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Strategic Insights: Revolutionary Change Is Coming to Strategic Leadership

December 19, 2017 | Dr. Steven Metz

Clausewitz famously observed that war has an enduring nature and a changing character that evolves over time as technology, society, economics, and politics shift. This observation also applies to strategic leadership: it too has an enduring nature and a changing character.

The enduring nature manifests itself as characteristics that define a skilled strategic leader across history including: the ability to discern and distill vital information and ideas from complexity and background noise; effective and timely adaptability and creativity; steadiness under pressure; clarity in communication; and a solid ethical foundation. From the warrior kings of the earliest civilizations through the masters of 20th-century industrial war, to the armed conflict of the future, these characteristics are important.

At the same time, though, trends in the global security environment and the domestic political, social, and economic system are changing the character of strategic leadership. Take, for instance, the broad and historic decline of authority and authority structures. In the United States, the military has retained its standing among the public, but many other institutions of authority—perhaps even most of them—have seen a significant erosion of respect and influence. Structures of authority like the national media, Congress, the Presidency, and even universities are experiencing this. In other parts of the world, the erosion of authority structures weakens governments. The Arab Spring may be the starkest example of this, but the phenomenon has spread to most regions of the world with young democracies particularly vulnerable. The result is a revival of authoritarianism.

The profusion of information drives this erosion of authority both within the United States and abroad, in part by making the institutions of authority transparent to a greater degree than ever before. In all likelihood, politicians are no more corrupt and the media no more error prone than in the past, but now their transgressions or failures are visible. At the same time, the profusion of information makes it easier for people to find alternative explanations to the ones offered by authority institutions. No longer does the American public depend on elected officials, three big television networks, and a few national newspapers and magazines to understand political events. Instead, the public has access to literally thousands of alternative sources of information—many of which have found that it is more profitable to take on the trappings of entertainment rather than the stodgy approach of mainstream media—but often cannot assess the validity of the information or its sources.

Today most people consume information that reflects their preexisting beliefs rather than the authority of the source and its methods of obtaining, selecting, and vetting information. The result is incendiary hyperpartisanship. Most people only consume the information that reflects their ideological predilections without having to consider or grapple with different perspectives, living in what is often labeled an information bubble. Pundits and people who might be called “infotainers” define and shape the political agenda more than elected officials. The result is an

unwillingness to compromise or cooperate across partisan boundaries. As a recent Pew study found, “What is striking is how little common ground there is among partisans today.”¹

There is little sign that this hyperpartisanship will subside given that it is structural rather than something the political leaders and opinion shapers can simply choose to resist. For strategic leaders, this means that long-range planning and programming will be extraordinarily difficult since there will be no predictability in defense spending. It also means that protracted operations that cross multiple presidential administrations will be nearly impossible. Every time a different party takes control of The White House, it may feel compelled to reverse the policies of its predecessor. This might force strategic leaders to avoid operations likely to cross multiple administrations, instead recommending suboptimal options that can be undertaken in one presidential term.

Admittedly, the widespread erosion of authority is not unprecedented. It has happened many times in history, most recently in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. However, this particular wave is the most dramatic and powerful ever. This means at least two things for the U.S. military. First, state weakness and collapse with its ensuing instability around the world will remain pervasive. This will create persistent conflicts and compel the United States to decide once again whether friendly dictators—potentially repressive ones—are suitable security partners. Second, there is a possibility that the military itself will be swept up in the broad erosion of authority. This would have significant effects on order and discipline within the services and change the way strategic leaders advise policymakers. As the character of strategic leadership changes, so too must civil-military relations.

Information technology is undercutting traditional notions of operational security and force protection as well. Strategic leaders—and commanders at all levels—now must assume that their operations will be broadcast to a global audience in real time. This alters strategy and operational planning. Strategic leaders also have to grapple with the fact that their troops have online personas, which can create vulnerabilities. It is not hard to imagine a future enemy targeting the families of deployed troops. Strategic leaders would then have to decide whether it is reasonable for deployed troops to expect that the families they left behind will be better protected than the rest of the American public.

The profusion of information and the decline of authority will also make narrative shaping by strategic leaders both more important and more difficult. Narratives will be fluid with public opinion both in the United States and abroad swarming on particular themes or ideas and then moving on to something else. America’s adversaries will build resistance to U.S. policies by dynamic narrative shaping potentially influencing American policymakers. Russia’s intervention in the 2016 U.S. election and ones in other nations is only the first volley in this. At the same time, new technology will make it very hard for the public in the United States and in other countries to distinguish reality from fabrication—many commentators warn that the world has entered the “post-truth” era. This will destroy the traditional American notion of strategic communications, which is based on the belief that there is a ground truth and it ultimately will win out over lies or fabrications. Like past strategic leaders, future ones must be effective communicators, but what this means may be dramatically different.

Finally, technology, particularly autonomous systems, and artificial intelligence, will change the character of strategic leadership. Future U.S. military units may deploy with few or even no humans. Deployed forces will consist mostly or entirely of autonomous or semi-autonomous systems controlled—to the extent they are controlled by humans in real time rather than by algorithms written in advance—from afar. For strategic leaders as well as tactical

commanders, this means that the management of human fear and the preservation of force discipline will be less important than in the past. This will pose new ethical challenges. Will a military member controlling a machine thousands of miles away be more or less likely to use deadly force than one who can see the enemy? What will this mean for military strategy? Should strategic leaders offer different military advice to political leaders when they know that units can be deployed abroad without Americans dying?

These are only a few of the megatrends in the American political climate and global security environment likely to change the character of strategic leadership. The challenge for today's leaders is to grapple with this and decide what it means for the way the United States finds, develops, and rewards strategic leaders, and for the nature of the professional ethic that will guide them in the future. There will still be a need for Grants, MacArthurs, Marshalls, and Eisenhowers but they are certain to think and act very different than their predecessors.

ENDNOTES

1. Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," Pew Research Center, October 5, 2017, available from <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.

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