

The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West

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Nathaniel L. Moir

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BOOK REVIEW

The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West, by David Kilcullen, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 325 pp., \$27.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780190265687

At Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri on March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a speech, “The Sinews of Peace,” that gained renown for its reference to the “Iron Curtain.”¹ In it, the former Prime Minister described the task before the United States and its allies: “Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by merely waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement.” Churchill proposed addressing these challenges by rebuilding strong alliances in adherence to the principles of cooperation found in the United Nations Charter.² Should such unity fail, he warned, “and if these all-important years are allowed to slip away then indeed catastrophe may overwhelm us.” The speech, among many, was perceived as “the first widely recognized clarion call” to mark the beginning of the Cold War.³ Today, another global contest has been brewing for some time, one that is tempting to compare with the Cold War. Yet, whether contemporary great-power resurgence constitutes a second bi-polar competition is a debate that looms large in popular and scholarly discourse.⁴ On one side, a Cold War 2.0 is evident.⁵ In opposition, there is significant resistance to framing the economic and political conflict between the United States and China as a new Cold War.⁶

As Joseph Nye explains, “recent administration speeches that squeeze China into a Cold War ideological framework misrepresent the real strategic challenge we face.”⁷ Cold War metaphors, Nye argues, mislead us by making competition worse and cooperation less likely. Similarly, Stephen Walt made his position on the debate abundantly clear in a March 2018 *Foreign Policy* article entitled “I knew the Cold War. This is No Cold War.”⁸ Yet, despite the resistance to a new Cold War, let alone describing it as such, the overwhelming attention given to political conflicts between China and the United States—ranging from trade, climate, human rights and others—all indicate that a new great power competition has returned in a real way.

Even as early as 2011, Aaron Friedberg and Henry Kissinger made this case when they analyzed the cultural, economic, and historical disparities between China and the United States.⁹ While the “Frenimity” between the U.S. and China may have etched deeper divisions between them, it remains to be seen whether a better descriptive framework emerges to depict the current strategic environment.¹⁰ If this new competition is not “Cold War 2.0,” then what is it?

David Kilcullen, a professor at the University of New South Wales, contributes to this debate by assessing resurging state and non-state competitors and the challenges they pose to the United States-led world order. While the emerging security environment might not be a new Cold War, Kilcullen contends it may be more dangerous than in the past. Misperceptions and growing distrust increase the potential for accidents, let alone miscalculations and other problems created by human error. Risks are many and severe, and they also exist at a time when global cooperation and alliances are comparatively fragile to those in place before 2016. All too often, unfortunately, global leaders’ poor decision-making over the last several years has exacerbated an already dangerous world and Kilcullen, in *The Dragons and the Snakes*, recounts and illuminates this evolving security environment. The colorful title is taken from an analogy former CIA-Director James Woolsey made in 1993 to describe threats posed by non-state (Snakes) and state actors (Dragons). (3) While the metaphor may initially come across as hyperbolic, Kilcullen’s typology is pragmatic and convincingly developed.

The Dragons, specifically Russia and China, weakened toward the end of the Cold War but, since the new millennium began, they have returned with renewed capacities. China, in particular, benefited from membership in the World Trade Organization on December 11, 2001.¹¹ While conceding to demands liberalizing its service and financial sectors, and to permitting foreign investment and easing

restrictions on telecommunications, China and its people have benefitted from massive economic growth averaging almost 10% a year between 1980 and 2018.¹² Yet, instead of a Marxist-Leninist orientation, China now exploits a form of Market-Leninist mercantilism while working within a conflicted world order. China's approach is certainly contentious, particularly because of its Belt and Road Initiative which is often perceived as financially extractive and as degrading of environments in which development occurs. Critics have gone so far as to accuse China of deliberately destroying the current world order and the Belt and Road Initiative is often regarded as a sprawling tool enabling a global reorientation that benefits China while disadvantaging others.¹³ It might not be a new Cold War, but the incorporation of China into institutions such as the World Trade Organization and others, is shifting the global configuration of power in powerful ways that is ongoing and difficult to pin down.

