

Thinking anew as our times are new: Australian strategy in 2020

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We come together at an important moment in our nation's history. If the past few years asked us to observe a changing world, today we must make decisions which will define this decade and likely the one after. Not only in how we tackle the COVID-19 virus but how quickly and capably we can restore a focus on the even larger problems of the twenty-first century such as China and Climate Change.

These problems will tax our wallets and equipment. But more so they will tax our minds. We will need changes in both what we think, and how we think. We will be required to weight unknown and possibly unknowable issues of significance and timeframe, to balance risk and opportunities in ways we have rarely had to outside the crucible of war. These calculations will depend on a firm understanding of who we are as a people and the land on which we live.

I worry that we lack this understanding. The terrible bush fires over the summer showed gaps in our knowledge of this continent and the tools needed to protect it and ourselves. Our people were brave, our community was strong. But for too many, for too long, it was treated as just another summer burn off that old ways and old mindsets could handle.

Today's coronavirus emergency presents a similarly mixed picture. There has been serious preparation over recent decades in expectation of a crisis like this and the government has generally responded well. Yet it took us all too long to realise we faced an emergency and to shift to the new reality.

How might we gain this ability to shift our understanding? To deal with the fundamental uncertainty of a changing world and realise when a fire is not just a fire, a virus not just a virus?

To help answer this question, I take as my inspiration a man I am sure familiar to many of you, the late John Boyd, a US Air Force fighter pilot. Boyd, among the greatest strategic minds of the twentieth century, had many ideas, but in today's talk I want to draw on his well-known OODA Loop concept. I will concentrate on the first two steps, Observing and Orienting. It is for those in office to Decide and for those of you in uniform to Act.

Observe

In recent years you have no doubt sat through dozens of speeches which began by observing the world is more uncertain and more difficult than ever before. To the degree these claims have merit why is there such uncertainty?

It is not because we lack information. We have more information, from raw data to thoughtful reports than ever before. Nor is it a question of the resources for us to analyse and understand our world. Australia's intelligence community has more than tripled this century and now involves over 7'000 people. While the Department of Defence has 64'000 in uniform and

16'000 in suits. In 1938, the oft-highlighted comparison moment of uncertainty, we had only 10'000 in uniform and just 57 public servants (that's not a typo, just 57).

Today's challenge instead is trying to put this information together in ways that contribute meaningfully to our security. How can we observe that which is important, and which we must incorporate into our future world views?

One challenge is to avoid simply trying to gather together facts which support a pre-existing world view. Too many who speak about security in Asia simply include laundry lists of China's sins such as the islands in the South China Sea or camps in Xianjing as if their meaning for national strategic policy was obvious.

The observing step in the OODA loop requires an effort to search for and think about what does not fit our assumptions. Donald Trump's election in 2016 was such a disconfirming fact. It showed the US population was not as committed to being the 'indispensable nation' as Australia had hoped. It showed many resented the costs they had paid, and saw allies as debtors to D.C. rather than as friends who had banked favours. But how many of us had observed these quite visible insights about our ally before the election?

Not that we should make the unexpected the foundation of our observing efforts either. Much of the nonsense about 'black swans' (and in Australia, almost all swans are black) reflects a lack of knowledge or care for history. It is the product of statisticians who have decided that where reality cannot be captured by their models, it is reality which is at fault and impossible to know.

The Coronavirus pandemic is not an unknown or unpredictable 'black swan' event. It is one of multiple disease outbreaks this century, and human history is replete with others. It has always been a question of when, not if, such a virus would spread in our globalized world. The Chinese Communist Party knew of the outbreak in early December, the world by early January. But how well did we observe it?

Often the hardest things to observe are what seem most obvious. China has been growing for decades, and the climate has been heating up over an even longer period. What these mean for Australia is unclear. Too often when facing such vast issues, there is a temptation to import frameworks from others. Many in Australia view these issues primarily through American eyes. They worry about 'strategic competition' with China as if Australia's interest was in who was atop the global greasy pole, rather than how power and order will specifically operate in our region. Likewise Climate Change is not about global CO2 levels but how this sun burnt country can manage, mitigate and help reverse the harmful effects already occurring. It is not that we shouldn't listen to and align with others, but rather that responsibility for observing ultimately lies with us.

When I observe Australia's strategic environment, at least six issues stand out to me.

- China's slowly emerging hegemony in Asia;
- An increasingly hot and dry Australia with the potential for sea rises affecting our coasts and island neighbours;
- America's confusion over purpose and collapse of institutional capacity;
- Australia's relative economic decline in Southeast Asia;

- The disruption of power and standing which the COVID-19 pandemic will cause; and
- Australia's strengths of policy, institutions and community.

