening at the moment experienced. The financial crisis is, unfortunately, the most perfect and implacable illustration of this.

Strategic surprise, one of the most common leitmotifs in the art of warfare, can be understood as the production of an intentional event, aiming, as its name suggests, to surprise, strike a space little or badly anticipated and disarm the opponent. This notion, which is as old as the art of warfare, has in recent years experienced a clear revival of interest, but it overlaps with the realities of the world of war. It is a concept as old as the art of warfare, which has been enjoying a marked revival in recent years, but it is one that cuts across realities as diverse and varied as the economy, society and, for some, even ecology, and combines the notions of vulnerability, risk and threat.

To produce a strategic surprise, Clausewitz insists on speed and discretion. But what about the ability to withstand an adverse strategic surprise or to anticipate it? It is this capacity to anticipate surprise, i.e. the capacity to detect weak signals and to analyse them, that is the subject of this (very) short essay.

By definition, the earlier the signal, the weaker it is. The more time goes by, the more the likelihood of what it tends to indicate becomes clearer, and the more the concordance will emerge with the multiplication of the signals, which then become explicit. But, in reality, the signal is weak only in the face of distracted or non-existent attention, of a light or dilatory interpretation.

Talking about the future of the world also means keeping in mind that we are living at the end of a period of historical transition coupled with the end of a historical age, which implies an acceleration, a "leap" in history. In fact, history is a dynamic, not a logic. In these

periods of "leap", history is unpredictable, it switches from one fracture to another.

Yet we learn and analyse exclusively by repetition, without wanting to tackle what has never happened. Hence the overestimation of certain events, such as September 11. In reality, in geopolitics, what we do not know matters more than what we know. Wars are unpredictable, as we all know. And we act as if we did not know that...

When faced with the course of events, we must therefore measure the complexity of the facts. On the one hand, we need to be critical of both the factual overinformation of our time and the expertise of authority. On the other hand, we must guard against the pretension of knowing and understanding everything; against the illusion of knowledge that evaluates the future according to the previous illusion. Too often, the problem is not the nature of events, but the way they are perceived. What we know not only does not reflect the whole reality, but leads us to focus on simple segments that we generalize to what we do not know, facilitated by the sustained urgency of the media obstructing all vision.

Moreover, we observe every sequence of events in an explanatory and logical way, attributing to each event a link of cause, of fact, of consequences, making it possible to give meaning and thus increase our feeling (a very comforting one) of understanding the ordering of the world. We think the world is logical when it seems more and more random... We prefer to be wrong precisely rather than approximately right. In short, we have to admit, faced with the opacity of future events, that not only do we know little about what is going to happen, but also that no one really knows what is happening today. The financial crisis being, unfortunately, the most perfect and implacable illustration of this.

In fact, I cannot manage to know exactly what the unknown is by definition. Nevertheless, I can, and must, try to predict how this unknown could affect me so that I can anticipate my decisions. I know, therefore, with absolute certainty, that the next story will be marked by a highly improbable event; but I must also admit that I do not know precisely what it will be.

Therefore, anticipating strategic surprise and preventing risks of a strategic nature consists first and foremost in monitoring geopolitical developments in a precise and detailed manner, using prospective analysis in order to apprehend potential threats. To this end, geostrategic monitoring units must be set up that are capable of continuously assessing future trends, 24 hours a day, by country and geographical area, by threats and strategic themes. Enlighten the present, to enlighten the future and thus inform decision-making, which involves a long and expert process.

It is easy to see that, in the current environment, the management of the unexpected must become an active policy of managers and companies alike. And in the face of the illusion of precise and detailed knowledge of the future, to overcome strategic surprise, it is advisable first of all to never rule out a hypothesis, however disturbing it may be. In 2001, who was planning to deploy Western forces in Afghanistan? No French or American parliamentary report between 1991 and 2001 envisaged such a theatre of deployment. What is more, Colin Powell, then future Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs under the Bush presidency, during his hearing before Congress, did not once cite this country as a source of potential problems. American naivety? The French Directorate of Military Intelligence closes its Afghan affairs office on the eve of September 11, 2001?

In fact, as Pierre DAC said: "we must not rely on things that cannot happen, because it is precisely those things that happen..."

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