Meanwhile, these dragons have retained not only the old-fashioned fire-breathing strategies found in nuclear competition and deterrence, they have also refined low-threshold competition as a state strategy. Through integrating propaganda techniques employed during the Cold War with social media's omnipresent reach, contemporary "dragons" utilize sets of evolving kinetic and non-kinetic approaches found in offensive cyber operations, psychological operations, and other covert activities. Known in Russia as "active measures" (*aktivnyye meropriatia*), historian Calder Walton has described the contemporary relevance of analyzing such revitalized Russian tradecraft. In Walton's view, "the aim here (regarding active measures) was to influence the course of world events in favor of the Soviet Union, while discrediting and undermining the influence of the United States, termed the "Main Adversary."¹⁴ As Walton and other Applied Historians demonstrate, history may illuminate contemporary threat assessments of the security environment. History is replete with examples demonstrating how authoritarian states locate and manipulate weaknesses in liberal-oriented alliances and institutions. Kilcullen's integration of history and his innovative inquiry—as developed through the Dragon-Snakes framework—positively advances contemporary assessments by showing how things have changed since the Cold War.

In Kilcullen's view, Woolsey's insights were centered on the complacency of U.S. leadership and its unfocused foreign policy after the Gulf War in 1991. Additionally, as Robert Gates argues in *Exercise of Power*, an overreliance on militarized solutions, along with insufficiently supported nonmilitary capacities, has also contributed to the United States' weakening position and many of its mistakes after the Cold War.¹⁵ In fact, the U.S. military's technological advantages contributed to a flawed vision of future warfare, while the so-called "Peace Dividend" revealed an over optimistic assumption that the post-Cold War environment would be less conflict riven.¹⁶ As a geopolitical analyst, Kilcullen analyzes how U.S. foreign policy has struggled to adapt as other nation states and non-state actors utilized dynamic changes in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technological innovations to their advantage. The distractions created from the disastrous decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent strategic errors associated with Coalition Provisional Authority's decisions One and Two—which led to the elimination of the Ba'ath Party and the disbanding of the Iraqi army shortly after the invasion—contributed to monumental problems for the United States.¹⁷ Of course, the price Iraqis paid for decisions made by George W. Bush and his neoconservative administration far exceeded those rung up by American military personnel on behalf of the American public.

The broad utility of Kilcullen's book, however, is not merely in revisiting a recent and painful past. Rather, it consists in how the still emerging competition, created by state and non-state actors, informs and interacts with persistent threats of terrorism and insurgency that also require costly-levels of preparedness. Kilcullen's thesis is straightforward: "State and nonstate actors have learned from each other so that today many of the most effective techniques used by nonstate armed groups draw on ideas or technologies acquired from states, while many successful state strategies are copied from nonstate groups." In other words, "The snakes have learned to fight like dragons, and the dragons now fight like snakes" (64). This evocative metaphor forms an effective vehicle for the book's argument, which is broken into two parts.

The Snakes

The first component of Kilcullen's thesis uses ecological and biological modeling to describe how "snakes"—nonstate actors—fight. While this "organic" methodology appeared in Kilcullen's earlier work; *The Dragons and The Snakes* takes a further evolutionary step in this descriptive approach. In his earlier analyses of insurgent and terrorists' ability to adapt, as found in his 2006 work on the Accidental Guerrilla Syndrome, adaptation formed a cyclic process generating networks of fighters through manipulation of social and political grievances.¹⁸ *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (2012) marked another step in Kilcullen's thought as he furthered a biological/ecological-oriented analytical framework for assessing conflict as an ecosystem.¹⁹ Ecological modeling, particularly as relevant to low-level urban warfare associated with criminal activity, including human and narco-trafficking, epitomized Kilcullen's analytical style in these earlier books.

In one illustrative example from *Out of the Mountains*, Kilcullen described how the violence afflicting the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras formed a "conflict ecosystem." Fed by an influx of independent variables including external influence and global demand for narcotics, and other variables that included historic rivalries among gangs, San Pedro Sula still embodies a convergence of problems. As a model, San Pedro Sula functioned as an effective framework for one case among the many found examples of conflict ecosystems he assessed when his book appeared in 2012. Through construing cities as organic structures, rather than simply concrete places, Kilcullen showed how ecological modeling vividly depicted the health or degeneracy of a city. This approach to analyzing conflict zones remains illuminating today. The communication networks available in even the poorest of cities now makes all cities "smart" in ways that were not possible in past decades. The convergence of increased urbanization, littoralization, globalization, and informational connectivity, moreover, are difficult to unravel when knotted together so thinking of cities as organic entities provided a useful analogy. Readers familiar with Mike Davis' scholarship on urbanization and Thomas Homer-Dixon's analysis of linkages between violence and environmental pressures may also find Kilcullen's ecological framework compelling.²⁰

