2022 Vernon Parker Oration

A time out of joint? Reflections on some key trends in international relations

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It is a great privilege for me to be invited to deliver the Vernon Parker Oration of the Australian Naval Institute. I am in no sense a specialist on naval affairs, but recently, I saw a new film entitled *Operation Mincemeat* which dealt with one of the most remarkable deception operations during the Second World War, when the body of a vagrant was floated ashore in Spain with a false identity and a clutch of compromising papers designed to divert attention from Sicily as the main target of the Allied invasion of southern Europe in 1943.[1] I too feel somewhat like a vagrant washed ashore clutching a few papers, but I hope that the remarks that I will share this evening serve to shed some light on a number of the troubling challenges and issues that confront our world.

A time of uncertainty

We are living, to paraphrase Hamlet, in a time out of joint. It is a time of radical uncertainty, in which not only do we not know what *will* happen, but we do not know what *might* happen. Former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously referred in 2002 to the challenge of 'unknown unknowns', and while he was ridiculed at the time for this claim, it was probably the most insightful thing he ever said, and it even provided the title for his memoirs.[2] To some degree, radical uncertainty is an endemic feature of political life, but in 2022 it seems more pressing than ever. There are six particular kinds of uncertainty which I find it useful to note, although the list is hardly exhaustive.

First, we are confronted by notable uncertainties relating to the character of the international order. Historically, international orders have been underpinned by different devices.[3] Whilst the genesis of the system of states was complex – certainly more complex than simple references to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 as its point of origin might suggest – one enduring mechanism that attracted a great deal of attention was 'balancing', directed against either power or threats. But over time, other mechanisms came into play: rules and understandings, such as those embodied in the Concert of Europe in the 19th century or the Charter of the United Nations from 1945; and nuclear deterrence in the aftermath of the development of the atom bomb.[4] These mechanisms are all still with us, but the mix between them can vary over time and space.

Second, we are also faced with striking uncertainties with respect to the foreign policies of major powers. One need only point to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 in order to appreciate how unexpected events can set off major tremors within a complex international system. Russia is indisputably a major power: a nuclear-armed state, and a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, equipped with the veto power to prevent any enforcement action being authorised against it. Its invasion of Ukraine caught other major powers largely unawares, and triggered a series of events the

consequences of which are yet to be determined and may prove far-reaching, both for individual states and peoples, and for the international system as a whole.

Third, the domestic politics of major powers give rise to a host of uncertainties. In Russia in the 1990s, there were high hopes that the political system was moving in a more democratic direction, but in the period after Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris El'tsin as president, Russian politics took a distinctly authoritarian turn, with Putin in 2022 more firmly autocratic than any leader in Moscow since Stalin's death in 1953. This was certainly a contributing factor to the invasion of Ukraine.[5] Even more worrying for Australia has been a change in the domestic politics of the United States, Australia's principal alliance partner. The deterioration in the functioning of the US political system is more deeply-rooted than many might think, and actually began before the advent to the presidency of Donald J. Trump.[6] But there is no doubt that the rise of Trump – by almost any measure the least qualified person ever to occupy the Oval Office[7] – represented a hostile takeover of the Republican Party, and in a two-party system, this has major ramifications for stability. The US is a deeply-divided society, and its future is clouded with uncertainty.

Fourth, uncertainties also arise from the pace of technological change. In a 1969 article, a distinguished scholar of international relations noted that 'No special theory is needed to account for the emergence of new types of armament from time to time: mere recognition of the possibility of major war, and the propensity to invent, which the intellectual revolution of the last three centuries has increased, lead to expectations which rather would require special explanations for new types *not* emerging'.[8] The precise character of technological innovations is intrinsically unpredictable, and there is no way of knowing exactly what weapon system might prove decisive in a future conflict. In 1918, no one foresaw the role that the atomic bomb would play in August 1945, let alone the role that drones would play in wars of the 21st century. This of course is worrying when there are long lead-times for the delivery of capital equipment, such as nuclear-propelled submarines.

