



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

by David Kilcullen.

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Historian David Kilcullen is an Australian expert on counterinsurgency theory and practice, having served in the Global War on Terror and written and taught about it extensively. In *The Dragons and the Snakes*, he examines trends in insurgency and great power conflict. Concentrating on “convergent evolution” or the “way in which unlike actors confronting a similar environment can come to resemble each other” (4), he shows how the dragons, China and Russia, and snakes, that is, non-state actors, have acquired and used many of the same tools and strategies to increasingly lethal effect.

The author warns that Western militaries must rethink their reliance on the “high-tech, high-precision, high-cost suite of networked systems” (6) that have failed to consistently deliver successes over the past twenty years:

The vulnerability of precision systems to inaccurate intelligence, their dependence on data and connectivity, and their irrelevance against an amorphous, cell-based enemy who blended into the physical and human terrain of a society and culture we barely understood became increasingly obvious as the [Iraq] war dragged on. (219)

Kilcullen advocates a Byzantine strategy of “long-duration sustainability” entailing the selective pursuit of certain technologies, the setting of adversaries at odds with each other, and the embrace of hybrid operations, among other approaches (238, 245).

The author believes that Western militaries, particularly that of the United States, reached their peak of power in 2003. Early on in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the failed attack on Dora Farms, where the coalition expected to find Saddam Hussein, exposed the faulty intelligence that limited the Western allies’ approach to waging war. The coalition’s apparently more successful Operation Desert Storm (1990-91) featured “unprecedented battlefield dominance” but only “within one narrowly defined conventional form of warfare” (19).

Since then the West’s technological advantage has ebbed owing to the “convergence of state and nonstate adversaries on remarkably similar operating methods, ... such as stealth, dispersion, and modularity” (1, 71). All this has occurred in an “operating environment” that has “become dramatically more crowded, cluttered, urbanized, coastal, and connected” (68).

The first half of *Dragons and Snakes* concerns non-state actors that the US military and its coalition partners have confronted in the Global War on Terror. Kilcullen demonstrates how the United States’ ability to find targets has forced snakes to learn and adapt more rapidly; in this, their diversity and autonomy were significantly pluses (51). American drone strikes in Pakistan, for example, could not conduct sufficiently “intensive targeting” to “collapse” terrorist groups. In Syria, decentralized organizations concocted a “smartphone-based precision firing system for mortars and rockets” in a kind of “democratization of lethality” (79-80, 66) that enabled them to acquire makeshift capabilities akin to those of far stronger conventional powers.

The book's second half examines how China and Russia learned to avoid competing directly with Western military power. Instead, they espoused what Kilcullen calls liminal strategies that allowed them to "ride the edge" without triggering a US response (29).

The dragons also expanded their conventional and non-conventional "playbooks" (5). Some Russian military officers, for example, advocated a "roughly 4:1 ratio of nonmilitary and military measures" (162). They developed a vertical strategy of collapsing time while "surfing the threshold of detectability" (119), capitalizing on the Western democracies' tendency to seek consensus, which slowed their reaction times (153). Instead of the US military's often-discussed OODA (observe-orient-decide-act) loop, Kilcullen offers a model of "detect-attribute, decide, mount, and launch" in which "decide" is the longest phase and "attribute" is ever more challenging (158).

By contrast, China has chosen a more horizontal strategy by creatively expanding war's boundaries. Kilcullen applies the idea of "conceptual envelopment" to explain why this development can be so destabilizing. On one hand, the West may not recognize China's actions as war-like because its own definition of war is too narrow. Hence the "blithely unaware" West may "have already lost" by the time it comprehends that it is at war. On the other hand, what the West considers "normal peacetime competition" (175) may strike the Chinese, with their different conception of war, as outright belligerence.

As with all sweeping arguments over the future of warfare, there are areas that specialists may argue over. Moreover, Kilcullen's undergirding points are not entirely new.<sup>1</sup> But his framework offers helpful insights into possible future developments and stresses the United States' need to invest in both unconventional and more novel military capabilities. In short, the West must discard its narrow view of battlefield dominance to embrace a new and "more modest" goal of preventing the dragons from dominating it (255).

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1. See, e.g., Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (NY: Morrow, 2019), with review at *MiWSR* 2020-107.