In his new book, however, Kilcullen provides greater concentration on *what* nonstate actors have learned from conflicts, particularly from war in Iraq between 2003–2012. As an example, he investigates how Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—after evolving into the Islamic State—applied lessons learned from earlier conflict as the Islamic State strove to build its caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The ways in which non-state actors utilized communications technology found in encrypted applications, such as Telegram Messenger, shows how non-state actors increasingly rely on technology previously unimaginable for them to access before such cost-free apps existed. When the Islamic State sought out cheap, accessible, and totally encrypted comms, Telegram Messenger was an easy and evolutionary, even revolutionary, tool to adopt. More importantly, the Islamic State could employ it safe in the knowledge that it was not vulnerable to state-based military signal interception.

After Telegram Messenger was launched in 2013, it quickly replaced Facebook, Twitter, and other less secure apps in the Islamic States' toolkit. By 2017, Telegram's speed and security—with its almost impregnable end-to-end encryption—provided the Islamic State with an accessible and cheap communication platform that exceeded the out-moded frequency hopping security found in U.S. military platforms. As Ahmet Yayla and Anne Speckhard have shown, along with Craig Whiteside in a similar mode of analysis, the Islamic State simply capitalized on a sophisticated set of communication tools that others made and that outperformed government-made systems and cost next to nothing in comparison.²¹ In the context of Kilcullen's work, moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that Telegram was created by Nikolai and Pavel Durov, the creators of the Russian social-media platform VK.²² The Durovs themselves became targets of the Russian government because of Telegram Messenger's importance among Russian and Ukrainian non-state actors fighting Russian authoritarianism. In the case of the Islamic State, however, it was not just a bunch of killer apps that contributed to their success. Large and powerful weapon systems captured from the Iraqi Army contributed the conventional and literal punch the Islamic State required to confront its adversaries.²³

The dragons

The second component of Kilcullen's thesis explores the state-based "dragons" that challenge the unipolar world order led by the United States. In convincing analysis of Russia's approach to conflict and through his related study of Chinese methods, Kilcullen pays particular attention to the potential for miscalculation arising from an escalatory security dilemma in both Europe and East Asia. Readers familiar with Robert Jervis' "Spiral Model" will find that Kilcullen convincingly contextualizes a new iteration or, more accurately, a variation on this element of the security dilemma.²⁴ Given the resurgent great power geopolitical competition between the United States and China, and with potential hotspots in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea, the dilemma phenomenon Jervis did so much to illuminate contributes a background for the contemporary competition Kilcullen describes.

Turning to Russia, Kilcullen frames its decades-long conflict with the United States using what he terms "liminal warfare." This anthropological concept invokes the ambiguous thresholds that stressed societies experience when undergoing transformation in response to internal and external challenges. Liminal warfare denotes Russia's ability to ride along an edge of conflict and it does this through military-like operations that do not provoke an open military response by the United States: non-intervention in response to Russia's incursion on Crimea in 2014 is one example. Russia's strategy centers, therefore, on conduct along a threshold that 1.) is difficult to detect through Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and 2.) creates cognitive dissonance concerning the cost and benefits of potential intervention to contain it. In the first Cold War, Russia learned that it could get away with pulling countries such as Czechoslovakia into the Soviet Orbit in 1948 without initiating World War III. Taking over West Berlin, in contrast, had different strategic value that seriously risked war if pursued with too much zest. Refinements in developing and implementing "Liminal Warfare" enables Russia to achieve contemporary core political objectives without creating political pressures that might potentially trigger a kinetic military reaction or unleash severe, and mostly American-initiated, economic sanctions. In using liminal warfare, the trick is to maintain deniability of action or, at least, plausible deniability in the face of public allegations.