Fifth, uncertainties can flow from the difficulties of gathering credible information, from the possibility of misinterpretation of what information one has, and from problems of misperception more broadly.[9] Sometimes information is fragmentary or ambiguous, and the weight attached to a particular interpretation of it can be disastrous: the July 1942 loss of the PQ17 convoy is a famous and tragic example from the naval world.[10] This is also a problem with endemic effects in the political realm: the catastrophic US misreading of the Afghan Taliban which led Washington to sign an agreement with them on 29 February 2020 is a very obvious case.[11] It is not even the case that having some scraps of information will necessarily be more useful than having none: this may *sometimes* be so, but there are other cases where fragments of information can be seriously misleading.[12]

Finally, the phenomenon of globalisation has injected notable uncertainties into the world in which we live. David Singh Grewal has argued that 'globalisation is best understood as the emergence and consolidation of transnational and international networks that link people – or groups of people, including entire countries – through the use of shared coordinating standards'.[13] What is uncertain, however, is exactly how people are linked, what coordinating standards emerge, and what the consequences might be of the processes of globalisation more broadly.[14] One particular apprehension, initially articulated long before the era of internet communications, relates to the erosion or twilight of authority. Conservatives tended

to see this in political terms, but rather more alarming is the privileging of belief over fact,[15] which has opened the door to all sorts of populist movements, with the radicalising consequences that can flow from their emergence.[16] This makes coping with dangers and challenges all the more difficult.

Dangers and challenges

The world is awash with dangers – to ordinary people, to states, and to the system of states more broadly. The following seem to me to be of particular significance, but other researchers might well compile quite a different list.

To start with, we are witnessing dangers arising from the changing character and orientations of powers. In our region, no power has focused our attention more than China. Until the second half of the 1970s, China was obviously a major state, which had tested a nuclear device in 1965 and had a population large enough to sustain significant powerhood. But it was also – in action, if not in rhetoric – an inward-looking state, preoccupied with the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution from 1965 to 1976.[17] Only with the death of Mao Zedong and the rise of Deng Xiaoping did it take a different turn, with domestic entrepreneurialism encouraged and an export orientation replacing the more collectivist system it had promoted.[18] The result was a massive shift in China's strength, and the subsequent rise of Xi Jinping to leadership combined that strength with a more forceful disposition to make an impact on the world.[19] Xi is now 68, and it is not clear what stands may be adopted by those who succeed him, but as a great power, China is here to stay.

Another danger can arise from a failure properly to recognise the interconnected character of world politics, and the ways in which actions taken in one theatre can impact on others. The United States is strangely prone to weakness in this respect, a point neatly captured in a recent article by Professor Eliot A. Cohen: 'U.S. decisions on Afghanistan, Syria, and other trouble spots were … treated as local and separable, with little apparent awareness that they would have global repercussions. It was surely no accident that Russia's annexation of Crimea followed less than a year after the Obama administration failed to enforce its supposed red-line on Syria's use of chemical weapons. Nor was it likely a coincidence that Russia invaded Ukraine following the United States' humiliating scuttle from Afghanistan'.[20] When President Biden turned his back on Afghanistan, the Russians were watching.

This points to a further challenge, namely the problem of credibility. A state may have massive power but not the manifest will to use it. This may be no bad thing in certain circumstances. As one of Shakespeare's characters put it, 'it is excellent To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant'[21] But in other circumstances it can be a serious problem. For example, in the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the *New York Times* reported that 'Mr. Biden has repeatedly made clear that he has no intention of sending U.S. troops to Ukraine. During national security crisis, presidents often issue the cryptic warning that "all options are on the table." But Mr Biden pointedly said in early December that the military option was "not on the table"'.[22] This must have been music to the ears of Putin and his colleagues in the Kremlin, and is more easily explained in terms of Biden's desire not to alienate Democrats who remembered his ardent support for the 2003 US invasion of Iraq[23] than in terms of rational crisis-signalling. There might have been good reasons for Biden to

explain to the *Ukrainian* leadership the likely limits of US support; there was no earthly reason to share such information in advance with the Russians.