Many other concerns flow from these factors, such as the role of international institutions and law, the stability of our societies, the well-being of our neighbours, the propagation of our values, and the security of our people. We protect those things by taking our observations into the world and turning them into orientations – mental models which help us understand what matters and what we should do.

Orientation

Multiple Mental Models

For John Boyd, the Second O in the OODA loop, Orientation was by far the most important step.

His theory of victory at the tactical and strategic levels rested upon the alignment of the mental concepts we use to view the world, and the world as it actually is. The closer your alignment is and the more your opponents' alignment is out of sync, the better your chances of victory.

This is not a once-off task. The bond between how we view the world and how it really is, is always slipping. Either because of the march of time and chance, or because our adversary is trying to change it for us.

Our ability to survive and thrive according to Boyd, thus depends on our willingness to regularly break down and reconstruct the mental concepts we use in our head. To realise what is worth

observing, what elements of our old-world view still align with the new world, and to creatively re-construct a mental model that more directly aligns with reality.¹

In this way, at the tactical level a fighter pilot can create confusion in an enemy fighter and get on their six. At the strategic level, this process is fundamental to how we recognise when today's challenge is more than just a traditional summer burn off, or a nasty bug far over there.

A similar sentiment can be found in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. He argued that 'the first of all strategic questions' was the 'judgement that the statesman and commander have to make... to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature'.

That is, unless we know what is going on, we can not hope to devise a strategy against it. Boyd would probably hate the fact I just invoked the dead Prussian. He respected *On War*, but was an early critic of the canonization of Saint Carl which has taken place in western militaries. Boyd believed those who seek all answers in one book make a 'horrible mistake... you've told me your thinking hasn't proceeded beyond 1832'.

Where nature's challenges like a bush fire or virus can be difficult to interpret, human beings are downright confusing. Little wonder some sound the intellectual retreat, invoking 'black swans' to claim history only ever moves by the unexpected and unknowable. But as hard as the problem is, we must still make decisions. A foreign state which is re-arming may simply be seeking defence or buying off domestic constituents with popular spending. Or... it could be

¹ I would recommend those interested read John Boyd's 1976 essay Destruction and Creation - https://www.colonelboyd.com/s/Destruction-and-Creation_3-Sep-1976.pdf

planning for war. Good strategy requires not one fixed picture of what that state 'IS', but rather ideas of what it may look like in peace, in competition, and in war, and how we should respond to these various iterations.

Perhaps the most popular answer to this problem of uncertainty is to urge the creation of a *grand* strategy. Something that can bind all elements of national capacity together to achieve our security.

I am doubtful. Observing and orienting every single area necessary for policy in perfect coordination is simply beyond human capacity. Notions of a 'master strategist' are a myth, and a harmful one at that as Lawrence Freedman has written in *Strategy: A History*. The 20th century showed the fallacy of believing humans could understand and control a domestic economy. Why then in the 21st century do so many in the strategic community think we can manage the economy, governance, society, technology, values, cultural power and on and on and on.

The logic of grand strategy also implies we only need to get our ideas in alignment with the world once and then set-and-forget. That we just need the next George Kennan to step up and provide the recipe for our security. Many have recently auditioned for the role with proposals such as a 'The New Cold War', 'Thucydides Trap', and 'Indo-Pacific'. As stand-alone descriptions of our world, they all fall short. The world is far more interconnected and far less ideological than the Cold War. Thucydides didn't predict a trap. And the Indo-Pacific is more hope than reality.

But, if we move away from trying to look at these ideas as a singular grand guide and instead seek to carry several of them in our heads, swapping them in and out as if different lenses, then they become remarkably useful. Each of these Orientations casts a different light on what matters in our world and why. They tell us to look at different things. To think in different ways.

It when such models become fixed, when we pretend or insist there is only one grand way of looking at it, then we are at risk. As Boyd put it, 'I don't want you to have a rigid recipe. Because then the other guy's going to find out what it is. You would in a sense become predictable, and he's going to pull your pants down'.

So, to keep our pants up, we need to admit our mental models may not align with reality as they once did. Boyd teaches us to accept this and never get too attached to any of our mental models. Instead we should constantly work to observe afresh what still makes sense and what should be discarded. And in turn, to rebuild or replace our orientations so that we can rapidly Decide and Act to achieve our security.