Kilcullen offers case studies from Russia's operations in Georgia in August 2008 and Crimea in 2014 to demonstrate how state-actors use liminal approaches to gain advantages while avoiding larger-scale conflict. The chapter is theoretically rich, provocative, and demonstrates that "while the West considers these nonmilitary measures to be ways of avoiding war, Russia considers them part of war" (162). In certain respects, Kilcullen's use of liminal advances a similar concept of "gray areas" that security studies specialists will recognize. As Kilcullen employs his term, however, it is not entirely clear how his use of liminal is distinct from Henry Kissinger's idea of "gray areas" used to describe a similar shadowy attempt to subvert the current security environment. In his section on Russia, it would have been interesting to know more about Kilcullen's perspective concerning how "gray areas" have changed since Kissinger first unveiled the concept in the April 1955 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.²⁵

With respect to China, Kilcullen presents an analytical framework that he calls "Conceptual Envelopment." This approach entails widening the very definition of warfare by taking into account "a situation in which an adversary's conception of war becomes so much broader than our own" (175). As he points out, China's broadening understanding and prosecution of wider conceptions of warfare creates an array of problems for western analysts. If an American intelligence analyst or decision-maker fails to recognize how Chinese strategy depends on broadening competition—into trade, communication technology, computing, and others with which the analyst or decision-maker may be unfamiliar—then the potential for misperceiving adversarial intent is increased.

The fight over creating and implementing 5 G networks is an example of "conceptual envelopment" that western analysts certainly recognize, but are there other areas of "conceptual envelopment" that go unnoticed and that may form a catalyst for conflict? What about Chinese development and widespread use of digital currency that far outpaces the U.S. government's ability to harness private sector innovation to effectively compete with Alibaba's approach that integrates a bank, marketplace,

and search engine “all in one?”²⁶ Alibaba’s financial services, for example, includes the Yu’e Bao Fund which, in 2014, was the fourth largest global Money-Market Fund.²⁷ When combined with military, economic, and political competition, larger structural political stress may create a security dilemma that is dangerously novel and surprising. In terms of global health, what kind of dilemmas and conflicts might ensue when the next pandemic inevitably comes around?

The type of “Conceptual Envelopment” Kilcullen considers has a potentially global reach. Assessing structural pressures, in addition to domestic and external challenges, are therefore critical to consider. As Stephen Walt points out, too many western commentators look to domestic politics rather than the structural and strategic landscape in their analysis of rising tensions between the United States and China.²⁸ This criticism does not seem to apply to the global outlook found in Kilcullen’s work. Instead, Kilcullen acknowledges domestic constraints as well as the bigger picture. Moreover, he balances them with a broader strategic landscape Walt would possibly find plausible and constructive.

Kilcullen’s use of conceptual envelopment, however, falls short in places. The most puzzling omission concerns the minimal attention he gives to the idea of *shashoujian*, the Assassin’s Mace. The conceptual approach of “The Assassin’s Mace”—far more a series of asymmetric methods than a set of matériel equipment—revolves around finding ways to neutralize American strengths and to manipulate and exploit American weaknesses. China analyst, Michael Pillsbury’s study of asymmetric warfare, found in chapter seven, “The Assassin’s Mace” of *The Hundred Year Marathon*, is a topic Kilcullen seems to build upon but that he only references briefly.²⁹ The approach China has taken for years, and with which the United States currently and will contend in the future, is relevant to strategic defense cost-benefit planning. According to Pillsbury, “The Assassination Mace’s weapons are far less expensive than the weapons they destroy.”³⁰

This is evident in a cost comparison between Chinese “Carrier-Killer” Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) missiles (possibly 21 million USD per unit) in relation to the United States’ three planned Ford Class aircraft carriers, priced at almost 13 USD billion each.³¹ These “floating mountains of gold,” let alone the existing Nimitz-class carriers around which the United States Navy’s fleets are currently built, certainly project power. However, these massive ships’ capabilities are hemmed in—despite the incredible innovations this class of carriers possess over earlier classes—because A2/AD missiles seriously challenge U.S. Naval power projection. A similar assessment could be made of the F-35 Lightning II (at a price of almost 78 million USD per unit in Lot 14) and the KC-135 Stratotanker (at almost 40 million USD per unit) on which the F-35A relies to push past its 2,200-kilometer range.³² The cost-benefits associated with humans piloting such expensive aircraft are dwindling. And they are dwindling about as fast as human piloted flight took off before World War I and during the inter-war era.