There are then challenges that flow from the burden of illusions. One illusion relates to the idea of 'the national interest'. In 1848, the British Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston, gave a famous speech in the House of Commons in which he remarked that 'Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow'.[24] Few observations have been as misleading as this. Beyond mere survival as a state, it is difficult to think of a single claimed 'national interest' that could not be contested. So-called 'national interests' are not fixed and 'eternal', but subject to continuous reformulation and redefinition by political leaders in the light of their own interests and the interests of those who are close to them. All too often, demands that particular policy settings be explained and justified are met with the numbingly-vacuous assertion that they have been adopted because they are 'in the national interest' – without any effort to explain *why* this might be the case. This is not to say that over time, the conviction that a particular policy setting is 'in the national interest' might not become widespread, but if it does, it may well be an example of ideological conviction rather than the product of a clear-eyed and rational assessment of different options.

One illusion which can be particularly dangerous is the belief in the eternity of alliance relations. Formal alliances come about through a formal process of engagement, typically reflect some shared purpose or interest, involve a joint commitment of resources and at least some coordinated or joint decision-making, and depend on a degree of mutual trust. Alliances can be very powerful tools for maintaining a balance of power. But they are often asymmetric, with one partner markedly stronger than others. They are thus vulnerable to dissolution if a major player loses a sense of shared purpose or interest: this accounted in large part for the dissolution of SEATO on 30 June 1977 following the US exit from Vietnam in April 1975. Weaker partners in alliance can also be dumped unceremoniously by stronger partners if stronger partners come to the conclusion that it serves their interests to do so: this was essentially what happened to Afghanistan – a formally-designated 'major non-NATO ally of the US – in 2020-2021.[25] The lesson here is *not* that one should avoid alliance relationships, but rather that one should be realistic about what they have to offer. If it comes to the crunch, foreign leaders may well be driven predominantly by what they conceive to be in *their* interests, rather than move altruistically to serve the interests of alliance partners.

This has not prevented the emergence of yet another kind of illusion, namely the belief that one can build up 'capital' by going along with the wishes of a more powerful state, with a view to 'drawing' on that capital when one's own interests are more directly involved. Some Australian officials learned this the hard way at the time of the 1999 East Timor crisis.[26] The initial US reaction to what was a huge challenge for Australian policy was tepid to say the least. When the militia violence broke out, President Clinton's National Security Advisor, Sandy Berger, was strongly opposed to the United States's becoming directly involved.[27] Indeed, at a White House press briefing on 8 September 1999, Berger, pressed as to why a doctrine of military intervention for humanitarian purposes would apply to Kosovo but not East Timor, replied 'my daughter has a very messy apartment up in college, maybe I shouldn't intervene to have that cleaned up'.[28] This, unsurprisingly, sent shivers down the spines of many Australian officials. It was only the good fortune that saw President Clinton exposed to concerted pressure from participants at an APEC summit in New Zealand that turned things around. But clinging ever more tightly to the knees of the US was not the solution either. At

the time of the Iraq war in 2003, former British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd referred to the US and its partners not as a 'coalition of the willing' but as a 'coalition of the obedient'. If such *ad hoc* coalitions become the order of the day, the danger is that the weaker powers will be valued not on the strength of what they may have contributed in the past, but simply in light of their willingness to join the latest adventure on which the stronger power embarks. This is particularly dangerous when the political system of a major ally proves capable of putting a Donald Trump into its key leadership position: pairing up with such a leader is akin to bungee-jumping when one does not know the length of the rope.