Rather than retreat (black swans) or hubris (grand strategies), Boyd's OODA loop offers a nimble way to think about how our world is changing and how we can prepare ourselves to not only change with it, but take advantage of those changes. This is how we can better realise when a fire is not just a fire and a virus not just a virus. It offers us ways to seek peace with China while preparing for the risk of war. To deal with the myriad of problems of climate change without collapsing our economy or way of life. What then does Boyd have to teach us about Australia's current strategic predicament?

Problems in Australia's current mental models

Today, we face a clear and growing misalignment between the mental models Australia has used over the last few decades and the world as it is before us. As my colleague Stephan Frühling aptly noted in 2016 in relation to ANZUS

'The geographic scope of the 'Pacific Area' in ANZUS remains misaligned with its membership, and Australia's obligations to support US commitments under the treaty are not matched by any Australian influence on the same. Moreover, it remains uncertain how the rise of China can best be met—especially with military force.

Australia and the United States allies have not developed a strategic concept providing a politically endorsed, joint approach to the use of force.

After having spent the last few months living in Washington D.C, I would put it even more strongly. There is a fundamental lack of understanding by Americans about Australia, by Australians about America, and by both of our nations about the kind of world we face.

COVID will exacerbate all of these. Even if the health effects are contained in a few months, and the economic effects within a year or two, world politics is likely to change considerably. The trend of the last decade, towards more regional, inward-looking and zero-sum politics is likely to exacerbate, while many global institutions have proven incapable or corrupted.

Rather than face up to this slipping alignment, too many of our elites and leaders in recent years have relied on tired old mental concepts. We have favoured intellectual comfort food – hoping to re-microwave the dishes of Prime Ministers past, rather than cooking afresh with the ingredients to hand. Is it then little wonder we find the results not to our taste?

Nor is there enough diversity in the ingredients provided to our leaders. The staid bipartisanship of Australian politics, the risk averse nature of Defence and the ADF, together with the failure of my own academic profession to give strategy its due, have left Australian strategic thought as barren as the toilet paper aisle at Woolworths.

The fault is not with any one person or group here. Rather there are simply too few people in the debate and too little space for new ideas and a genuine plurality of opinions. I am heartened by new forums such as The Forge and The Cove, because I believe it is critical we hear more voices from those in uniform about how they see the world. Civ-Mil relations cannot function if only one group talks and the other acts. We need a conversation, where both sides are willing to listen.

In judging what Australia's new orientation must be, we must confront head on the fact that how we judged the success of old orientations has changed. Two examples illustrate this: The target of our strategy, and the role of values in strategy.

Australian strategy has typically been far more concerned with its allies than its adversaries. Canberra uses military force to achieve an impact in Washington rather than to deter or defeat an enemy on the battlefield. Hence why the ADF has found itself sent in, pulled out, sent back in, moved around, and rarely been given clear guidance beyond, "do us proud". And they have.

I raise this not to criticize it. It is as legitimate to fight to earn a friend as to defeat an enemy. In strategic terms, I see no problem with our past willingness to send forces to influence

Washington. But as is widely understood, this approach will be less useful for us in the future. It and other comfortable old habits will have to be re-evaluated.

We must also rethink the way we talk of values. Values certainly matter. There is no such thing as a purely rational and value-free strategic policy. Used right, values can be a force multiplier. But much of our invocation of values occurred as a way to bind our allies closer. We appealed to the sentiments of kinship with the British and to lady liberty with the Yanks.

But values are hard to turn into strategy. Especially for a country of our size. They don't neatly align with a political objective we might use military force to protect or achieve. It is difficult to prioritize and assign weight to them. In this fallen world there are too many instances of our values being broken. One way we've tried to feel some sense of progress was to support America when it undertook values-led actions such as Iraq in 2003. But that kind of action, both in support of the ally and support of the values the US thinks most important to pursue, will be far less viable or worthwhile to Australia in the future.

Models that last

So what might a successful orientation look like?

If we follow Boyd in believing we need to regularly revise and adapt our orientations, how do we avoid the trap of relativism, of anything goes? While Boyd was scornful of Clausewitz, the Prussian really was onto something on this central challenge. If our mental models at the strategic level are to be meaningful, they must identify clear political objectives we want to achieve. Only then can military means be properly aligned. Far too often the West has failed to

identify its political objectives, leading to inconclusive, everlasting wars which aim at not quite victory, not quite defeat, uncertain of just what we want.

From this, it follows we need to shake up our idea of strategy as an attempt to build a single model. Especially if this model is to be both 'grand' and involving 'whole of government' coordination. That may work in certain times, but to deal with environments like ours, with their diversity of challenges, we need a diversity of responses. We need more voices, more views, more debate, and more effort to see these ideas as different lenses that we may pick up to see the world in different ways. Some orientations are microscopes, some reading glasses, some binoculars, some telescopes.