More broadly, the sole reference Kilcullen makes to the Assassin’s Mace is that it forms a type of “trump-card” weapon system. The Assassin’s Mace, however, is not necessarily a weapon system, rather it is an approach that in some respects mirrors Kilcullen’s “Conceptual Envelopment” idea. According to Michael Pillsbury, the Assassin’s Mace is a framework through which China works toward global dominance. After the Cold War, according to Pillsbury, “America saw conflict only through the lens of military means, instead of the broader strategic picture encouraged by ancient Chinese thinkers who emphasized intelligence, economics, and law.”³³ A2/AD missiles embody such a convergence between economics and military strength, especially when they are effectively developed to target an aircraft carrier that costs 13 USD billion per unit. Kilcullen appears to mirror Pillsbury’s thought on this point but uses different terminology. In Pillsbury’s view, the concept of the Assassin’s Mace “revolves around finding ways to exploit perceived American weaknesses and neutralize American strengths.”³⁴ If Pillsbury’s concept of the Assassin’s Mace matches Kilcullen’s use “conceptual envelopment,” or if the two ideas are different, it would have been helpful for Kilcullen to make this distinction.

Kilcullen’s analysis is dynamic, yet it also builds upon other intellectual precedents found in the Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment. Russian asymmetric approaches to conflict that are below detection threshold, the method discussed earlier as “Liminal Warfare,” is not entirely new.

Before the Soviet Union dissolved, Andrew Marshall and the Office of Net Assessment (ONI) he led anticipated changes in the security environment that accounted for a rising China, Russian post-Cold War adaptation, A2/AD systems, and multidimensional warfare which Multi-Domain Operations are designed to confront.³⁵ A careful reading of Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts' book, *The Last Warrior*, an analysis of Andrew Marshall and his accomplishments with the thinkers on the ONI staff, illuminates the problems Kilcullen also engages.³⁶ It is surprising, therefore, that Kilcullen does not directly discuss the Office of Net Assessment's analyses of asymmetric warfare. This is significant because the call for greater understanding of Russian and Chinese approaches to conflict have been around for quite some time. Aaron Friedberg analyzed and accurately predicted most of China's economic, political, and military advancements and he foresaw growing competition with the United States almost a decade ago.³⁷ While Kilcullen looks at adaptation and technological innovation in an invigorating way, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint exactly what is new about it.

Navigating a world of snakes and dragons

Despite these criticisms, *The Dragons and the Snakes* is an incisive analysis of contemporary threats and challenges facing the United States and its allies. Ongoing developments can make for gloomy reading. Yet, one positive feature found in Kilcullen's scholarship is his enduring search for solutions. In his concluding chapter, "Ebb Tide of the West," for example, he points out that several potential strategies exist that might favorably position the United States in the decades ahead. Among these options, Kilcullen convincingly argues that doubling down on current defense planning—such as building Ford-class aircraft carriers that are "range obsolete" in contrast to Chinese A2/AD capacity—is strategically myopic. In a supporting view, Christian Brose argued that the political demand for massively expensive defense legacy systems fails to engage with the reality of comparatively cheaper hypersonic and aircraft carrier killers embodied in the Chinese Military's DF-21 and DF-26 ballistic missiles.³⁸


Kilcullen acknowledges that the United States could absorb the pitfalls of decreasing influence and try to make the best of things. But this, he understandably cautions, is deeply problematic. Instead, he recommends an option that appears inspired by a version of "Offshore Balancing" aligned with strategy advocated by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. This is a perspective that shared many similarities with Van Jackson's strategic vision supporting "Forward Balancing."³⁹ Like Mearsheimer, Walt, and Jackson, Kilcullen envisions a type of realist-oriented strategic flexibility that relies on strong alliances, wise decision-making, and a careful balance between restraint and intervention that may be required but only out of dire-necessity. The overarching goal of this approach is to protect U.S. and allied security interests rather than creating more problems that might jeopardize a collective future for the planet and its inhabitants. In many respects, the wisdom and realism Winston Churchill advocated in his 1946 speech, the "Sinews of Peace," with its focus on the importance of allies, may come to mind. Churchill, one may be certain, would not be surprised to know how his comments continue to resonate today. For now, it is at least reassuring to know that formidable thinkers, such as Kilcullen and others, are around to support and articulate a realist approach to restraint and wiser decision-making in the face of a dangerous security environment. In that task, the effort required to achieve peaceful competition can use all the help and inspiration it can get.

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Nathaniel L. Moir
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
 nmoir@hks.harvard.edu

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