A further challenge for policymakers of the 21st century is to recognise how highly *contingent* have been many crucial developments with which they are obliged to cope. The so-called 'Whig Interpretation of History',[29] with its assumption of forward progress, has long been criticised. But it is important not to offer a reverse-image in the form of despair about the possibility of things working out well. The current state of Russia offers a good example. It is relatively easy to fall into the line of thinking that sees Putin's autocracy as something that was inevitable, a manifestation of deep cultural tendencies in Russian society and politics that nothing could have changed. This is a considerable oversimplification, as simplistic as suggesting that the rise of Hitler was inevitable in Germany. (It is easily forgotten that the 1920s were a period of relative optimism about the state of the world.[30]) Putin did not sail into the Kremlin on a ship named 'Russian culture'; he was promoted by President Boris El'tsin. But El'tsin had also considered promoting a very different figure, the modernist democrat Boris Nemtsov,[31] whom I once met in Canberra. A Russia led by Nemtsov would have been a very different Russia from that led by Putin. Nemtsov, a staunch opponent of Putin, was murdered in Moscow in February 2015.[32] The notion of historical inevitability is rightly discredited,[33] and it would be a mistake for policymakers to import it into their strategic analyses. It is necessary to build one's strategic planning on a range of assumptions, but it is a good idea to revisit one's assumptions fairly regularly.

This is true also with respect to the very nature of war. It is almost a cliché to say that some planners plan to fight the last war rather than the next, but there has historically been enough truth in the claim to make it disturbing, although there is much more to military failure than this alone. Yet a lesson of recent times is that wars can change in their character not simply by virtue of technological innovation, but on the basis of a range of other factors. Mary Kaldor in particular has devoted considerable effort to analysing 'new wars' grounded in distinctive actors, goals, methods, and forms of finance.[34] Guerrilla warfare is a very different phenomenon from set-piece battles involving infantry, armoured vehicles, and air cover. The Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s was ill-prepared for guerrilla warfare,[35] and it paid a heavy price as a result, both militarily and politically. One could make a similar broad point with respect to counterterrorism.

Some concluding thoughts

Let me return to the oceans. Seen from outer space, our world is wet. After five billion years the oceans will have boiled away,[36] but for now, they are central to our existence. Covering 71 per cent of the earth's surface, consisting of 1.3 billion cubic kilometres of water, and feeding much of the world's population with seafood, the oceans are fundamental to human existence. The navies of the world are minute compared to this awesome vastness. US Admiral Hyman G. Rickover recognised this in his favourite prayer: 'Oh God, thy sea is so great

and my boat is so small'. Yet oceans have long been venues for competition,[37] and navies remain central to the smooth functioning of a complex international system with political and economic dimensions.

This became shockingly clear as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For many years, Ukraine was a critical exporter of wheat, supplying a very large proportion of the critical grains used by the World Food Program to alleviate the risk of famine in vulnerable countries, and the waters of the Black Sea provided the route of egress by which these exports found their way to other parts of the world. The effect of Russia's military action was to disrupt this flow, threatening disaster for those dependent on WFP assistance. Whilst the sinking of the Russian vessel *Moskva*, the flagship of the Black Sea fleet, on 14 April 2022 demonstrated that Russia's naval power was not unchallengeable, nonetheless Western powers proved unwilling to take on Russia at sea because of the danger of escalation to the level of a nuclear exchange. While the focus of reporting from Ukrainian theatre remained on land battles, developments at sea had potentially much wider ramifications for the world as a whole.

Navies, thus, remain central tools for the projection of global power. While Kipling in his *Recessional* could write 'Far-called, our navies melt away …', no major power with naval strength would dare allow its navy to melt away. What can change, however, is the nature of naval assets and of conflict at sea. The navies of the 21st century are not the navies of the Spanish Armada, of Trafalgar, of Tsushima, of Jutland. They can carry strike aircraft and nuclear warheads, and can contribute to the diverse mechanisms sustaining international order that I noted earlier, namely balancing, deterrence, and rule enforcement. Their potential for use in combined operations has long been recognised,[38] and they are complex, integrated systems based on highly-sophisticated technologies of communication, propulsion and offense. Yet despite this sophistication, they remain haunted by the challenges of an uncertain and dangerous world. Finding appropriate ways of continually adjusting to changes in this world will remain a critical task of naval strategy for the foreseeable future.

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[1]See Ewen Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953); Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[2]Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel Books, 2011).

[3]See Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[4]See Arthur Lee Burns, 'From Balance to Deterrence: A Theoretical Analysis', *World Politics* vol.9, no. 4, July 1957, pp.494-529; F.H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) pp.213-237.