The 'first of all strategic judgements' according to Clausewitz is about deciding what lens is right for what situation. And we need to not simply lock temporarily successful models in place, but be ready to swap them out and reach for others to suit changing circumstances. To help us see when a fire is not just a fire, a virus not just a virus.

Second, we need to think again about how to ensure our orientations towards the world match Australian interests and Australia's strategic personality. We must be much more careful in our observation, and in translating our insights into mental models that fit who we are, fit where we are and fit what we want in the world. No one can do this task for us, and it is dangerous to outsource it to another beyond our shores.

Some orientations will have more enduring significance. These are ones that go to the big challenges of our day. Pandemics are scary times, but the worst-case scenarios of Climate

Change or war with China will look far, far worse. We need ways to maintain a perspective that helps us prioritize and sort. We need to be better at saying what we won't do during peaceful times, so that we can build up the spare capacity to roll out a clear and powerful response rapidly when a crisis begins. That may mean less overseas deployments, changes in acquisition, and, as is already emerging, a stronger focus on mobilization as a core responsibility.

Orientations that last will reflect those elements of our strategic position that last. Our people, our way of life, and our geography. Our strategic thinkers must pay far more attention to the people who are to be defended and their landscape, than we have in the past. If we are prepared to listen, our geography poses vast paradoxes that we need to be able to answer. Our answers over time will change, but the tensions will not abate.

Most Australians live in the south and east of the country, yet state-based threats will likely come from the north and north-west. How much do we value the benefits of location, family and amenities against the challenges of logistics, time and distance?

We know that the defence of Australia cannot simply begin with defending Australia. We cannot wall off the beaches and hope the world backs off. But where do we draw the line to achieve the most security without overloading our capacity? We've often set it far from our shores, claiming in the words of Robert Menzies that 'peace is indivisible'. To my mind, the 2016 Defence White Paper was quietly radical in its firm boundaries of the Indo-Pacific as the outer-reach of what mattered to us. Of course, this still claims as a core interest over 30% of the world's geography for a country with 0.3% of the world's population. But it's at least an acknowledgement of limits.

Australian strategy for much of its history has regarded ourselves as an island, focusing on the sea-air gap, or expeditionary operations to achieve security. Yet we are also a continent. One of vast scope and difficulty traversing that may offer unrivalled means of deterrence. We have not done nearly enough to think of how this distance may work for us, rather than being our tyrant.

And we need finally to pay far more attention to the way others see Australia in their orientations. How do the great and powerful nations think about our continent? What do they want us to do? How might they seek to present a threat, to coerce or change our behaviour? To run through the OODA loop without paying attention to what your adversary is doing is like playing chess without looking at the other side's pieces. It simply can't work.

Conclusion

To tackle an uncertain world, two kinds of responses have been popular: The Grand Strategy which attempts to cower the unknowable, and the Black Swan which is covered by the unknowable.

Neither approach is satisfying. John Boyd, a maverick US Air Force pilot however offers us another way. Boyd's OODA loop – Observe, Orient, Decide, Act – shows how to continually attempt to think about how well our mental models align with our uncertain world, and find ways to improve our situation. The key to survival for Boyd was both quickly moving through this model, and doing so again and again. In that way, we are better aligned with reality, able to respond to challenges and able to seize advantage against those who would do us harm.

We in Australia are well placed for this kind of agility. Handling change is what democracies do best. We change and we change and we change. If a leader doesn't change we throw them out

for one who will. Authoritarians cannot change. They may have occasional tactical guile but largely they are stuck with their orientations. If those out of power challenge this orientation they are declared traitors and jailed. While those in power are unable to change orientations without risking a broader loss of confidence, rebellion and ending up on a hangman's noose. The more authoritarian the system, the less they can change in the name of alignment with reality.

Over the last two decades the new authoritarians have surprised us by seizing the initiative and pushing change. It is time for us to push back. To seek to push their mental models out of alignment, while updating ours faster and better than they can hope to manage. While there are difficult questions of money and equipment, the most important element is the strategic. Our ability to think afresh about the world before us and how we can shape it to our interest. I am reminded here of Abraham Lincoln's 1862 message to Congress:

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

Lincoln by dint of genius could think anew by himself. Today, we mere mortals can draw on tools such as John Boyd's OODA loop to help us rise to the occasion of our time. I am confident we will.

Andrew Carr - March 2020.