[5]See Graeme Gill, *Building an Authoritarian Polity: Russia in Post-Soviet Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Stephen Kotkin, 'The Cold War Never Ended: Ukraine, the China Challenge, and the Revival of the West', *Foreign Affairs*, vol.101, no.3, May-June 2022, pp.64-78

[6]See Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

[7]See Jerrold M. Post with Stephanie R. Doucette, *Dangerous Charisma: The Political Psychology of Donald Trump and His Followers* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019; Daniel W. Drezner, *The Toddler in Chief: What Donald Trump Teaches us about the Modern Presidency* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[8]Arthur Lee Burns, 'Military-Technological Models and World Order', *International Journal* vol.24, no.4, December 1969, pp.790-805 at p.793.

[9]See Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) pp.209-215; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[10]Hugh Sebag Montefiore, *Enigma: The Battle for the Code* (London: The Folio Society, 2005) pp.212-227; Evan Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) pp.266-269.

[11]See William Maley and Ahmad Shuja Jamal, 'Diplomacy of disaster: The Afghanistan "peace process" and the Taliban occupation of Kabul', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol.17, no.1, February 2022, pp.32-63.

[12]William Maley, *Diplomacy, Communication and Peace: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2021) p.8.

[13]David Singh Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) p.292.

[14]For more detailed discussion, see Ian Clark, *Globalization and Fragmentation: International Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp.16-26; Ian Clark, *Globalization and International Relations Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp.33-51; Mauro F. Guillén, 'Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble? A Critique of Five Key Debates in the Social Science Literature', *Annual Review of Sociology* vol.27, August 2001, pp.235-260.

[15]See Farhad Manjoo, *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[16]See Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[17]See Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[18]For a detailed discussion, see Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) pp.423-476.

[19]See Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (Sydney: Hachette, 2022).

[20]Eliot A. Cohen, 'The Return of Statecraft: Back to Basics in the Post-American World', *Foreign Affairs*, vol.101, no.3, May-June 2022, pp.117-129 at p.124. See also William Maley, 'Why Now? – The Afghanistan-Ukraine Nexus', *Australian Outlook*, 5 April 2022.

[21]William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene II.

[22]Michael Crowley, 'All Options Are Not on the Table as Biden Moves Troops Closer to Ukraine', *The New York Times*, 5 February 2022.

[23]See Mark Weisbrot, 'Joe Biden championed the Iraq war. Will that come back to haunt him now?', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2020.

[24]*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol.97, col.122, 1 March 1848.

[25]For more detail, see Ahmad Shuja Jamal and William Maley, *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2022).
[26]On this case, see William Maley, 'Australia and the East Timor Crisis: Some Critical Comments', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.54, no.2, July 2000, pp.151-161.
[27]Elizabeth Becker and Philip Shenon, 'U.S. Priority Is to Maintain Good Ties With Indonesia, Officials Indicate', *The New York Times*, 9 September 1999.
[28]Quoted in Joseph Nevins, *A Not-So-Distant-Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) p.124.
[29]Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1931).
[30]See Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[31]Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) p.287.
[32]Gill, *Building an Authoritarian Polity*, p.44.
[33]See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Auguste Comte Memorial Trust Lecture no.1, Oxford University Press, 1954).
[34]Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
[35]Carl Van Dyke, 'Kabul to Grozny: A Critique of Soviet (Russian) Counter-Insurgency Doctrine', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* vol.9, no.4, December 1996, pp.689-705.
[36]Neil deGrasse Tyson, 'The Size and Scale of the Universe', in Neil deGrasse Tyson, Michael A. Strauss and J. Richard Gott, *Welcome to the Universe: An Astrophysical Tour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) pp.17-25 at p.25.
[37]Graeme Gill, 'The Soviet Union, Détente, and the Indian Ocean', *Australian Outlook*, vol.31, no.2, August 1977, pp.253-260.
[38]See Admiral of the Fleet The Lord Keyes, *Amphibious Warfare and Combined Operations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943).